

NATURE SPEAKS - AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF NATURE AS INSPIRATION

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Abstract: Artists, composers, writers, and photographers who have been inspired by Acadia National Park and Baxter State Park, share their thoughts about the importance of nature to creativity, their feelings about park landscapes, their need for personal expression and the importance of sharing the inspirational experience. Implications for a better understanding of the park experience as re-creation are discussed, along with managerial considerations.

Background

The idea that nature speaks to us at some conscious or subconscious level seems to be a fairly comfortable view for many despite a scarcity of scientific corroboration. Nature's messages of beauty, grandeur, danger, and mystery, often communicate as well or better than the signs we erect to say the same things.

People commonly say that a certain scene "speaks to me"- meaning that it resonates in some way with their sense of place, their memory banks, their curiosity, or their concepts of appropriateness and beauty. A few individuals are convinced that they actually receive sensory messages from wild creatures, plants, landscapes, seascapes, and inanimate objects in nature.

The inspirational powers of nature seem to be unarguable. How we Process and act upon that inspiration is probably as diverse as our individual skills and abilities -- a painting, a photograph, a poem, a donation of time or money, a musical composition, and a performance might all result from a single inspirational moment or scene.

The inspired works vary not only in their style of expression, but in their emotional intensity. A single snapshot may suffice to capture the mountain's power for one photographer, while for another appreciating the mountain may mean a collection or even a life's work. Perhaps, in much the same way, one mountain climber may be content to conquer it with a single ascent, while for another, knowing the mountain may not happen with a hundred visits.

The range of creative responses to nature's inspiration seem almost kaleidoscopic and, for this research, was defined to include a limited number of people who have responded to their inspiration from two of Maine's public parklands: Acadia national park and Baxter state park. Their creative works in music, the visual arts, the performing arts, in literature, and through volunteerism, are but a sampling of what these public assets mean to people. Their insights have the capacity to move us emotionally just as their authors were moved by the shouts and whispers of nature.

These interpretations of nature share many common characteristics, from a strong sense of exhilaration, to a need for capturing, sharing, and extending the moment, to feelings of humility, conflict, caring, and concern.

Over the past Century there have been numerous perceptive social commentaries linking the American Spirit to wilderness, perhaps beginning with Frederick Jackson Turner's concern for our collapse after conquering the last frontier. In fact, however, America's artists, writers, and composers had been celebrating the wilderness for much of the previous Century and continue to do so today. The distinctive American culture, like its spirit, is profoundly a product of the wilderness. And, yet, we seldom think about the sources, as we enjoy popular music like John Denver's Rocky Mountain High or symphonic pieces like Ferde Grofe's Grand Canyon Suite. Similarly, when we admire the classic art of Church, Bierstadt, or Remington, or the powerful photography of Adams and Porter, we recognize their interpretive genius with little thought about the inspirational event that must have been associated with the work.

In the 1980's, when I was writing a feature article for Parks and Recreation on wilderness and culture, I had the good fortune to make contact with Richard Adler, composer of The Wilderness Suite and The Yellowstone Overture (along with such Broadway hits as Damn Yankees and Pajama Game). Adler told me that at the moment he first saw The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone he saw not just colors but he also saw notes on a musical scale.

The background music you heard as you came into this session is from a composition called "A Sense of Acadia" by a Maine composer, Barbara Smith. Compare what she says about the moment of her inspiration with Adler's moment of inspiration: "I didn't really have to sit there and wait for the music to come. By loving the outdoors and feeling very serene and peaceful and appreciative of being there, it just all came together. One of the tunes I wrote while sitting at Somes Sound. It was one of those beautiful blue sky late September days and the sun was like diamonds on the water and this tune just came to me just very bright and lively."

And compare Smith's description of the moment with that of Tom Paquette, an artist from Portland, Maine, whose work focuses on very similar settings: "I definitely see whispers -- it's landscapes that call out to be painted . . . I have to turn and look, and I think what was that? What is that?....and then I try to recreate those whispers....sometimes I want to shout the whispers, and whisper the shouts....it's the experience of whatever nature is that I'm after. I once tried to paint from somebody's photos and it was a disaster because I didn't have the experience. It isn't the mountain, I can't know the mountain . . . that would be presumptuous.

Finally, compare these insights with the words of Michael Lewis (whose Acadia painting was inspired by the same setting as Barbara Smith's piano composition), and the range of emotions he feels as he begins to paint: "Gradually

I don't feel like I'm an observer, a part of it, the dissolving of that distinction is invited by the landscape and it lets impressions just come in. Sometimes I'm not even aware of what it is that I'm going to focus on when I start painting. I feel like I need it the way I need to breathe, the way I need to take in food."

I hope that these few insights might provoke you to wonder about the connections between inspiration and creative expression. We need to better understand these connections if we wish to truly preserve all of the values that these protected public lands have to offer us. Productions like these, along with the mental renewal and inspirational transfer that they represent, tend not to show up in the park's annual reports of numbers served, revenue generated, programs offered, and acres protected. And yet, are they not reflective of the real output of our protected lands? Isn't there a direct connection between these inspirational resources and the positive attitude, the pride, the challenge, the sense of wonder that epitomizes American Spirit? Isn't there a direct connection between their experiences and the visions of the donor's of these lands? Some very preliminary findings from the interviews seem worth sharing.

Some Observations About Creative People:

Emotional High. John Denver captures the essence of what many artists report in describing their feelings of the inspirational moment, in his Rocky Mountain High. John Muir's almost rhapsodic descriptions of The Range of Light that he found in the Sierras reflects this same intensity of emotions as does Walt Whitman's poetry, and Ansel Adams' photography. It is both a range of emotions (awe and humility, ownership and belonging, sharing and protecting) as well as an intensity of emotions that that can block out other concerns and even sound judgment (almost like the feeling divers report as "rapture of the deep.") Michael Lewis, whose Acadia painting you see on the easel, says: "The range of emotions is amazing . . . It isn't just visual, -- it takes you away from the human context -- It's like being a kid again --- It's so sensorial --- there's nothing like it."

Humility, or perhaps more appropriately awe, is another recurring theme in response to questions about inspirational moments. However, it seems not be a universal trait as the following excerpt from the early 20th Century landscape painter, Marsden Hartley's correspondence with a colleague reveals: "I shall immortalize that mountain, and no else has or likely will, as it is my mountain and I the official portraitist of it." Not surprisingly, his descriptions of Frederick Church's voluminous Katahdin art, from the previous century, are far from complimentary: "The pictures I remember were what I call ice cream pictures, pretty and meaningless, we found them in calendars."

Capturing the moment. It's the moment, not the mountain, seems to be a common theme. For a photographer, the moment, the perfect light effect, shadows, wildlife activity, reflections, clouds, and other ephemeral visual components of the scene provide an obvious moment. It is a fleeting

experience mentioned by painters as well. Volunteers sometimes seek to capture or re-live the moments that inspired their volunteerism.

Beyond the Moment -- It's The Experience. "Sometimes I just put away the tools, so that I can simply enjoy the experience myself with no thought of having to share it."

Beyond the Experience -- It's the Spirit. "And then there are times when the experience evaporates into a profound sense of the landscape and its history, the first people to sail into Frenchman's Bay at Acadia, or even beyond that into the pre-history of geologic time."

Sharing the moment. Or, at least sharing the opportunity for similar moments, cuts across all of the subjects. There would be little point to the capture, if sharing was not the expected outcome. But the sharing seems to be vastly more than "show and tell." It is the validation of the effort. From the sale of images, the publication of recordings and books to the recognition of volunteer efforts and teaching excellence, the sharing provides a vital source of approbation and feedback.

Caring, and concern, about the landscape is, not surprisingly, a repeated theme in these interviews. It would be easy (and erroneous) to assume that volunteer creativity reflects a more caring attitude than does commercial photography. While income may be an over-riding concern for many, it is curious to note how many of the artists in this study also volunteer their time to supplement park staff and freely donate their works in support of park causes. Caring is clearly a powerful motive for many of the volunteers who keep doing strenuous tasks well into their retirement.

Signature, identity, individuality, and distinctiveness of style, are closely related to the artistic response and to sharing that response. It is both a way of identifying with the source of the inspiration as well as a way of insuring feedback from sharing. It is consistent with the complexity of emotions and the apparent contradictions expressed throughout these interviews. Volunteers often see their work as unique, a representation of themselves, even a signature of their particular style of trimming the brush alongside a trail, or rock work to stabilize a mountain trail, or in building a water bar on a trail, or a trail marking cairn above tree line. (Don Curley, a long-time Acadia trail volunteer: "If you can't write or paint, it's a way of expressing yourself.")

Essential Conflict. All subjects alluded to a degree of conflict that they experienced, expected, perhaps welcomed, in the process of a creative response to the inspirational moment. Perhaps "creative tension" might be a more appropriate description for wanting to keep the moment private and yet share the experience. Similarly, feelings of wanting to experience the moment for oneself while having to capture it for others, can be opposing forces. And, very likely, doubts as to technical adequacy in the face of often-times awesome natural spectacles can produce additional tensions, e.g., reducing Mt. Katahdin to

20x18 canvas. Consider the tensions contained in the following: finding an identity within the landscape, yet having an identity uniquely your own; sharing the moment, yet needing to protect the site from too many others visiting it and spoiling it; reveling in the freedom of the moment, yet needing to capture it; being humbled by the scene, yet hoping to become identified with it. Volunteers frequently express a deep-seated conflict with park visitors who are uncaring about their environment, as well as a sense of conflict with the bureaucracy that administers the parks. And yet they continue to volunteer.

Some Implications for Research and Management:

Creative People as Park Visitors: Because of their intensity, creative people provide us with a chance to have an in-depth look at a common phenomenon - inspiration and to learn from it. If you are a geneticist, you probably would prefer to study something that reproduces intensively not once every 20 years. If you are a seismologist, you probably want to work where the earthquake activity is most intense. If you want to understand activism, you'd prefer to study the crusader, rather than the dilettante. In the same way, if you are interested in emotional connections to the land, you can probably learn a lot about everyone's needs for re-creation by studying those who feel them most intensely, and are best able to articulate and act on those feelings.

Creative People as Park Staff: Perhaps we should be looking at these people as the land's volunteer cheer leaders? Ansel Adams photography, for example, has undoubtedly influenced millions of people to go see for themselves, and to help preserve those landscapes, and to become photographers themselves.

Painters, composers, writers, volunteers, and teachers probably bring much more than their art to staff discussions. Doesn't the presence of creative people increase staff creativity, and enhance job satisfaction? Does it help increase staff sensitivity to the public as individuals?

So, how are we treating this extended staff? I've heard that some national parks have tried to require commercial photographers to get a permit. While the distinction between commercial photography and photography for commercials is admittedly vague, I doubt that they tried to do that for composers, writers, and painters.

Creative People as Research Subjects: How does primary inspiration (from nature to the artist, teacher, or volunteer) differ from secondary inspiration (from the creative work to a broader public)? What are some creative outcomes of this "secondary inspiration?" Do primary and secondary inspiration breed creativity among people who do not consider themselves "creative?" How does the inspiration to share directly (through volunteerism and teaching) differ from the inspiration to share indirectly through art?

How does the inspiration to preserve differ from that to develop? How can we build an ethical foundation to protect the inspirational resource and to compete with the development ethic?

Creative People as Indicators of Park Health and Vigor: These people are unique their inspirations may not be. You only have to listen to the clicking of 3-dozen cameras and the in-drawn breaths when the tour bus unloads at the top of Cadillac Mountain to realize we are all inspired by the spectacular in nature. What is different is the ways that creative people see nature, their responses to it, and their styles of sharing the experience. To the extent that we compromise the experience for them, we compromise it for all. These are management's indicators of a healthy park environment, their canaries in the mine!

If we over-manage, bureaucratize, and over-develop the outdoors, creative people will be the first to know and to react. When looking for public reaction to our development plans, the concerns of creative people may very well be a threshold that we need to be alert to. When do the pressures for increased development compromise creativity? (If we can accept deferred maintenance, why not deferred development?)

Many of these people comment on the productive settings that they find in parks. How can we avoid damaging those settings? What's the connection between productive settings, life changing experiences, and management? When visitor numbers begin to reduce the quality of individual visits; and where is it most likely to first become evident? How can we avoid over-managing creative people? Volunteerism is a form of creative expression. Are we sometimes over-managing our volunteers to the point of destroying the experience and turning away volunteers?

Creative People as Products of Park Systems. Several of these people alluded to the parks, and to parks residency, as being turning points in their careers. To what extent do we see parks as life fulfilling potentials? Parks as catalysts for change? Parks for re-creation, need to be managed quite differently than parks for recreation.

Many parks close their gates without exception (well maybe they open them for VIP's) at certain times of the year. Perhaps these are the times that are best suited for many creative people to visit, when the distractions are minimal? Do we try to make exceptions for the very people who can best help us to achieve our goals?

How do we honor donor/founder vision -- was it quality or quantity? Should we consider a revised annual report format focusing on quality -- quality of experience, of life, of lives changed, of the resource itself? If quantities of visits, programs, income, acres protected, etc. must take center stage, we should, at least, consider appending 1 or 2 narrative testimonials of quality experiences. Should we, perhaps, ground our philosophies of Limits of Acceptable Change in qualitative terms; and develop some inspirational indices?

Note: The research reported here is from the first year of a 4-year project. For further information or annual updates, contact the author at: will_lapage@umenfa.maine.edu

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Excerpts from the Acadia Artist in Residence Journal 1994-1999

In general I prefer the low tide and being out early or at dusk the animals are more active, and the sounds more apparent. The fog insulates me from the larger world, and the details here are endlessly interesting and beautiful. The textures of the plants, the rocks, sea weeds, lichens, . . wish I could explain how I make a musical correlation to something visual or from the smell of low tide.

Elizabeth Brown, Composer, Brooklyn, NY 1999

The Maine coast is a living brush painting and I have been delighted beyond belief. Acadia is paradise! This residency has provided me with solitude and the greatest gift of all, time. Time to contemplate. . . time to meditate. Johanna Scholfield Ruggiero, Mixed Media Cambridge MA, 1999

Each day I experienced many different emotions. I would wake up with lots of plans and find that the best plan was to experience Acadia . . . observing the strong contrast of light against strange shaped rocks or stripes of light crossing the darker greens of a pine tree. . .

Pamela Braverman Schmidt, Oils Salem, MA 1997

The jagged crumbling cliffs surrounding the cave composed of all sorts of stone tell quite a story in a language only the earth really understands. But the story is tantalizingly close to obvious even for a geological illiterate like myself . . smashed fragments of boulders suspended in newer rock layered between glopping sandstone then flipped upright by some magnificent force, scrapped by glaciers, eroded by time. . . . it doesn't get much better than that . . the brown

trees are now timidly trying on their new spring fashions. Some in green, some in red. . .

Tom Paquette, Oils Portland, ME 1994

There is poetry in the Acadian woods and music wherever I walk. . . There are lyrics in multi-colored leaves, flickering bright red and green and cadmium yellow in the brilliant mid-morning sun, and in the blowing fog . . in birch trunks

shining white on a near-by ridge, in sun dappled rocks tumbling down from granite summits. .

David Halperin, Landscape Photographer 1994

For me, Acadia is a uniquely intimate setting -- so enveloping and warm, like being home in the aroma of mossy damp woods, sea spray and the pungent smell of tide lines, the sound of wind in the tree tops, water trickling down granite walls, and the rushing surf. The sound of breakers rushing back to sea with what was once a wave creating a symphony of sea and land that captures the essence of timelessness. Witness that which has occurred for thousands of years and one can find themselves stepping back to a place of belonging.

R. Scott Baltz, Landscape Photographer Millville, DE 1996

Park Landscapes as Re-Creation -- Special Moments of Creative People

"It's about getting to the summit and kind of dissolving yourself a little bit into the elements, into the mountain itself, and losing yourself and becoming one with the mountain. . . . it was an overcast gray day, and the five dancers were on a rock at the summit and at a point in the dance where they were opening their arms and looking skyward -- and at that particular moment, the sun broke through and all five broke into tears. It was an incredible moment and the audience responded the same way - it was one of the most spell-binding moments that I can remember -definitely a 'ten'!"

Dianne Eno, Dancer/Choreographer, Artist-in-residence, 1999, Acadia N. P.

"I'd hiked up to the pond before daybreak and had everything set to capture a Katahdin sunrise. . . . and as it started getting lighter, I happened to notice a moose down the shoreline watching the expanding rim of light with me. . it was one of those special moments when everything stops and you don't even realize you're breathing. . . I always feel that nature is overwhelming but in a good way. . . The idea that I am such a small part of it is a wonderful feeling .

. . . to be in awe of . . . its almost a religious feeling, compelling, but not really one with nature. . . "

Terry Lester, Landscape Photographer Deer Isle, ME

"It isn't the mountain because I can't know the mountain. It's not my job to interpret the mountain, or even offer the mountain as expression of mine. Both of those things seem presumptuous. How can I interpret the mountain, and why would anybody want my interpretation? It's more an interpretation of someone experiencing the mountain or an interpretation of consciousness. I am trying to paint what I experience, it's a response. I don't presume to know what Katahdin is as a mountain"

Tom Paquette, Landscape Painter Portland ME

"It all came very quickly and very easily. I didn't really have to sit there and wait for the music to come." "By loving the outdoors and feeling very serene and peaceful and appreciative of being there, it just all came together. One of the tunes I wrote sitting at Sones Sound -- it was one of those beautiful blue sky late September days and the sun was like diamonds on the water and this tune just came to me just very bright and lively."

Barbara Smith, Composer Orono Maine

I'm suffering Katahdin withdrawal. I've been going a lot almost once a month to see the mountain, it's been very intense experiences , , to film, but also you're hurting to get up there. . . it's almost like a withdrawal thing. . I was becoming very intimate and connected to the mountain. "

Huey, (James Coleman) Videographer Portland, ME

Dr. LaPage teaches courses in environmental interpretation, and issues and ethics in outdoor recreation at the University of Maine. He has taught at the Universities of Wyoming, Colorado State, and New Hampshire; and has served as Director of NH state parks, director of the Wolf Education and Research Center, a N. H. Fish and Game commissioner, US Forest Service scientist, and a member of President Reagan's Commission on Americans Outdoors.