

# Chapter 7: The Knowing Body: Eco-Paganism as an Embodying Practice

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## **Introduction**

Any attempt at theorising re-embodiment needs to consider two questions: First, how did the Western experience of the self become 'essentially disembodied'?<sup>1</sup> Second, what might guide Western humankind to re-embodiment? Although the first question has been discussed at length, it cannot be left unconsidered, for the genealogy of disembodied experience carries vital clues for strategies of re-embodiment. So in the first section of this chapter I shall consider this question. I propose that our sense of disembodiment is closely related to the emergence of modern urban civilisation. Although we can trace the process from early history, I shall focus on what I consider to be the most profound and damaging shift – from a medieval to a modern consciousness.

The second section of this chapter will consider strategies for re-embodiment. Curiously enough, these emerge from the very ancient and the very modern: animism, a spiritual belief probably held by the earliest humans, and embodied situated cognition (ESC), a field so new it only emerged at the close of the twentieth century. Animism and ESC illuminate each other, as well as re-embodiment, because ESC is fundamental to human consciousness and animism is our default relationship to the world.

The terms 'animism', 'spirit' and 'embodiment' are used in many different contexts and can carry quite different connotations. I will therefore be as specific as space allows about how I use these terms.

The term animism has an unpromising ancestry as it was used by the Victorian anthropologist Tylor to refer to 'lower' forms of religion that held a 'belief in Spiritual Beings'.<sup>2</sup> For Tylor, who was embedded in a colonialist materialist worldview, this was a 'primitive' and 'childlike' error.<sup>3</sup> The term has been re-appropriated by recent scholars as 'the new animism'.<sup>4</sup> From this perspective '[a]nimists are people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others'.<sup>5</sup>

Following this discussion with a consideration of what we mean by 'spirits' serves well, as I have begun to contrast a dualistic worldview of matter and spirit with a more relational one that emphasises process. A modernist Western worldview like Tylor's sets 'spirits' apart from 'matter' just as it separates mind and body. This chapter proposes a sideways step to a quite different stance where spirits and matter are revealed as no more separate than mind and body are. In general, when eco-pagans speak about the spirit of a place, they do not envision a material location somehow inhabited by an immaterial spirit entity; spirit is immanent in the world.

My understanding of embodiment draws primarily on the phenomenological tradition, especially as articulated in the work of Merleau-Ponty. Embodiment is not concerned with the body as such but with our phenomenological experience of our bodily being-in-the-world. We are embodied beings, and what we think, how we feel and ultimately perhaps *who we are*, emerges from our fleshy embodied existence.

Before proceeding, I will set out my core assumptions. First, many aspects of human consciousness are malleable and will vary depending upon the social and cultural context of peoples lives. As cognitive science shows, 'the experiences of the body-in-the-world also shape the embodied mind'.<sup>6</sup> Second, individual experiences of a sense of embodiment or apparent disembodiment rest upon a long spectrum and neither is an absolute or fixed condition. My degree of awareness of my own embodiment can vary considerably over a single hour, much less a lifetime, but considering historical processes necessitates working with social norms that generalise across broad populations. Having said that, I take it as a given that Western civilisation tends to create a sense of a disembodied self, and as a result we feel alienated from our own bodies and from the world.

### **From Participation Consciousness to Disembodiment**

How did we acquire this illusory sense of disembodiment? To answer that question fully would require a lengthy history of somatic experience, such as that offered by Berman.<sup>7</sup> For my purposes it will suffice to recount the most recent and profound episode in this long saga, the shift from medieval to modern consciousness. This account will model and highlight the process and illuminate the bigger picture.

Several anthropologists, philosophers and historians have discussed the notion of participatory perception<sup>8</sup> or participatory consciousness.<sup>9</sup> Abram, drawing upon Merleau-Ponty and his own fieldwork, concludes that 'perception always involves, at its most intimate level, the experience of an active interplay, or coupling, between the perceiving body and that which it perceives'.<sup>10</sup> This mode of awareness is largely eschewed in the Western world and has been replaced by what Berman calls 'nonparticipatory consciousness': 'that state of mind in which one knows phenomena

precisely in the act of distancing oneself from them'.<sup>11</sup> Nonparticipatory consciousness enables scientific objectivity but it also encourages – perhaps even requires – an alienation from embodied awareness.

The gradual shift from an embodying, embedding consciousness to an alienated, disembodied and objective one arguably started with Plato, but it took centuries. We can usefully take the medieval period as a mid-point in this process, when participatory consciousness, though probably 'not so pure as that of pre-Homeric Greece',<sup>12</sup> was still common. Berman notes that in many medieval practices 'the route to true understanding was to be found in that absorption, in the loss of psychic distance'.<sup>13</sup>

The embodying participatory consciousness of the medieval period engendered a 'deeply animistic' understanding.<sup>14</sup> As Berman explains, '[p]erception and cognition emerged primarily from the body which is why, to borrow a term from the anthropologists, everything possessed *mana*, was alive'.<sup>15</sup> This resulted in a 'complex syncretism between animism and Christianity' that lasted for a century and a half.<sup>16</sup> But the objectivity demanded by modern science destroyed that balance as it created a new form of consciousness.

We can map this process through Bakhtin's analysis of the shift from the open or grotesque body to the Modern closed body. The notion of the open body emerges in Bakhtin's description of the carnival, which played a dominant role in people's lives in Medieval Europe. In large cities as much as three months a year were devoted to carnival activities. These were festive public occasions in which the populace filled the streets, drinking and masquerading. Bakhtin characterises carnival as a celebration of the body and openness to life.

A central aspect of carnival is its attitude to the body, which Bakhtin called the 'grotesque'. Grotesque bodies are not closed, but are open to the world. Emphasis is placed upon body parts that can reach out, such as the nose, the belly, phallus and breasts, and upon openings such as the mouth, genitals and anus. The intent is to reveal the body as part of the world – not separate from it. 'This is an unfinished and open body without clearly defined boundaries'.<sup>17</sup>

Carnival temporarily created a different habitus – an 'open body' that is more connected to other bodies and the environment around it. Thus:

People could have an experience of the lived body that was more direct and unmediated – a sensuous involvement with the world where the boundaries between the inside and outside of the body, and the dividing line between the individual and the collective, were not as sharply drawn as they are today.<sup>18</sup>

With the Renaissance came what Bakhtin calls the 'Classical Canon', at the core of which was the rationalism 'created and expressed in Descartes'

philosophy'.<sup>19</sup> The objectivist philosophy espoused by Descartes, Newton and others divided mind from body and simultaneously mechanized the world. An 'increasing preoccupation with psychic distance can be seen in most areas of human activity from the Renaissance on'.<sup>20</sup> Berman notes the discovery of perspective in art, the shift from alchemy to chemistry and from astrology to astronomy. Parallel changes occurred across society and culture as bodies began to acquire a private quality, closed off to the world. At the same time there emerged notions of good manners that required careful control of behaviour. Western civilisation thus created a 'closed body' that was both disembodied and alienated.

I have, of necessity, simplified somewhat: There are complex socio-historical relationships between the emergence of scientific rationalism, heightened self-awareness and the resultant loss of participatory consciousness. My principle point is that the 'shift from animism to mechanism' engendered 'not merely a new science, but a new personality to go with it ...'<sup>21</sup> That personality is disembodied, a 'closed and rationalized Cartesian body' that is 'severed from its sensual connections with the world and its collective associations with other beings'.<sup>22</sup>

The closed modernist body has been created by a specific set of circumstances and is thus open to transformation. Furthermore, research into the processes of human cognition suggests that such a closed body is disembodied and therefore maladaptive. There are many dimensions to this maladaptive disembodiment, but I shall focus briefly upon its impact upon our environment. Bateson outlined the belief system that inevitably emerges from the closed modernist body:

you will logically and naturally see yourself as outside and against the things around you. And as you arrogate all mind to yourself, you will see the world around you as mindless and therefore not entitled to moral or ethical consideration.<sup>23</sup>

He concludes that:

If this is your estimate of your relation to nature *and you have an advanced technology*, your likelihood of survival will be that of a snowball in hell.<sup>24</sup>

Re-embodiment would be a major corrective advance in human development. It can be encouraged by a better appreciation of human cognition and animism, arguably our default mode of relating to the world.

### **Embodied Situated Cognition**

As the twentieth century grew old, many philosophers worked to banish the

disembodying spectre of Cartesian dualism. At the heart of this project lay a new theory of cognition as embodied, situated and intersubjective. What has emerged are models of embodied situated cognition that disrupt established discourses that 'divide spirit and flesh, soul and body, subject and object...people and environment'.<sup>25</sup>

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological insights clarified the ways in which our consciousness is incarnate in the world. He writes:

As I contemplate the blue of the sky ... I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery, it 'thinks itself within me', I am the sky itself as it is drawn together and unified, and as it begins to exist for itself; my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue ...<sup>26</sup>

Our awareness does not emerge from a disembodied, decontextualized mind located somewhere outside the physical. Nor is this mind disembodiment, decontextualizing of other embodied forms. Rather, the mind is part of an *active relationship* between embodied humans and the world. Merleau-Ponty concluded that the process by which we come to understand the world emerges from a unity between subjects and objects that is the direct result of our embodiment. 'The properties of the object and the intentions of the subject ... are not only intermingled; they also constitute a new whole'.<sup>27</sup> This understanding disrupts the Cartesian world-view, because it transcends subject/object dualism: The 'I' that thinks is tangled with the object that is thought about.

Merleau-Ponty's insights have been influential upon later philosophers and cognitive science, a multidisciplinary field that draws upon biology, chemistry, psychology, information science, philosophy, anthropology and linguistics. Second-generation cognitive science marks a shift towards re-embodiment and 'begins with the realization that the body...grounds and shapes human cognition'.<sup>28</sup> Contrary to centuries of dualist theorising, reason not only relies upon the structure of the brain and the body, but also depends on our entire social and physical environment. Cognitive science confirms what Merleau-Ponty realised; cognition is embodied and blurs conventional understandings of 'self' and 'world'.

Philosopher Clark draws upon the insights of cognitive science to answer a question that is central to this chapter: 'Where Does the Mind Stop and the Rest of the World Begin?'<sup>29</sup> Clark follows Bateson in concluding that what we normally accept as 'mental processes' sometimes extend beyond the 'skin bag' into the local environment,<sup>30</sup> and this blurring of mind and world may challenge Western notions of self. Such conclusions are widespread: In his survey of the field, Peterson notes that for a 'significant number of researchers ... to understand the mind/brain in isolation from biological and environmental contexts is to understand nothing'.<sup>31</sup>

Varela and colleagues build upon Merleau-Ponty's work to develop a model of cognition as 'embodied action', a process they call 'enactive'.<sup>32</sup> They agree that cognition is embodied and factor in the wider 'biological, psychological, and cultural context'.<sup>33</sup> By emphasizing action they highlight that cognition is an aspect of the sensory body and that 'knower and known, mind and world, stand in relation to each other through mutual specification or dependent coorigination'.<sup>34</sup> They conclude that 'organism and environment enfold into each other and unfold from one another in the fundamental circularity that is life itself'.<sup>35</sup>

Such ideas may initially seem strange to us because we rarely have any phenomenological experience of the enfolding of organism and environment. There is, however, a very common embodied tacit knowledge that partly draws upon this enfolding. Gendlin, who is both a philosopher and a psychologist, describes a 'bodily sensed knowledge',<sup>36</sup> which he calls the 'felt sense'. A felt sense is basically a feeling in the body that has a meaning for us – those fuzzy feelings that we don't usually pay much attention to. Perhaps the most familiar example is the vague feeling that *something* is wrong, but we cannot say what it is. At such times we might say 'I just got out of the wrong side of bed this morning'. We often talk about having a 'gut feeling' about something or someone and when that is literally a bodily sensation, it's a felt sense. In such situations there is a knowing and a *not* knowing at the same time. What is unknown in each case is tacit and embodied, but we can bring it into explicit conscious awareness using Focusing, a simple technique Gendlin developed to facilitate working with the felt-sense.<sup>37</sup>

In common with the thinkers considered above, Gendlin's conception of the 'body' extends beyond the skin: For Gendlin the body can be best understood as 'an ongoing interaction with its environment'<sup>38</sup> such that the bodily knowledge of the felt sense *is* the entire situation. Thus, via the felt-sense we can access 'a vast amount of environmental information' and unexpected knowledge – accurate 'gut feelings' for example – can emerge. Gendlin supports the conclusion of the thinkers I have introduced: In the light of our current understanding, the subject/object distinction collapses: 'We will move beyond the subject/object distinction if we become able to speak from how we interact bodily in our situations.'<sup>39</sup>

### **The Enactive Process Model**

By combining enactivism with Gendlin's philosophy of the implicit, I have synthesized a model of embodied situated cognition with more explanatory power than either has alone. This model is consistent with other theories discussed here, and in several cases elucidates them. Given that Gendlin's key exposition describes his theory as *A Process Model*<sup>40</sup> I call this the *enactive process model*. The enactive process model claims that our being-in-the-world is bound up with

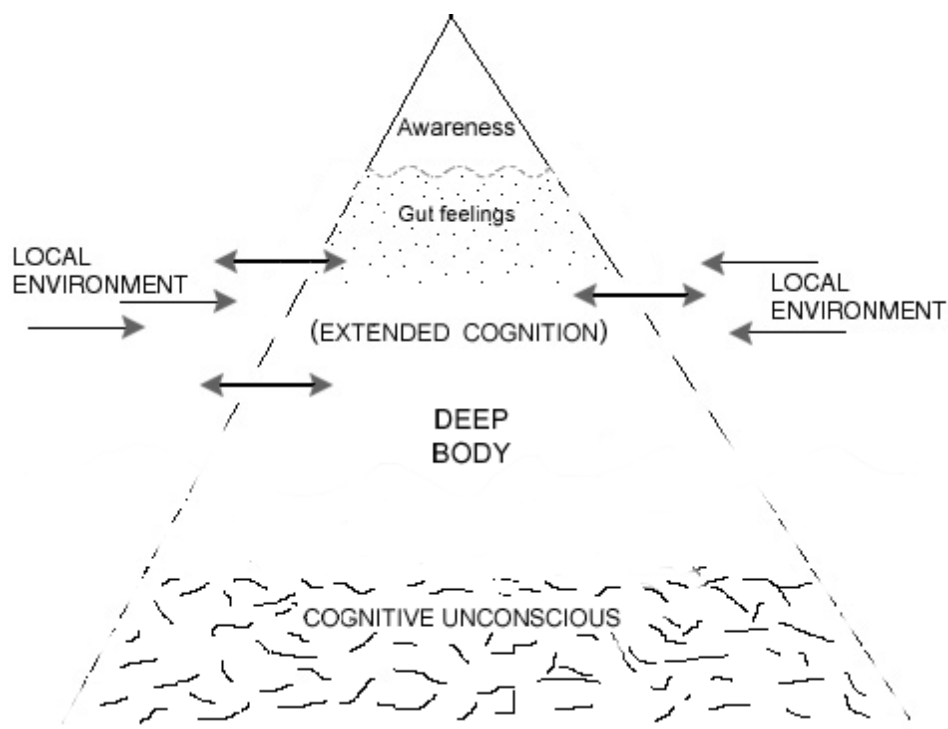


Fig 7.1: The cognitive iceberg

the immediate environment and that embodied cognition draws upon that space as a source of material to think with.

My 'cognitive iceberg' schematically represents the complex processes of embodied situated cognition. It is inevitably an oversimplification and presents the local environment and physical body as more separate than the enactive process model suggests. I explain the enactive process model in detail elsewhere,<sup>41</sup> but in summary, the whole 'iceberg' triangle represents the physical body, while the area at its base represents the 'cognitive unconscious'.<sup>42</sup> The physical body is engaged in a dynamic relationship with the local environment through perception and extended cognition. As 95 per cent of embodied thought occurs below our consciousness,<sup>43</sup> most of this processing never reaches everyday awareness, which is at the iceberg's tip.

At the top of the triangle – the tip of the proverbial iceberg – is everyday conscious awareness, which as we have heard, is a very small percentage of who we are. Consciousness is simply what we are aware of, the minimal aspects of a complex process, but because we identify our 'self' with consciousness we tend to discount what I call the *deep body* 'self' that actually governs much of our behaviour. This top level of awareness is quite narrowly focused and tends to heighten our impression of a subject/object distinction. The dotted area just below the apex designates 'gut feelings' or felt senses. Further down the triangle awareness widens out into the deep

body, becoming less focused and blurring the distinction between self and other, shown in the graphic by the gaps appearing in the sides of the triangle. The cognitive unconscious is distinguished from the rest of the deep body because it is normally inaccessible to intentional influence or conscious awareness.

### **APPLYING THE MODEL**

Certain circumstances and techniques allow us to become more aware of the blurred boundary between self and world. As the waves ride up the side of a real iceberg, what is above the water and what is below changes constantly. So it is with conscious awareness: At times we are unaware of the deeper processes of embodied situated cognition – the sea around the iceberg is still. But at other times the sea is rough, and what lies beneath and above the waves shifts constantly. Our experiences make this apparent, as Leder vividly describes upon an occasion when he was walking in the woods, caught up with his own concerns:

a paper that needs completion, a financial problem. My thoughts are running their own private race, unrelated to the landscape....The landscape neither penetrates into me, not I into it. We are two bodies<sup>44</sup>.

Leder's mind is working off-line,<sup>45</sup> and upon my model his awareness is focused at the tip of the cognitive iceberg. But the 'rhythm of walking' and the peace of the wood calm his mind and induce an 'existential shift', so that he begins to notice the beauty around him. Gradually

[t]he boundaries between the inner and the outer thus become porous....I feel the sun and hear the song birds both within-me and without-me....They are part of a rich body-world chasm that eludes dualistic characterization.<sup>46</sup>

Leder's awareness has slipped down the cognitive iceberg, broadening into what Greenwood calls magical consciousness,<sup>47</sup> and this change in 'body-mind-habitus' produces 'an altered sense of self'.<sup>48</sup> A fundamental aspect of this change in habitus is the deepening sense of personal embodiment that results from shifting awareness down the cognitive iceberg. This shift blurs the distinction between self and other, enhancing Leder's sense of connection.

Berman suggests that in order to reach an embodied understanding of the premodern period 'we would have to abandon modern consciousness...and this means to abandon a certain type of egoic personality structure, allowing the mind to sink into the body, as it were'. He concludes that such a 'merger is premodern consciousness, or at least a good part of



it'.<sup>49</sup> The kind of premodern consciousness Berman describes can be represented with my 'Cognitive Iceberg' model as below. This differs from my model of modern consciousness in that the wavy line separating awareness from gut feelings is absent – the mind can sink into the body.

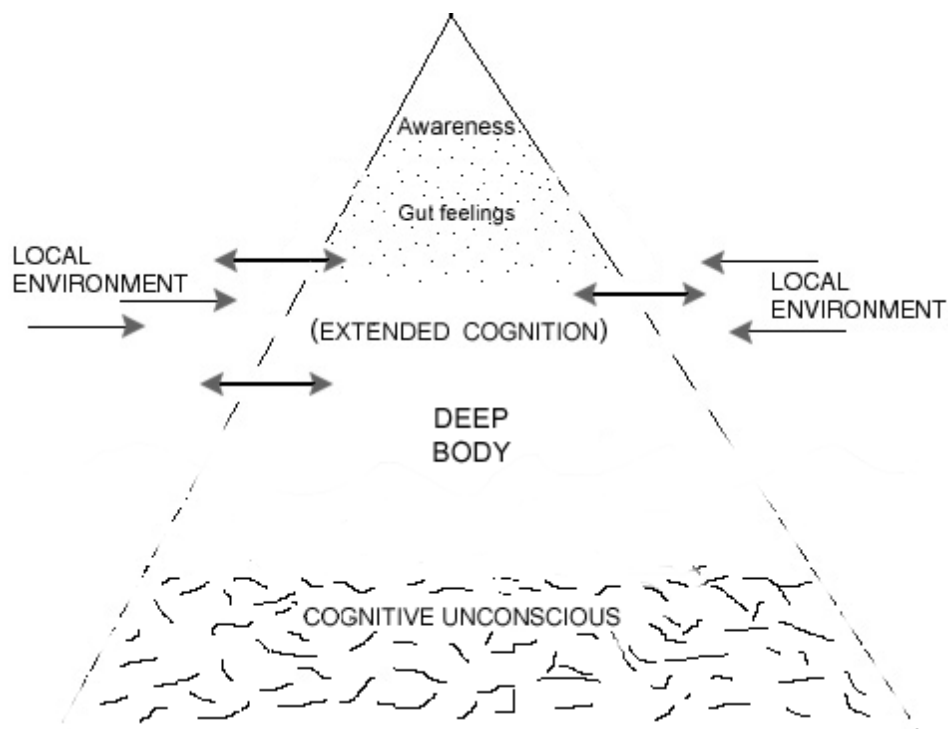


Fig 7.2: The premodern cognitive iceberg

Because awareness blurs into the extended cognition of the deep body, we would expect the kind of ease with participation consciousness I described earlier. It is probably not possible – or particularly desirable – to return to this form of premodern consciousness, but similar states of mind do exist in the modern world, notably amongst animists.

### **Animism – Old and New**

Abrams suggests that 'at the level of our spontaneous, sensorial engagement with the world around us, we are all animists', engaged in participation consciousness.<sup>50</sup> But how often are we aware of that sensorial engagement? An indigenous tribal lifestyle typically requires a high level of sensory awareness to survive. The Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea, for example, live in dense rainforest and rely upon a highly developed sense of sound to know the time of day, season of the year and their location in space.<sup>51</sup> It is no coincidence that indigenous tribal people are generally animists: Heightened sensory awareness encourages participation

consciousness, which itself reveals the interconnectedness of the world. Abram asserts that such cultures are fully aware that we are 'corporeally embedded' in a 'living landscape'<sup>52</sup> and proposes that the body is 'a sort of open circuit that completes itself only in things, in others, in the encompassing earth'.<sup>53</sup> Ingold concurs that "'organism plus environment" should denote not a compound of two things, but one indivisible totality'.<sup>54</sup> Body and mind are thus simply different ways of describing the same process, 'namely the environmentally situated activity of the human organism-person'.<sup>55</sup> This mode of being-in-the-world engenders a knowledge that is grounded in 'practical application' and 'based in feeling, consisting in the skills, sensitivities and orientations that have developed through long experience of conducting one's life in a particular environment'.<sup>56</sup> Thus, as Bird-David explains, animism is grounded in 'a relational epistemology'.<sup>57</sup>

I do not want to idealise indigenous tribal peoples or imply that those living in a modern urban environment are incapable of participation consciousness: We are all capable of experiencing such consciousness. A fully embodied sensuality can break down the apparent division between body/mind/self and the 'other'. When we fully open to our direct sensory experience – the feel of the wind as it caresses the skin or the feel of the ground under our feet as we walk upon it – our awareness shifts. Abram notes that if one can maintain this awareness for some length of time, 'one will begin to experience a corresponding shift in the physical environment. Birds, trees, even rivers and stones begin to stand forth as living, communicative presences'.<sup>58</sup> This process is a development of the experience described by Leder, above, when '[t]he boundaries between the inner and the outer thus become porous'.<sup>59</sup> Such blurring between 'inner' and 'outer' allows us to become aware that 'I' am 'that', and opens us to an animist ontology that entails a relational epistemology.

There are at least two fundamentally different ways of knowing: an embodying animist knowing that utilizes participation consciousness and a disembodied Cartesian (modernist) scientific knowledge.<sup>60</sup> Bird-David compares the two: 'the object of modernist epistemology is a totalizing scheme of separated essences, approached ideally from a separated viewpoint', while the object of...animistic knowledge is understanding relatedness...'<sup>61</sup> While she concludes that '[b]oth ways are real and valid',<sup>62</sup> there are clearly costs in adopting a modernist epistemology.

Modernist epistemology is familiar to us and has been discussed endlessly, but embodied animist knowing has been virtually ignored. Part of the reason for that is the denial of the body that has infected Western philosophy since Plato, as encapsulated by Spelman's term, somatophobia.<sup>63</sup> There is a profound potential in embodying animist knowing for an emergent process of re-embodiment. We are nonetheless too soaked in our modernism to attempt an ersatz recreation of an indigenous oral culture. Western eco-pagans, however, model a post-modern embodying animism.

## **Thinking with Place: Eco-Pagans and other Animists**

My doctoral research focused on embodied knowing in eco-paganism. It demonstrated how the practice and belief of these modern Western animists draws upon embodied situated cognition (ESC). In common with other animists, eco-pagans feel a deep connection with the land, which is seen 'as sacred'.<sup>64</sup> One eco-pagan (Jan) expressed it very explicitly: 'That's what paganism is all about - connection with everything'.<sup>65</sup>

Letcher suggests that 'an embodied sensitivity to nature' is essential if we are to 'come to know the "*genius loci*" - the spirit(s) of a place'.<sup>66</sup> This sense of connection to the *genus loci* functions through embodied situated cognition; more specifically, it uses what I call processes of connection. All these processes tend to deepen our sense of connection with the natural environment and often alter our sense of self: they thus enable a communion with the *genius loci* which informs eco-paganism. I identified seven processes of connection during my fieldwork; the wilderness effect/threshold brook, meditation, the felt sense, trance, ritual, dance and entheogens.<sup>67</sup> All of the processes of connection can shift awareness down the cognitive iceberg, making the enactive process of co-creating reality described by Varela more apparent. This sometimes enables eco-pagans to 'communicate' with the *genius loci* within which they are enactively enmeshed. There is only space to briefly consider each of these processes,<sup>68</sup> and I shall focus upon how they relate to embodiment in contemporary eco-pagan animism.

## **The Wilderness Effect**

Greenway argues that 'civilization is only four days deep'<sup>69</sup> and that even such a brief time away from twenty-first-century life is deeply transformative. The wilderness effect<sup>70</sup> was originally observed in the context of extended wilderness trips, but my fieldwork showed not only that the wilderness effect occurs at protest camps, but that it catalyses a spiritual experience that leads some protesters to describe themselves as 'pagans'.

There are many obvious similarities between a wilderness trek and life upon a typical protest camp. Most significant of these is the practical connection with the elemental forces of nature. As Letcher says: 'The very act of living out, however dependent on wider society for food and so on, puts one in touch with nature in a way that is real, not virtual'.<sup>71</sup> Newbury activist Jim Hindle describes how he

became accustomed to the sound of the wind in the trees at all times. It wasn't a thing I necessarily listened to, but the silence that fell whenever I stepped inside a building was eerie and disquietening. ... It was like being connected to a great river, the source of all life...and years of separation between us and the Land were falling away like an old skin,<sup>72</sup>

Spending time in a more natural environment enhances sensory acuity<sup>73</sup> and this is apparent in my interview with Rob. In the city he has to engage sensory filters to 'block out information, to block out noise, to block out the chatter of things'. Upon returning to a more natural space he would find the silence overwhelming, but this passed:

And it was only when you actually started to listen that you realised it wasn't quiet at all but the river was flowing, the wind was in the trees, the birds flying. All of these things were going on which we weren't hearing because we had these filters on. And I keep repeating it but it's an important point, because people do live their entire lives in an urban environment and they just don't get the connection, um they don't get that connection with nature.

For Greenway connection – or reconnection – is fundamental to the wilderness effect: 'When entering the wilderness psychologically as well as physically, participants most often speak of feelings of expansion or reconnection'.<sup>74</sup> The wilderness effect is closely related to the other processes of connection I introduced above, and all of them are grounded in embodied situated knowing: Shaw explains the sense of connection at the heart of the wilderness effect as 'an embodied visceral knowing that transcends the distinction between the inner and outer landscapes'.<sup>75</sup>

In an urban location the influence of the natural environment is diminished, and urban eco-pagans need to enhance their sensory acuity to enable an animist connection to the *genius loci*. Such subtle embodied communion with place requires an intentional effort, which may involve several of the processes of connection. Urban eco-pagans use meditation, entheogens, ritual and dance, trance and the felt sense to fine-tune their awareness of the natural environment and open up to the sensory richness available in intimate local relationships. This process of developing a deep connection to a specific location is most aptly referred to as 'listening to the threshold brook'.<sup>76</sup> As with more typical experiences of the wilderness effect, the threshold brook is deeply healing and can inspire a spiritual sensibility.

## **Meditation**

Many eco-pagans use some form of meditation. Eco-pagan Letcher recommends 'solitude, stillness and sensitivity' as a means of reconnecting with a natural environment.<sup>77</sup> This simple technique of spending time quietly 'sitting out' has a long history in Heathen<sup>78</sup> practice.<sup>79</sup> Greenway compares meditation with other processes of connection, claiming that 'both the psychedelic and meditation experiences...closely parallel'<sup>80</sup> the experience of the wilderness effect. He further claims that such awareness seems to

have the 'capacity to open consciousness to Mind - that is, to the more natural flows of information from nature'.<sup>81</sup>

### **A Sense of Nature**

Many eco-pagans use felt senses in their spiritual practice. Barry provided an excellent example when he explained his animist 'pattern of consciousness' during my interview with him. I asked if there was a physical sense associated with this pattern:

Barry: Definitely. Absolutely definitely.... when you said the physical sense, and I focused there and I went there, I moved into that, I turned the volume up on that and I put my awareness into that, and what I got was a sense of embodiment which was much richer and more strange than your normal body awareness. Um, and so in a sense what happens is the hawthorn buds about to burst into May blossom became a physical sensation within my body...You know what I mean?

Adrian: Kinda. Whereabouts in the body?

Barry: OK. I'll do hawthorn buds. Oh, yeah, there is a practice I do that's related to this locating it in the body. Hawthorne buds are very much in my upper arms, and my chest. [Pause]. My shoulders. Like a kind of - You couldn't call it a buzz, I'm not talking about a buzz - I'm talking about a kinda, something, delicate.

Elsewhere Barry explains that a 'conversation with a tree is first and foremost a feeling in your body'.<sup>82</sup> This description of a felt sense enabling animist communication is common amongst eco-pagans.

### **Situated Embodied Knowing in Trance**

Eco-pagan Shaman Gordon MacLellan writes of how the physical ecstasy of dance connects him to a 'world that thinks'.<sup>83</sup> Greenwood's model of magical consciousness<sup>84</sup> applies Bateson's model of an ecology of mind<sup>85</sup> to understand the way Gordon uses dance to communicate with the other-than-human world:

Gordon's dance is about participating in such an interconnected system as an inspirited pattern — a web of wyrd — whereby the act of dancing enables spirits, energy and people to meet in a world that is alive.<sup>86</sup>

Bateson suggested that dance could serve as an 'interface between conscious and unconscious',<sup>87</sup> offering a means of understanding messages that the dancer is consciously unaware of. This does not involve a Freudian

unconscious but one built upon an ecology of mind and is therefore consistent with the enactive process model. This process is apparent in Greenwood's description of an occasion when she watched Gordon dance with his spirit family:

As the drumming increased, it was evident to me that there was a participatory communication between Gordon and the spirits in process, the other than human was coming into the human form. At times there seemed to be a non-verbal discussion going on as Gordon's body appeared to act out questions and answers in a swirling profusion of expressive movements.<sup>88</sup>

This is a good example of how trance might function within the enactive process model; by shifting his awareness to a deep embodied self, Gordon melts the boundary between subject and object, enabling communication with the 'other than human'.

### **Situated Embodied Knowing in Ritual and Dance**

Dance can speak a language beyond words, and this reveals two interrelated aspects of embodied situated cognition: First, dance allows a place or spirit to communicate to the dancer. Second, the dance can serve as a bridge between the dancers deep embodied knowing and their conscious awareness. These aspects work together when a place or a spirit communicates with the dancer through a deep embodied knowing that must be expressed in dance to become conscious. This process becomes apparent in the interview with Zoe when we read how her body has 'a different way of moving' that is 'like a dance' when she is connecting to a place. When Zoe's 'body moves then something is able to move' and this dance enables 'inspiration and the expression' to 'flow through'. The 'something' that moves is '[w]hat the place is trying to tell me', which can be 'an insight' or 'a sense of, my ancestors or the ancestors of the place being around me'. The *movement* of the dance is fundamental and without movement there is no contact: 'If [...] I'm frozen in some way physically, then I can't hear. I can't listen. Nothing will flow through me. So I have to move in some way with it, how ever simple it is, I have to move physicality in some way'.

Zoe experienced a similar sense when working ritually with a particular site:

half way up the hill, there's an old hawthorn tree. So I would always stop there as I felt she was the guardian of the outer-ring. I've no idea if anyone else ever felt this, but I would have to stop there [...] ask her permission, and then wait for the answer. And the answer would come in a bodily sense. [...] It's like a sense of permission in my body.

This permission was sensed as a slight pressure on her back: 'It was like a propelling forward motion from behind. Like "Yes!" You know. Pushing me gently forward'. Once past this stage Zoe would come to 'the inner level' where she would often

receive a 'no'. That would be like a frontal sense – like a closing down. I could feel it, yeah, it's definitely a front of body closed down. [Holds her open palms in front of her body]. Like someone's just drawn a curtain or shut a door in front of me.

### **Blurring Boundaries**

The processes of connection can dramatically reveal how 'organism and environment enfold into each other'.<sup>89</sup> Rob described how he felt one evening in the woods when a deep realisation of environmental destruction came to him:

I felt like Gaia was really screaming out through me, saying please help me. Please help me, and like I started screaming myself and started saying these words. I felt so connected, so at one with the earth that this violence was being done towards me. Um, not me personally, any ego or anything like that, but me as in life, as in this whole unity which I'm connected with.

His identification with a sense of life itself, which is emphatically not his ego, is particularly striking and recalls Greenway's conclusion that some of what I call processes of connection 'facilitate the arousal of nonegoic awareness.'<sup>90</sup> Such experiences are not uncommon. Taylor found that 'no small number of activists report profound experiences of connection to the Earth and its lifeforms'<sup>91</sup> while eco-pagan Jodie concluded that site life constructed 'a different form of consciousness whereby a person felt a part of nature'.<sup>92</sup>

Living upon a protest site — or wilderness trekking – will also have significant effects upon what Jackson describes as the 'body-mind-habitus'<sup>93</sup> thus contributing to changes in one's being-in-the-world. Jackson claims that changes in our habitus can free 'energies bound up in habitual deformations of posture or movement produce an altered sense of self',<sup>94</sup> which is exactly what the wilderness effect does. A fundamental aspect of this change in habitus is a deepening sense of personal embodiment, which I describe above in terms of shifting awareness down and through the cognitive iceberg.

## **Conclusion**

My fieldwork touched the individual threads of many lives, and my writing has woven them into a tapestry with a distinct pattern: by various means we slip down the cognitive iceberg to become aware of 'a larger Mind of which the individual mind is only a subsystem'.<sup>95 96</sup> This plunge into the deep body awakens us from the dualistic dream that we are separate from the 'wisdom of the body'.<sup>97</sup> We can experience this psychological shift phenomenologically as a sense of spiritual connection that allows us to 'attune...to the natural world', and can feel

[I]ike being in a great big dream, relevant messages are being spoken everywhere, telling me things I need to hear, and to which I need respond.<sup>98</sup>

Such messages were spoken in Gordon's dance and by the threshold brook, and we heard of their power to change lives. In as much as the immanent sacred is that which enables communion with the world and offers spiritual knowing, its source is the deep body which blurs into the natural environment. However deeply we drink from this source - a threshold brook perhaps - the depth of potential implicit knowing will never be drained and the experience of connection remains ineffable.

Eco-pagan practice can enable an awareness that embraces the reality of our embodiment and honours the processes by which self emerges from a relationship with the world. Although it may only appeal to a minority, understanding eco-paganism provides valuable theoretical insights for a cultural shift towards a richer sense of our embodiment.



- <sup>1</sup> I. Burkitt, *Bodies of Thought*, London: Sage Publications, 1999, p. 45.
- <sup>2</sup> E. Tylor, Edward. *Primitive Culture: Researches Into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, Volume 1. London: John Murray. 1871, p. 383.
- <sup>3</sup> E. Tylor, *ibid*, p. 431.
- <sup>4</sup> G. Harvey, *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*. Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2013, p. 5.
- <sup>5</sup> G. Harvey. *Animism, respecting the Living World*. London: Hurst & Co., 2005, p. xi.
- <sup>6</sup> T. Rohrer, 'The Body in Space: Embodiment, Experientialism and Linguistic Conceptualization', in J. Zlatev, T. Ziemke, R. Frank, R. Dirven (eds) *Body, Language and Mind*, vol. 2, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2007, p. 343.
- <sup>7</sup> M. Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981; M. Berman, *Coming to Our Senses*, London: Unwin, 1990.
- <sup>8</sup> D. Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, New York: Pantheon, 1996; M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962.
- <sup>9</sup> Berman, *Our Senses*, *op. cit.*
- <sup>10</sup> Abram, *op. cit.*, p. 57.
- <sup>11</sup> Berman, *Reenchantment*, *op. cit.*, p. 39.
- <sup>12</sup> Berman, *Our Senses*, *op. cit.*, p. 122.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> Stephan Harding, *Animate Earth: Science, Intuition and Gaia*, Totnes, Devon: Green Books, 2006, p. 25.
- <sup>15</sup> Berman, *Reenchantment*, *op. cit.*, p. 133.
- <sup>16</sup> Stephan Harding, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
- <sup>17</sup> M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. By H. Iswolsky, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984, pp. 26-7.
- <sup>18</sup> Burkitt, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>20</sup> Berman, *Our Senses*, *op. cit.*, p. 113.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> Burkitt, *op. cit.*, p. 49.
- <sup>23</sup> G. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution and Epistemology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000 [1974], p. 468.
- <sup>24</sup> Bateson, *op. cit.*, p. 468.
- <sup>25</sup> G. Harvey, 'Animism: A Contemporary Perspective', in B. Taylor (editor-in-chief), *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, London and New York: Continuum, 2005, p. 83.
- <sup>26</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op. cit.*, p. 249.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- <sup>28</sup> T. Rohrer, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-2.
- <sup>29</sup> A. Clark, *Being There Putting Brain, Body, and World Together Again*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997, p. 213.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p. 214.
- <sup>31</sup> G. R. Peterson, *Minding God: Theology and the Cognitive Sciences*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003, p. 43.
- <sup>32</sup> Varela, E. Thompson and E. Rosch, *op. cit.*, p. xx.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217.
- <sup>36</sup> E. Gendlin, *Focusing*, New York: Bantam, 1981, p. 25.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>38</sup> E. Gendlin, 'The Primacy of the Body, not the Primacy of Perception: How the Body Knows the Situation and Philosophy', *Man and World*, 1992, vol. 25(3-4), p. 349.
- <sup>39</sup> E. Gendlin, 'How Philosophy Cannot Appeal to Experience, and How it Can', in D.M. Levin (ed.) *Language beyond Postmodernism: Saying and Thinking in Gendlin's Philosophy*, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1997, p. 15.
- <sup>40</sup> E. Gendlin, *A Process Model*, New York: Focusing Institute, 1997. Available HTTP: <<http://www.focusing.org/process.html>> (accessed 30 August 2014).
- <sup>41</sup> A. Harris, *The Wisdom of the Body: Embodied Knowledge in Eco-Paganism*, PhD thesis, University of Southampton, 2008. Available HTTP:

<[http://www.thegreenfuse.org/phd/more/full\\_thesis.pdf](http://www.thegreenfuse.org/phd/more/full_thesis.pdf)> (accessed 20 March 2013).

<sup>42</sup> G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*, New York: Basic Books, 1999, p. 10.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>44</sup> D. Leder, *The Absent Body*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990, p. 165.

<sup>45</sup> On-line cognition deals with live tasks that require fast moment-by-moment processing. We switch to slower, off-line cognition when we need to check upon something odd or plan future behaviour.

<sup>46</sup> Leder, *op. cit.*, pp. 165-6.

<sup>47</sup> S. Greenwood, *The Nature of Magic: An Anthropology of Consciousness*, Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005.

<sup>48</sup> M. Jackson, 'Knowledge of the Body', in H. Moore, and T. Sanders, *Anthropology in Theory: Issues in Epistemology*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006, p. 328.

<sup>49</sup> Berman, M., *Our Senses*, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

<sup>50</sup> Abram, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

<sup>51</sup> S. Feld, 'Places Sensed, Senses Placed', in D. Howes, *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005.

<sup>52</sup> Abram, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>54</sup> T. Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*, Oxon, USA and Canada: Routledge, 2000, p. 9.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>56</sup> T. Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*, Oxon, USA and Canada: Routledge, 2000, p. 25.

<sup>57</sup> N. Bird-David, 'Animism Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology', in G. Harvey (ed.), *Readings in Indigenous Religions*, London and New York: Continuum, 2002, p. 74.

<sup>58</sup> D. Abram, 'The Perceptual Implications of Gaia', *The Ecologist*, 1985, 15(3), p. 100.

<sup>59</sup> Leder, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

<sup>60</sup> Feminist epistemology shows that not all scientific knowing has to be disembodied (Sandra Harding, *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

<sup>61</sup> N. Bird-David, 'Animism' Revisited', *op. cit.*, p. 96.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>63</sup> Somatophobia refers to the fear and hostility to the body that is characteristic of Western philosophy. E. Spelman, 'Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views', *Feminist Studies*, 1982, vol. 8(1), p. 120.

<sup>64</sup> A. Worthington, (ed.), *The Battle of the Beanfield*, Devon: Enabler Publications, 2005, p. 214.

<sup>65</sup> Author's field notes, Jan interviewed at site A, October, 2005.

<sup>66</sup> A. Letcher, 'Go fly a kite: A New Approach to Eco-Magick', *The Dragon Eco-Magic Journal*, 2001. Available HTTP: <<http://www.dragonnetwork.org/go-fly-a-kite-a-new-approach-to-eco-magick/>> (accessed 21 March 2013).

<sup>67</sup> This list is not exhaustive and there are clearly other processes of connection - erotic communion for example.

<sup>68</sup> I have discussed the role of the wilderness effect and the threshold brook in more depth elsewhere. See A. Harris, 'The Power of Place: Protest Site Pagans', *The European Journal of Ecopsychology*, 2011, vol. 2. Available HTTP: <<http://aje.wyrdwise.com/ojs/index.php/EJE/article/view/12>> (accessed on 21 March 2013); A. Harris, 'A Life in the Woods' in G. MacLellan and S. Cross (eds) *The Wanton Green*, Oxford: Mandrake Press, 2012, pp. 68-82; A. Harris (2013). 'Embodied Eco-Paganism'. G Harvey (ed.), in *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*. Durham: Acumen Publishing, pp. 403 - 415.

<sup>69</sup> R. Greenway, 'The Wilderness Effect and Ecopsychology', in T. Roszak, M. E. Gomes and A. D. Kanner (eds) *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*, San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 1995, p. 129.

<sup>70</sup> In as far as the term 'wilderness' can be seen as a Western construct (see, for example, M. Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), the term 'wilderness effect' is problematic. However it is widely used in ecopsychology and has become the accepted term for the specific process I'm concerned with here.

- <sup>71</sup> A. Letcher, "'Virtual Paganism" or Direct Action? The Implications of Road Protesting for Modern Paganism', *Diskus*, 2000, vol. 6. Available HTTP: <<http://web.uni-marburg.de/religionswissenschaft/journal/diskus/letcher.html>> (accessed 15 May 2004).
- <sup>72</sup> J. Hindle, *Nine Miles: Two Winters of Anti-Road Protest*, Brighton: Phoenix Tree Books, 2006, pp. 70-1.
- <sup>73</sup> See, for example, B. McDonald and R. Schreyer, 'Spiritual Benefits of Leisure: Participation and Leisure Settings', in *Benefits of Leisure*, State College, PA: Venture Publishers, 1991.
- <sup>74</sup> Greenway, op. cit., p. 128.
- <sup>75</sup> S. Shaw, *Experiential Wildness*, 2006. Available HTTP: <<http://www.ecopsychology.org/journal/ezine/experiential.html>> (accessed 21 March 2013).
- <sup>76</sup> Barry – fieldwork interview.
- <sup>77</sup> A. Letcher, 'Go fly a kite', op. cit.
- <sup>78</sup> Heathens are pagans who follow Germanic or Scandinavian traditions.
- <sup>79</sup> J. Blain, *Nine Worlds of Seid-Magic: Ecstasy and Neo-Shamanism in Northern European Paganism*, London: Routledge, 2001, pp. 61-2.
- <sup>80</sup> Greenway, op. cit., p. 132.
- <sup>81</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>82</sup> B. Patterson, *The Art of Conversation with the Genius Loci*, Somerset: Capell Bann, 2005, p. 136.
- <sup>83</sup> G. MacLellan, 'Dancing on the Edge: Shamanism in Modern Britain' in G. Harvey and C. Hardman (eds) *Paganism Today: Ancient Earth Traditions for the Twenty-First Century*, Thorsons: London, 1996, p. 147.
- <sup>84</sup> Greenwood, op. cit.
- <sup>85</sup> Bateson, op. cit., p. 468.
- <sup>86</sup> Greenwood, op. cit., p. 97.
- <sup>87</sup> Bateson, op. cit., p. 138.
- <sup>88</sup> Greenwood, op. cit., p. 94.
- <sup>89</sup> Varela, Thompson and Rosch, op. cit., p. 217.
- <sup>90</sup> Greenway, op. cit., p. 133.
- <sup>91</sup> Taylor, B., 'Resacralizing Mother Earth in the History of Earth First!', *Earth First! The Radical Environmental Journal*, 2005, vol. 6(1), p. 47.
- <sup>92</sup> Greenwood, op. cit., p. 107.
- <sup>93</sup> Jackson, op. cit., p. 328
- <sup>94</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>95</sup> Bateson, op. cit., p. 467.
- <sup>96</sup> Although there are connections with deep ecology and transpersonal ecology that remain unexplored here, I consider eco-pagan animism to be more embodied than either. Both are part of a wider conversation and I have discussed deep ecology elsewhere (Sacred Ecology, see following endnote).
- <sup>97</sup> Harris, A., 'Sacred Ecology', in Harvey, G. and Hardman C. (eds) *Paganism Today: Ancient Earth Traditions for the Twenty-First Century*, Thorsons: London, 1996, p. 152.
- <sup>98</sup> A. Fisher, *Radical Ecopsychology: Psychology in the Service of Life*, State Albany: University of New York Press, 2002, p. 103.

### **Interview details:**

Barry interviewed in Coventry, 19/04/07

Gordon interviewed in Buxton, 29/05/07

Mark interviewed in Southend, 21/05/07

Mary interviewed in Devon, 26/05/07

Sally interviewed in London, 23/05/07

Zoe interviewed nr. Glastonbury, 24/05/07

Dave interviewed at site A, June 2007

Debbie interviewed at site A, October 2005

Ian interviewed at site B, June 2006

Jan interviewed at site A, October, 2005

Jo interviewed at site A, June 2007

John interviewed at site A, May 2006

Rob interviewed at Climate Change Camp, August 2006

Site A was a long term encampment on a narrow strip of land which was part of a local park in a suburban town in southern England. It was notable in that it included an ancient burial site. The number of full-time residents varied over the two years of my involvement from 2 to about 12. Although local support was strong, site B was targeted by arson and other attacks. At the time of writing site B is no longer threatened by a road widening scheme.

Site B was a road protest in southern England established during May 2006 in several patches of woodland - some ancient - on the edge of a town. There are two camps and again numbers on-site varied, but during my visits the main camp had an average of ten residents while the second had 5. Local support varied over time. The woodland is not longer under immediate threat. Sites A and B had some well built low-impact dwellings and communal spaces.