

ENJOYING THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENTAL IN NATAL

Donald Gear

A description of a method of increasing the enjoyment of the natural environment by the car traveller is given. The method includes extending the range of enjoyments into those of environmental mythology, history and other fields. Problems encountered from this point of view are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

I first knew central Africa 40 years ago when animals, forests and grass were abundant and the people were relatively few and peaceful. It was enjoyable. Later I found that there were countries that were more enjoyable than others, but always there was a new environmental interest. I learned from experience that I had to enjoy what there was when I was in a country because when I returned after a few years it would have changed.

As with many other enjoyments, one has to acquire sufficient usable information first. My own work in the earth sciences on aid programmes had included the assembly and usage of various kinds of scientific and historical information concerning the natural environment in third world conditions. This made prominent certain difficulties which are present but not so evident in a first world country, though just as important. As a result of the difficulties, ignorance always limited my enjoyment of my surroundings. Nevertheless, my opportunities to enjoy them were exceptional because of the nature of my work, the travel and the paid expenses.

Many years ago I had decided that sometime I would attempt to assemble the kind of information I would like to have when I visited a new country. Possibly I would put it on tape or publish it. What has been done to date is to prepare the material for a publication of a design suitable for 'field' use in a car. The material consists of sufficient unspecialised information on all those aspects of the environment which can be experienced by a motorist. The main part consists of travelogues providing the locally relevant information in a spatially sequential order (by distance from a start point) for each of the main surfaced and non-surfaced roads of Natal between the towns. The subordinate part contains a series of unspecialised accounts of all the main environmental components visible in Natal, selected and written for the car-traveller's information and, potentially, his increased enjoyment. In both cases the works are intended only for reference in the field, not for entertainment reading at home. Included in the subordinate part is unusual environmental material, the object being to emphasize the various kinds of environmental enjoyment possible before, during and after travel. This includes local and foreign environment-related myths, crafts, humour, place names and word games, folklore, outdoor recreations and games, pleasing sensations and two historical sections, one dealing with the environmental component in Natal and the other with man's relation to it. The chosen public is an English-speaking married couple, probably with children, travelling for pleasure on the roads of Natal. They live in a town, are environmentally undedicated and wish to enjoy what there is to enjoy along their routes. Some of the reasons for choosing this public will be apparent from what follows.

The objective of the work is the enjoyment of nature. Only incidentally, when relevant, does it touch on environmental matters connected with future survival, natural resource utilisation, conservation, education and ethics; the main concern is with enjoying such natural things as remain, while they remain. In this connection wildlife and other natural resources

can exist only if they are of more value to man as they are than whatever else he wants to replace them by or do with them. Enjoyment is one of these values.

A summary of the problems I have met forms the main part of this paper. Some of them are readily solved. In other cases I have not solved them or only poorly. Some are unsolvable. Comment and/or queries would be welcomed.

INTEREST IN THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT: HOW MUCH IS THERE?

Interest in the natural environment is but one of a person's interests. Moreover, a person does not *need* the natural environment to enjoy himself. He can live quite happily in the tundra, the desert, a great city or on a barren oceanic island. And we can be sure that once the natural environment is gone, no-one will mourn its loss. One has to live and what one has not experienced cannot be missed. Some statistics indicate the extent of Western interest.

- In South Africa about 1% or less of the white population belongs to one or more of the several environmental/wildlife organisations.
- In Britain only 4% of a sample population saw a natural environment as important. Much less than 1% of an average Briton's 25 to 50 hours of weekly leisure time is given to activities of a specifically natural environmental kind. (Coppock, 1975).
- Relatively few people visit the Drakensberg. Of these only about 5% to 13% are specifically interested in the fauna or flora, though most are interested in the landforms and their coloration. (Sutcliffe, 1981).
- At a Rustenburg nature reserve, surveys showed that 97% of the visitors did not leave the vicinity of the pool, restaurant and bar to visit the main natural attractions, 20 minutes walk away. (Farrell, 1981).
- Surveys in Britain (Coppock, 1975) indicate that the majority of people, during their away-from-home leisure time, prefer meeting other people at places of entertainment or recreation or being part of a small car-travelling group playing a passive role as a scenery spectator.

The results of the British surveys form the basis of the following comments.

Young people (teenagers and early twenties) for obvious reasons are mainly naturally gregarious, seek the opposite sex and wish to display or utilise their bodies, beauty or strength. They have a larger proportion of leisure money and leisure time and fewer social responsibilities than the older part of the community. Modern society habituates them to dense human populations, social concerns and reliance upon the increasing monotony and simplicity of mass artificial entertainment. Apparently for these reasons and others in Britain only some 15% of this group venture away from the beaches, the seaside resorts and towns.

'Mid-age' people (plus/minus 35 years of age) have home, family, loan and work concerns. They have relatively less leisure time and less leisure money than the young. Nevertheless, it is people of these ages who, for example, form the majority of those

visiting the Drakensberg. A large proportion of this group in their weekend away-from-home leisure time, seeks both coastal and inland places where the children may picnic and/or play. Some take friends to small town hotels or travel in order to escape from an urban environment. About 40% of their away-from-home pleasure time was spent (in Britain) on countryside pursuits, mainly of a passive nature.

People older than plus/minus 35 years spend about one third of their time on similar pursuits, either alone or as couples. These people were mainly professionals, business executives and the like. They tended more often to prefer active and less sociable recreations, though passive recreation was still by far the most popular form. This group, like the youngest, had more leisure time and money than the 'mid-age' group. (Coppock, 1975).

THE 'NATURAL' ENVIRONMENT: WHAT IS IT? WHERE IS IT?

Artificial environments (cities, places with a high density of dwellings etc.) cover about 2% or 3% of Natal's 9 140 000 hectares. Partly natural environments (cropped lands, pastures, densely populated cattle ranches, road verges) form at least 30%. Land which has a low livestock and human population i.e. 'natural' veld amounts to less than 65%. Provincial and government lands open to the public amount to about 5% and are included in the 65%.

Apart from the 5% of land available to the public and facilities made available by farmers and others upon request, the only 'natural' environment accessible in Natal is that which lies between the two fences bordering the road. Excluding the tarmac, one is left with the verges. There are often no verges and since often one may not stop because the road bends too frequently, is too narrow or is a freeway, only a part of the verges is accessible. One can see in detail for 100 metres on both sides of the road, if plantations, tall grass and hillslopes do not interfere. Beyond that distance only livestock, boulders, trees, landforms, clouds and sky are individually recognisable. Other than domestic livestock, the animals the car-driver may see are mainly the small ones crossing the road and the larger birds. Rarely, he may see a small antelope.

That part of Natal which can be seen in detail from the road amounts to about 1% if the driver remains on tarmac and 3% if he ventures off it. That part which is accessible to him - other than the 5% of public land, which is mostly remote from towns, is much smaller. It is in this type of environment that one must cultivate and maintain the interest of the car-traveller, adult and child.

ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION: WHO EDUCATES WHOM?

At best, about 3% of a child's school education in Natal is devoted to environmental topics and that is mostly in the classroom. Why should there be more? The present prospects of a technical job in one of these fields are very small. In Britain for example, a recent survey showed that a newly graduated botanist would be most unlikely to get a job in his specialised field within a year of graduation, if at all. Survival comes first, so should there be more environmental education if a living is difficult to obtain from it, few people are interested in it and schoolchildren have more important examinations to pass in non-environmental subjects?

Do those people who have an interest in some aspect of the natural world acquire it from school education or self-education? Lacking the results of surveys, I think the latter is more likely. An example of my reasons for thinking this is that in Natal, while the universities and official departments have field botanists, I have been unable to find one at the relatively few schools at which I

have enquired. I am sure that the children will have been taught much about transpiration, root pressure, plant forms and the like, but apparently some teachers are unfamiliar with their local flora. I find this a loss and one does wonder how far a child's interest in the natural environment can be stimulated under these conditions, even allowing for day trips away from classes and the like.

I hesitate to step into the field of education, but I wonder whether children could not enjoy a much more active role in environmental matters and so help others to enjoy them? By 'active' I mean that they are well placed to collect local environmental and historical information of several kinds, under guidance, and then to publish it, with assistance. Among the advantages one would hope for would be enjoyable popularisations of usable environmental information instead of specialist works written by specialists for specialists or enthusiasts.

ENVIRONMENTAL AND HUMAN HISTORIES: HOW CAN THEY BE MADE SUSTAINABLY ENJOYABLE?

People's interest in their nation's history apparently tends to increase with their age. Relatively few people are interested in the history of another group or even their own local history. As one example, a recent (1987) survey of high school graduates in the USA revealed that about half of them did not know who Winston Churchill or Josef Stalin were. (Why should they? Surely the associated events and their causes were much more important to remember?) The Women's Institute of Natal in 1974 asked its branches to compile local histories of their regions. Some branches did little. Others produced excellent works. Yet today, many are difficult for a visitor to find.

Less common than local histories are histories of local environmental components. Those changes in the natural environment which have come about since man entered Natal and which foretell its probable future are probably much less known to most Natalians than Josef Stalin is to American high school graduates.

There are excellent survival reasons why people should be interested in aspects of their group's history and the histories of their local environmental components, but how does one stimulate it and maintain it?

THE ENVIRONMENTAL LITERATURE: HOW SUITABLE IS IT? HOW AVAILABLE IS IT?

Many environmental books are unavailable to or are unsuited to non-specialists, in particular to short-term visitors. Some reasons are listed below.

- Many books soon go out of print and are not re-printed.
- No bookshop, library or other literature source may be near and open when one wishes to or is able to visit it. If open it may not stock the book required.
- Many environmental and travel books are too inconvenient to carry in the field, even in a car. They may be too bulky, too difficult to read in a car, too expensive to risk spoiling.
- Excellent reference books on Natal's environmental components exist, even if only in public libraries. However, often they may be too specialised for one's needs, especially, as is likely, if the traveller is not a specialist.
- Good popularisations exist in some fields but not in others. Sometimes popularisation is merely a condensation of a more specialised text. Sometimes it is too simplified for local field reference.

- For obvious reasons environmental literature is not everyone's first choice of reading material. The statistics I have are quantitatively unreliable but they are sufficient to show that many adults read little. Many read only a newspaper, others only a magazine, a work of fiction, or a technical journal related to their work. The proportion of non-fiction books borrowed from libraries is small.

THE TIME AVAILABLE TO ENJOY THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT: WHO HAS IT?

To enjoy most things, a period of habituation or study is required. The average amount of weekly disposable leisure time in the UK is about 35 hours for the youngest age group, 27 hours for the 'mid-age' group and 44 hours for the person over 60. The youngest age group is unlikely to devote the 'study' time required (infrequent exceptions are ignored). The 'mid-age' group would have the greatest difficulty in finding the study time. However a proportion of this group, especially males, is likely to find the most solace in a non-urban recreation as a relief from a stressful urban/work environment. This group still has influence over the children and it still spends much time with them. The oldest group has the greatest availability of time but there is no information published on the degree of its concern with environmental conservation.

In addition to 'study' time, travel time is required. One British survey in the 1970s showed that about five to 13 hours a week are spent on leisure motoring, mostly in small groups on the weekends. About half of this time was spent 'just driving around the countryside', usually with a small town or other amenity as a focus. South African habits may be somewhat similar.

THE COSTS OF ENJOYING NATAL'S NATURAL ENVIRONMENT: HOW MANY CAN AFFORD THEM?

Specialised books on environmental topics are expensive. A range of R30,00-R100,00 per book would not be abnormal. However, good popular books ranging between R5,00 and R15,00 are often available, but on some topics only. If one has wide environmental interests, then at least seven volumes would be required, giving a total book cost of between R35,00 and R700,00, assuming the books to be available. Only the cheaper books would normally be used in the field, the more expensive books being retained at home for reference. So it is unlikely that the required full range would be taken into the field. Such expenditures and arrangements may be practicable for many interested residents but most visitors could justify only the cheaper books.

To travel 80 kilometres to a place and back again one day might cost a motorist overall about R6. It would cost more if lunch were paid for at a restaurant. If one adds the costs of binoculars, cameras, recording equipment and other items of special interest, then the costs would rise still more.

PHYSICAL DISCOMFORT IN A NATURAL ENVIRONMENT: IMPORTANT?

Possibly as a result of the increasing comforts of western style living, the minor discomforts attendant upon journeys into the natural world often appear to outweigh the pleasures. For example, fear of variations from customary temperatures, being caught in the rain or in a wind or dust storm, are major deterrents. Some people have a marked aversion to insects, reptiles and small animals. Many car travellers worry, perhaps excessively, about corrugated road surfaces and stones hitting their cars. It is apparent that few people will choose to walk in preference to driving a car. British surveys support what one can see for oneself (Coppock, 1975).

CONCLUSION

To summarise the foregoing, I have indicated my beliefs in the wisdom of enjoying the existing natural environment and being aware of its association so that these too can be enjoyed. I have explained the way I have chosen to attempt to enable others to increase their enjoyment of their natural surroundings. I have concluded that the adult parents of about the mid-30s and older are the most likely to make the effort to enjoy the natural world. The approximately mid-30s parents (possibly self-educated environmentally) may be best placed to influence their children towards similar enjoyment. Certain difficulties have been exposed and upon these particularly comment would be appreciated.

REFERENCES

- COPPOCK J.T. & DUFFIELD B.S. 1975: *Recreation in the Countryside*. Edinburgh University/Macmillan Edinburgh.
- FARRELL B. 1981: Stimulus to participation in natural areas. *2nd International Symposium on Research in Sport and Recreation*.
- SUTCLIFFE M.O. 1981: *A Behavioural Study of Recreation in the Natal Drakensberg*. Natal Town and Regional Planning Report Vol.48. Natal Town and Regional Planning Commission. Pietermaritzburg.

● **Journal No. 8** will focus on 'Environmental Education and Museums'. Closing date for contributions is the 30th April 1988.

Journal No. 9 will focus on 'Environmental Education, Zoos and Botanical Gardens'. Closing date for contributions is the 30th August 1988.

Articles pertaining to these or any other aspect of environmental education will be welcome.

Send to: The Hon. Editor, Box 4746, MMABATHO, Bophuthatswana.