

Addressing global responsibility for conservation through cross-cultural collaboration: *Kodama Forest, a forest of tree spirits*

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Abstract A commitment to conservation of a place is based on the sense of place expressed by its “conceptual community”, including those who are not its residents in the geographical sense, but who nonetheless identify with it for various reasons. With the global nature of environmental issues being clearly recognized, such communities form a “*terrain of consciousness*” (Berg and Dasmann 1978), extending responsibility for conservation across cultures, time and space. Although the social mobility and diversity brought about by today’s technology often work against the development of a sense of place, they also allow the formation of such conceptual communities, who can highlight local distinctiveness while at the same time positioning local issues in a global context, so generating a sense of global responsibility. In the case of Tasmania, Australia, recent international interest in its ecologically and culturally significant places, such as Recherche Bay and the Styx Valley, has intensified the focus on forest issues, building on Tasmania’s already well-recognized history of environmentalism. It is important that these issues be recognized in Japan in particular, where a rising awareness about climate change and mass consumerism has alerted the public to the problem of deforestation; however the fact that Tasmania is one of the major sources of woodchips for paper production is not widely known. Awareness by the consumer, it is argued, is a foundation for forming a sense of global responsibility and it is necessary to form a conceptual community of those committed to the same issue. Cross-cultural collaboration is therefore necessary, and creativity can be an effective facilitating agent for this. This paper illustrates this point,

through the example of the *Kodama Forest, a forest of tree spirits*, in North East Tasmania, that arose from such a collaboration between a group of Japanese students and a local community group. The collaboration also facilitated meaningful learning opportunities for the students, who chose to study in Tasmania because of its natural environment. The forest now provides a cultural heritage that also defines the evolution of this conceptual community through on-going collaboration. The importance of human connection at all levels, local, regional and global, in promoting environmental sustainability is addressed through the example of this forest.

Keywords Creativity · Local–global · Responsibility · Conceptual community · Sense of place · Cross-cultural collaboration

Kodama 木霊 こだま

Kodama is a spirit that dwells within trees. *Kodama* is also an echo, *yama-biko* (山彦) that originates from *yama-hibiki* (山響き—resonance in mountains) because it is believed that when you call out, it is the tree spirits who reply to you. Numerous characters symbolizes *Kodama*—木精 (tree spirit)、木音 (tree sound)、木魅 (tree myth)、樹神 (tree deity)、返響 (returning sound) or 罅 (rocky valley). The character *kyo* 響 means expanding sound, while *in* 韻 is harmonious sound. 音 is “invisible” sound as in “dropping a line” and “harmonious tone”, and when read as *ne* it is the sound that resonates in our mind and the voices that reach our heart.¹

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¹ From “Landscape of language” Kyoto, Seisei-sha, p. 70, author’s translation.

“It is about visible and invisible, it is about history in the present and it is about creating the future” (Clifford 1994: 19).

1 Introduction

Kodama Forest or *the forest of tree spirits* is located in the Blue Tier,² approx 20 km inland from St Helens, North East Tasmania, Australia. This is the story of this particular place and its community, which sprang from a cross-cultural collaboration aimed at addressing the need for a global sense of responsibility for conservation. The specific *conservation issue* here concerns the forest resource, specifically a transition from destructive clear fell logging to more sustainable alternatives. The *cross-cultural collaboration* was between a Japanese student group and a Tasmanian community group, Friends of Blue Tier.³

In discussing this issue, my perspective is itself cross-cultural and multiplex, standing between two cultures and two languages and at an intersection of humanities and ecology. Throughout this story, what I wish to address is

² The Blue Tier is situated in the eastern end of the North East Highlands Tasmania, in the Break O’Day municipality. During the Regional Forest Agreement contracted between the State and Federal governments (RFA 1997), the local community contributed over 80 submissions to the Public Land Use Commission for the protection of the Blue Tier. In the submission, the iconic significance of the area’s cultural, natural, spiritual and ecological values was emphasized. The area is rich in mining history (significant Chinese migrant history), indigenous heritage (Meenamatta Country), and large trees including tall eucalypts (*eucalyptus regnans* and *oblique*, one of them named the Blue Tier Giant, with a girth of 19.4 m) and rainforest trees such as blackwood, sassafras, myrtle and celery top pine. The RFA however resulted in only the area above 600 m altitude being protected, which excluded forested areas. Although currently 5,500 ha of the Blue Tier is listed as a reserve, this in fact leaves forested areas vulnerable for logging. The Blue Tier campaign aims to link the Blue Tier reserve and two other existing reserves into *Blue Tier Nature Recreation Area* (total: 13,600 ha), filling in the large unprotected areas in between (6,000 ha). It is estimated that the proposed reserve area represents less than 4% of the State forest available to logging within the Break O’Day Municipality (158,300 ha—NRM Strategy), of which 119,605 ha are already in provisional logging coupes. In reality the figure is closer to 2%, since much of the protected area is unsuitable for forestry. At least 500ha within the proposed reserve have already been harvested and a further 200 ha per year are to be taken under the current plan (Nickalson 2004).

³ Formed in April 2004 by ten local residents to campaign for the Blue Tier Nature Recreational Area (13,600 ha), which combines the existing small reserves. The proposed area represents less than 4% of the State forest available to Forestry Tasmania in the Break O’Day Municipality (158,300 ha—NRM Strategy). Issues addressed include affect on catchment water quality and supply, use of toxic 1080, protection of cultural heritage (indigenous, tin mining). The area falls within Meenamatta country, which is represented by a member of the indigenous heritage.

the social, cultural, ecological, spiritual and also educational significance of natural areas.

The approach taken in this project resonates with the principles adopted in *Common Ground* (Clifford 1994), a work that, in a diverse range of community projects, encourages “new ways of looking at the world, to excite people into remembering the richness of the commonplace and the value of the everyday, to savour the symbolisms we have given nature, and to revalue our emotional engagement with places and their meaning, so that we may go on to become actively involved in their care” (Clifford 1994, 16). The *Common Ground* projects are each about a specific locality and its distinctness, but their universality is eminent. Although the story presented here concerns a particular locality and specifically a forest place, I hope fragments of this story may apply to other contexts.

In the following section, I present a brief discussion of *culture, community and sense of place*, before turning to the story itself.

2 Culture, community and sense of place

It is sense of place that underlies the commitment to a place’s conservation by its community, broadly embracing those who identify with the place for various reasons, both geographical and conceptual. Place, as Relph claims, is a fundamental aspect of people’s existence in the world. “Places are fusions of human and natural order and are the significant centers of our immediate experiences of the world” (Relph 1976: 141). A place becomes clearly acknowledged as home as one’s spiritual connection is recognized, established and developed. Quoting Heidegger’s definition of home as “an overwhelming inexchangeable something to which we are subordinate”, Hay asserts that home is “the foundation of our identity as individuals and members of a community; an irreplaceable center of significance” (Hay 1994: 11). Such a spiritual connection with a *home*, I argue, is essential for forming a conservation commitment.

Spirituality, as Plumwood claims, is an essential element in developing a better earth ethics and culture, and such spirituality should contain “a certain kind of communicative capacity that recognizes the elements that supports our lives” (Plumwood 2002: 220). The relationship formed there is dialogical and communicative: “two-way and two-place, in which you belong to the land as much as the land belongs to you” (Plumwood 2002: 229–230). The communicative paradigm suggested is to make “ownership out in the essentially narrative terms of naming and interpreting the land, of telling its story in ways that show a deep and loving acquaintance with it and history of dialogical interaction” (2002: 230). It is also to acknowledge that “*country* knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is

sorry or happy. Country is not a generalized or undifferentiated type of place... Rather, country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness and a will toward life (Rose 1996: 7). Such place is also a “more-than-human world” (Abram 1997).

A community of a particular place may be defined by “terrain of consciousness” in bioregional terms (Berg and Dasmann 1978), or as a community of consciousness or community of care (Hay 2002), and a community, formed to articulate the global nature of conservation issues, who can also extend a sense of responsibility and commitment across cultures, time and space. Although today’s social mobility and diversity often work against developing a sense of place, they also allow formation of such communities who can locate local issues in a global context.

In addressing global issues today, a need for collaboration across cultural, geographical, social and political boundaries is undeniable, and is even more vital at a grassroots level; I believe that it is culture that plays a critical role in bringing such communities together. Culture here is not only creativity and imagination but also shared meaning generated through everyday ordinary life. Although culture, in its relation with natural places, tends to focus on traditional lifestyles and on archaeological or evolutionary significance, the focus being discussed here is on the significance of a place to a community’s daily life. A recognition of the ordinary and the everyday creates a common ground physically, psychologically and spiritually, promoting in turn community integrity, sense of responsibility and commitment, that are expressed in many community projects with titles such as “our place”, “a sense of place” and “our common ground”. Culture here also extends across cultures that bring in external perspectives and interests, not only widening our perspectives and creating unique hybridity, but also giving emphasis to the local distinctiveness, both human and non-human, that in return acknowledges the vital importance of ordinary everyday life in life place (Thayer 2003).⁴

Artistic expressions are powerful in that they enable acknowledgement of our emotional engagement with our place (Clifford 1994; Thayer 2003). An environmental artist/photographer Peter Goin articulated the vital role that photography plays in raising awareness about the surrounding environment by “stopping us for three seconds,⁵ during which no word interferes”. That three seconds is when emotional engagement is permitted. An environmental artist, Andy Goldworthy, is known for his works that are largely transient and ephemeral, giving time for a clear focus by the audience themselves on their emotional engagement. “It is essential to listen carefully to the struggling murmurs of

⁴ Thayer coined the term *LifePlace* (2003).

⁵ Personal communication.

people in their attempt to show how fundamental is an association with place, nature, history and the land, and help in its expression” (Clifford 1994, 29).

A sense of place, here, is in other words a sense of connectivity held by a conceptual community who develop communicative capacity in collaborative interaction with a place, and whose spiritual connection and commitment to a place generates global responsibility. In the project described in the following section, such an intangible and invisible quality is addressed through a creative community project.

3 Tasmania and Japan

For Tasmania, the recent international attention to places such as Styx Valley⁶ has given further focus to issue of its forests, building on its already well-recognized history of environmentalism. For Japan, Tasmania is known for its *wilderness*, but the significant fact is that Japan is the major consumer of its woodchips. In Japan, information, especially in the Japanese language, about the connection between paper and Tasmanian forests, and the issue of old growth is still limited. The public is not ignorant but is simply not informed enough; as one Japanese tour guide said, “many people feel devastated when they find out where much of their paper comes from and what happens to the native forests here.”⁷ Awareness is rising,⁸ albeit slowly and gradually, in the context of climate change and mass-consumerism, alerting the public to the alternatives and instigating new initiatives in the environmentalism, mostly by younger generations. The Asia-Pacific green movement network meeting held in Kyoto in early 2005, for example, demonstrated such trends in Japan and the Asia-Pacific. Many young people are ready to take their own initiatives and actions, seeking alternatives to the economically driven and mass consumption-based social paradigm.⁹

⁶ e.g. Greenpeace (Japan, Germany, Australia) and the Wilderness Society (Australia) jointly established a “Global Rescue Station”, a 65 m high platform on a tree, where activist tree-sat for 5 months and broadcasted day-to-day occurrences through the web (Nov. 2003–March 2004).

⁷ Personal communication.

⁸ Publications such as “*For the forest*” by Helen Gee, the history of environment movement in Tasmania, with a section devoted to *the Japanese connection*. Japanese translations of the valley of the Giant (B Brown), the Rape of Tasmania (R Flanagan) by Kato (2004). Also, publicity owes much to young people’s involvement, such as a Greenpeace activist Noda Sakyō’s daily web posting during his 5 month tree sit at the Global Rescue Station (see Note 6).

⁹ A recent tendency is that new university graduates decide against a full-time employment with companies to which they “have moral and ethical objection”, taking up casual employment instead. Also, recent law reforms have led to a number of grassroots organizations, e.g. NPO (1998) and LLP (2005) being established by the younger generation.

Strengthening the Japan–Tasmania connection, therefore, was first intended to provide information to the general public in Japan and to emphasize the fact that the forest issue is a global one, second to bring those committed to environmental and forest issues into a community who might address a sense of global responsibility, and third to take together a positive step forward across cultures, abandoning protest, anger, accusation, frustration and self-criticism.

In the following section, the formation of the Kodama Forest concept is illustrated through three of the cultural exchanges organized so far.

4 Kodama Forest

4.1 Initial trip—the winter solstice festival

My initial inspiration came from a short essay by a local St Marys writer, Liz Dean, on their community landmark, *the Sisters*, that watches over their everyday life: *What I really loved was the containment of the Sisters. Unlike the silence of my father's ploughed paddocks, they didn't conform. No one told them what to grow or when to demolish trees and animals. They belonged to themselves and their whispers were their own* (Dean 2003). The spiritual connection expressed in this essay seemed prevalent in many local communities in Tasmania whose places are affected by clear-felling, which moved me to initiate this cultural exchange for conservation.

The first exchange took place with fifteen Hobart-based Japanese students taking a trip to the town of St Marys and the Blue Tier community in June 2004, as the first *Japanese–Tasmania Friendship Trip for Conservation*.¹⁰

In preparation for the trip, students prepared two Japanese songs, *Furusato* (*homeland*) and the popular *Sukiyaki*, and a framed “Statement of friendship and support” written in English and Japanese, to be presented to the two communities. Students took care discussing the details of the statement, selecting words carefully, deciding how they should be presented, and so on.

The Message to St Marys

We were so pleased that we were able to share our culture and form a deep relationship with the local people through the St Marys Winter Festival. We all agree unanimously that we will value this friendship and continue to support the conservation of the

abundant nature of the St Marys district. Let's all work together side by side to preserve this beautiful wildness for the next generation.

One of the students, who had taken a great deal of initiative in this project, explained how they chose those songs: “*Furusato*, because Tasmania is now our second homeland, and *Sukiyaki*, because the song has been known in both cultures for a long time and we want our friendship and this nature to last long too”. The second day started with a “Giant Tree” forest walk, a BBQ lunch hosted by Friends of Blue Tier, followed by a visit to the one of the clearfell sites. Although some students had seen clearfell sites before, the sight was a devastating contrast to the pleasant morning, that moved them to tears; it was a moment of sadness and helplessness, but yet it was one of positive reassurance and a reminder that this trip meant something for all.

At a local cafe before heading home, students found their framed statement displayed in the front cabinet, and commented that “*we have done something worthwhile, that we can do something, even a small one, and I am proud that I participated in this trip*”. Another said “*as I'm in Australia for only six months, I didn't think I can be involved in anything, and I am so surprised that we did this.*” The students' comment also confirmed my belief that a small action does matter, however small it may be, as people's connection generates positive energy that leads to the next step.

4.2 Second encounter—Princess Mononoke & the logging coupe

On the second trip, the student numbers had increased to 30.¹¹ This time the plan was to experience a Japanese film together with the community members, and take action associated with the film. The film was an animation “*Mononoke Hime*” (*Princess Mononoke*, dir. Miyazaki Hayao), in which the Princess fights against destructive intruders entering the forests, and *the tree spirits, Kodama*, appear as tree guardians, which inspired students to a creative approach. They hand-stitched more than one hundred Kodama day and night leading up to the trip, and they placed Kodama in one of the coupes, along with the community, after seeing the film together.

As hoped initially, the exchange did generate “*a genuine friendship between people who share the same passion for conservation*” and resulted in a *genuine* commitment from both parties. A community member took the group to “*show them his land*” and made an announcement that, as

¹⁰ 19–20 June, 04. Three goldfish lanterns from Neputa festival from the city of Hirosaki, Japan, a city adjoining to the Shirakami World Heritage Area sent through Prof. Makita, Hirosaki University. Director Shirakami Community Research Group, also supported this cultural exchange.

¹¹ 10–11 July, 04.

a sign of appreciation, he would like to donate the piece of land to the Japanese group.¹²

It was his trust in the people whom he only just met that moved not only the students but also the other members, who felt “incredibly proud to be in this community”. In media interviews, it was clear that students had clearly become confident spokespersons in the months leading up to that day. The Kodama spirits had created a new meaning of place and a common heritage for all those involved, and out of this action grew a student environmental group, *Echo*—also *Kodama* in Japanese¹³ with a hope that “*our belief will echo in Japan as well*”. Sing-along of Japanese songs on the way home to Hobart showed mixed sentiments of yearning for home—*home* where our families are, *home* where we live, learn and work, and the *home* where our spirits gather and grow, connecting people across cultures.

4.3 Creating home—echoes in the Kodama Forest

At the junction of Anchor and Lottah Roads, a sign hangs from a tree: “*こだまの森 (Kodama no Mori) Kodama Forest—Friendship between Friends of the Blue Tier and Echo. Since 2004.*” The sign hanging at the forest entrance was skillfully engraved by one of the students, using a dining table they found for 2 dollars. The naming of the forest took place on 28th November, 2004, six months after the first trip, with a professor from Hirosaki University who helped me with the initial exchange between the Tasmanian WWH and one in Japan. One year later in Nov, 2005, the Australia’s very first water harp (suikinkutsu) was installed in the forest under the guidance of a master garden designer from Kyoto, who volunteered to come here just to do this.¹⁴

Suikinkutsu is in essence a drainage system devised for Japanese gardens but it is an ideal community environmental art project, as it has little impact on the environment (it can be totally invisible), can utilize local materials, skills and resources, and its subtle sound emphasizes silence but also the surrounding noise we may not notice otherwise. The installation at Kodama was indeed a *collective improvisation*. As we had a zero budget, it was made with people’s willingness to work and learn together and express their commitment.

¹² A Lilydale-based cinematographer Simon Wearne, Stripeydog Production, filmed the exchange and is working to produce a DVD.

¹³ The Southern Cross News reported “a peaceful action taken by a group of international students”.

¹⁴ More information on Suikinkutsu is at www.kubo-zouen.com and www.suikinkutsu.com

5 Educational implications

For many international students who come to Australia for education, opportunities to meet the local community in “real and meaningful situations” and to participate in out-of-class activities are limited. As many of them, especially those from Asia, choose Australia for its natural beauty, the potential of Australia’s natural environment in providing education in a meaningful context is enormous. One student, who was at the fourth year of university and is now back in Japan recounts the experience as, “*organising the event, media liaison, fund-raising, talking in front of people I’ve never met, responding to the interviews, writing statements—doing all these in English gave me many skills and confidence, a sense of achievement, courage and self-esteem. I feel a lot clearer about what I want to do in future. Something changed in everyone who was involved in the Kodama Day*”. A similar sentiment was expressed by the community members who have “*watched with some small amazement the transformation of initially shy youth into confident spokespersons for Japan and the environment in the short time we have known them*”. Changes were also felt among the community who came together through this “*positive experience and joy (rather than defeat)*” and hearing “*the best story we’ve ever heard in years*”.

The owner of the land explained that he was moved by the students’ genuine concerns even though “*they do not live here, and they are only here (in Australia) for a short time*”. He explains that his intention was always to donate this land for “*the study of the forest who will be responsible for its future preservation... it will become a public reserve available for botanic interpretation and of archaeological interest and may eventually have a public walk with tree species, ages, etc. displayed. ...it will be held in trust by these people and available for public access and as such will be an asset to the community (Break O’Day municipality) forever*” (Friends of the Blue Tier, 2004).

6 Conclusions

One important message coming from the Kodama project is that *community* is fundamental in developing a commitment to conservation; and for global environmental issues, we need a global community across culture, time and space. This enables a more holistic picture of global environment—seemingly isolated and separate histories of living with different climate, geography, flora and fauna, would merge to give the picture of wholeness. This is clearly one positive aspect of globalisation.

What we also should acknowledge more is the importance of seasonal rituals, ceremonies, creative imagination and expressions of spirituality, as they are a powerful reminder of

our connection with the natural world as well as with one another. They also cultivate our senses, which can become numbed in our urban life. A focus on natural beauty, sense of place, celebration of community life and appreciation for each other also brings positive tone and language to the environmental discourse.

The extended community of *Kodama Forest* is now creating a new cultural heritage that addresses conservation responsibility beyond cultural boundaries. Kodama Forest and its community is now a valuable place for educational and cultural exchange, where initiatives and collaborations are taking place.¹⁵ Clearly, the students and community members' passion, trust, care, respect and responsibility for the natural environment, as well as for each other, have created an important cultural heritage. That, I believe, is what makes a place sacred.¹⁶ By expressing a spiritual connection with a local place, and by contemplating how we feel about a place as well as each other, we begin a process of making a place "ordinarily sacred" (Taylor 2003, 1999). It is an attempt to address the importance of human connectivity in an attempt to maintain *genius loci* or spirit of place.

The celebration of difference and diversity via the social expression of appreciation for place is also encouraged by the Common Ground (Clifford 1994), which asserts a diverse way of communicating the intangible—"communicate in invisible ways with the locality. Ritual is one way and has much to offer. It should, we believe, brim with symbolism and subtlety, so that layers of meaning are not immediately obvious" (Clifford 1994, 19). They also argue for "ethical relations with nature, ancient understanding of the land, necessary expressions of the love of beauty, and the need to preserve the symbols and stories that locate us within the world." (Clifford 1994, 29). That is the kind of spirituality we wish to communicate through Kodama, which is expressed in a letter from a community member that sums up the meaning of this cross-cultural collaboration in creating a cultural heritage in their ordinary life-place:

Dear Japanese brothers and sisters,
Thank you for spending the time thinking of ways to support us in the protection of the Blue Tier! Thank

you for spending the time to put together the Princess Mononoke DVD afternoon in St. Marys!

Thank you for your sewing efforts in the creation of the Kodamas.

Friends of the Blue Tier are encouraged, inspired, heartened and joyful to know that young Japanese people cherish the rainforest, will do something physical and positive to stand beside us in our desire to see this area preserved for the future of our planet. The marvel that is our modern life, internet, DVD etc. allows us to touch each other heart to heart—I send you my thoughts and would like you to know that each time I think of the Kodama Day I smile, and smile and smile—it was a delight to treasure and remember!! Thank you, each and every one of you.

Finally, defining the fundamental interconnectedness of life as *humannature*, Goin suggests the importance of human culture in addressing our environmental concerns:

While biodiversity and the preservation of habitat are noble goals, only when we comprehend and respect *humannature* will we evolve constructively as a species and begin to live again in harmony with the planet we so rightly call home (Goin 1996, 22).

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¹⁵ As a further cultural activity: Poetry reading and the Windscape of Kodama was held as part of the inaugural Tasmanian Living Writers Week in Aug. 2006. 60 windchimes with hanging poems by local writers and students were displayed and readings took place in the forest (19/8/06, details at www.bluetier.org). A DVD and a CD (poetry reading) are currently being edited. They can be made available on request.

¹⁶ With these beliefs the author established an organization *ECCO—Exchanging Culture for Conservation*; also (in Italian, *here*) *ecco*—being here, being fully grounded and engaged in the present moment.

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