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Exploring the Motivations, Experiences and Meanings of Camping in National Parks

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Abstract

Camping in natural areas such as national parks is an important social activity and provides a way of reconnecting with nature to achieve personal, social, and health benefits. Experience and meanings are not well understood regarding camping in natural areas, and recent research is limited. The aim of this qualitative study was to examine the motivations, experiences, and higher-order meanings of camping in two national parks in Western Australia, with a particular focus on the last of these. Important associated motivations included the “push” factor of addressing feelings of disconnection from nature, others, and self; and the “pull” factor of experiencing nature. Re-creation, reconnection and reaffirmation were key higher-order meanings. A deeper understanding of the camping experience highlights the importance of the people-natural environment relationship and shows how camping can benefit individuals and society.

Keywords: benefits, experiences, interpretist, motivations, meanings, national parks, nature-based tourism, Western Australia

Introduction

National parks are a global phenomenon where parts of the natural environment are protected for enjoyment and recreation by people and for conservation of biological diversity (IUCN, 2012; Sellars, 2009; Newsome, Moore, & Dowling, 2013). The last several decades have seen a re-emphasis of the personal health and societal benefits (beyond biodiversity conservation) of protected areas (Driver, 2008; Manning, 2011). Given this interest in the people-natural environment nexus, an appreciation and enhanced understanding of these interconnections is increasingly important in both facilitating achievement of broader benefits and ensuring societal support for protected areas (Weiler, Moore, & Moyle, 2013).

A way of reconnecting with the natural environment is to become physically immersed in it, with camping in national parks a popular way of achieving this. The camping experience can allow interaction with nature on a direct level by temporarily living in a dynamic natural ecosystem. The experiences of campers are highly variable and can range from recreational to aesthetic to spiritual experiences (Garst, Williams, & Roggenbuck, 2009; Putney, 2003). Experiences can be influenced by the management of the setting such as the physical layout of the site and the information available (Driver, 1987). Camping experiences can also be influenced by factors outside of park managerial control such as other visitors to the park, the weather, or the personal values held by the camper towards the environment (Cole, 2004; Vespestad & Lindberg, 2011).

These experiences allow the rich relationship between people and the natural environment to be established and re-established. Broader benefits such as improved physical and mental

health (Louv, 2005; Shultis, 2003), stress reduction (Ulrich et al., 1991), and increased social cohesion (Borrie & Roggenbuck, 2001) are also realized through these interactions. Further knowledge of the experiences and associated meanings that people have while camping can help understand achievement of broader benefits and potentially enhance the people-natural environment relationship.

Although camping was an important topic in leisure research in the 1960s and 1970s, it has received little attention since then, the notable exception being a more recently published study by Garst et al. (2009). These researchers compared the experiences and meanings of forest camping in the 2000s with those obtained in the 1960s and 1970s. Building on their work, this article analyzes the experiences and meanings of camping, with an additional consideration of camper motivations, through the concept from decades of tourism research of push-pull factors (Crompton, 1979). Push-pull factors have been extensively conceptualized and empirically investigated (e.g., Goossens, 2000; Klenosky, 2002; Mannell & Iso-Ahola, 1987) to provide insights into tourist motivations. Push factors are emotional influences on the choice to travel to a destination in the first place, while pull factors relate the perceived emotional benefits provided by a destination (Goossens, 2000; Klenosky, 2002).

This additional analysis contributes to further understanding the complex interrelationship of camping experiences and meanings and provides a novel interrelated heuristic illustrating these relationships. Another contribution of this research is its focus on Australian national parks and their visitors rather than those camping in a national recreation area in the United States (Garst et al., 2009). The aim of this article is to describe and analyze the motivations,

experiences, and higher-order meanings of camping through a detailed study located in two national parks in Western Australia. Higher-order meanings provide more abstract psychological or social benefits beyond those directly experienced in nature at the time of the visit.

Literature Review

Experience, meanings, and motivations have been areas of rich research enterprise in tourism, outdoor leisure, and recreation studies. The intent of this literature review is to briefly overview salient research relating to motivations, experiences and meanings in leisure, recreation, and tourism in natural settings, thereby providing a firm base for the subsequent qualitative analyses underpinning the study findings and their interpretation. It is not to present a comprehensive review; see Manning (2011) and Williams, Patterson, Roggenbuck, and Watson (1992) for this. One of the key messages from this review is the collective contribution made by experiences, motivations, and higher-order meanings to the meaning of nature-based tourism, leisure, and recreation for those immersed in it.

Experience is a fundamental component of tourism and outdoor recreation while still being a difficult-to-define, complex, and multidimensional concept (Coghlan, 2012; Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2012; Pernecky & Jamal, 2010). Many studies have sought to gain a deeper understanding of tourism and outdoor recreation experiences in a variety of different contexts utilizing differing measurements and means, such as temporal phases. Clawson and Knetsch (1966) conceptualized outdoor leisure experiences as multiphasic and linear, including anticipation, travel to, on-site, return travel, and recollection. They discussed that experiences and satisfaction can be different at each stage and are interrelated. Their work was further

developed and supported by Hammitt (1980). Stewart (1998) challenged the simplicity of Clawson and Knetsch's (1966) model, stating that it is a useful point of departure but does not take into consideration the many aspects of experience. The Clawson and Knetch model has an economic approach, which Borrie and Roggenbuck (2001) and Uriely (2005) argued is too narrow in scope: that not only does experience and satisfaction take place in each stage it takes place within stages, but it is also dynamic and emergent and consists of multiple dimensions (Moyle & Croy, 2007).

Patterson et al. (1998) reported four emergent dimensions of experience in a study of the wilderness experiences of river rafters: challenge, closeness to nature, decisions not faced in everyday environments, and stories of nature. Patterson et al. (1998) based their research on a hermeneutic approach, providing a rich, complex view of experience encapsulating motivations and benefits as well as an output perspective. This aligns with the approach taken in this article, in contrast to the more common practice of viewing expectations as an input, experience as an output, and satisfaction and benefits as outcomes (Coghlan, 2012; Driver, 2008; O'Neill, Riscinto-Kozub, & Van Hyfte, 2010). A scale to measure memorable tourism experiences was developed by Kim, Ritchie, and McCormick (2012) and included the dimensions of hedonism, involvement, local culture, refreshment, meaningfulness, knowledge, and novelty. In developing an experience scale from a services marketing perspective of tourism, Otto and Ritchie (1996) found similar dimensions to Kim et al. (2012) and also included challenge, comfort, safety, and escape. These dimensions have been viewed as motivations.

Seen as a driving force behind experience, motivations can assist with understanding the origins of experience and have been extensively measured and studied (Crompton, 1979; Driver, 1996; Iso-Ahola, 1982). Examples of motivations for outdoor recreation include escape, relaxation, viewing scenery, and getting closer to nature (Pearce, 2005; Young, 1999). These can also be viewed as goals that the person would like to attain from the experience (Ajzen, 1991). The driving forces of push and pull, factors that motivate a person to seek certain experiences (Crompton, 1979; Pearce, 2005), have been a useful concept to further understand motivation (Kim, Lee, & Klenosky, 2003; Chan & Baum, 2007). Linked to motivations and goals are the benefits that are received from the experience, which Driver (1996) defined as an improved condition felt individually/personally as well as at a broader level such as family and society, the prevention of an unwanted condition, and a desired condition (goal). Haas, Driver, and Brown (1980) developed a hierarchy of demand for outdoor recreation, with benefits being differentiated from motivation, settings, and activities as being situated at a higher level or order.

Terms used in the literature on motivation and the benefits of recreation and tourism are closely related to the dimensions of experience cited above. For example, Otto and Ritchie (1996) discovered an escape dimension of experience, which Driver, Brown, and Peterson (1991) and Driver (1996) viewed as a benefit of natural area recreation and Pearce (2005) described as a motivation. These examples indicate that experience is complex and multidimensional and similar dimensions can be seen and measured at different moments of the complete experience. Understanding what constitutes the dimensions of experience including motivations and benefits can go a step further in uncovering the underlying meanings attached to visitors' experiences.

A particular emphasis is placed in this study on push-pull factors to help understand and research campers' motivations. Together, these factors help understand tourists' social-psychological motivations to visit. As Gooseen (2000, p. 301) succinctly explained, "tourists are pushed by their emotional needs and pulled by the emotional benefits." This interplay has also been described as escaping from routine and stressful environments (i.e., push factors) and as seeking recreational opportunities (i.e., pull factors) (Mannell & Iso-Ahola, 1987).

Meanings have a similar definitional complexity to experience, motivation and benefits; with closely related terms, often not clearly defined or differentiated, used synonymously (Andereck, Bricker, Kersetter, & Nickerson, 2006; Jordan et al., 2009). Garst et al. (2009) and Hall, Johnson and Cole (2007), however, differentiated meaning as focused on individual interpretation, with experience being more culturally and socially shared. Despite this, meanings are often categorized similarly to motivation and benefits. For example, in their study of the personal meanings of parks Jordan et al. (2009) uncovered both personal and social meanings such as escape, relaxation, learning, and activities, similar to the experience dimensions, benefits, and motivations cited above. Watkins and Bond (2007) also found escape to be an experience dimension; however, they also explained associated meanings ascribed by respondents, including the need to get away from the pressures of everyday life and how leisure assisted with this aim.

In a study on change in leisure meanings, Watkins (2013) differentiated meanings of less developed experiences (such as passing time) from more developed experiences (such as achieving fulfilment). This finding suggests a temporal element in the contribution of experiences to meanings. The motivations described by Pearce (2005) as well as the benefits

discussed by Driver, Brown, and Peterson (1991) are also similar to the experience and meaning dimensions. These examples suggest a close relationship between experience and meaning, with meaning being a more complex part of the whole experience, which can be emotional and symbolic (Williams et al., 1992; Farber & Hall, 2007). Higher-order meanings are used in this study to capture these more highly developed, affective elements of the camping experience, both individually and collectively realized.

Empirical research exploring camping experiences and meanings is limited in the recent literature, with the exception of studies by Garst et al. (2009) and Tonge, Moore, Ryan, and Beckley (2013). An earlier study by Shafer (1979) provided a foundation for pursuing diversity rather than homogeneity among campers, influencing subsequent research efforts (e.g., Warzecha, Manning, Lime, & Freimund, 2001). Although Dorfman (1979) conducted a study of camping satisfaction and meaning, the focus was the importance and satisfaction with the experience, which is different from the more personal, deeper meanings explored by Garst et al. (2009). Garst et al. (2009) studied camping experiences and their associated meanings by undertaking in-depth interviews at three forested sites in a national recreation area in the United States. They described camping experiences using three interpretive frames: elements of the camping experience, such as nature, social interaction, and comfort and convenience; associated meanings, for example, restoration (escape, rest, and recovery), experiencing nature, family functioning, social interaction, and children's learning; and life-context meanings, including restoration and other themes such as novelty and appreciating nature. Tonge et al. (2013), in their study of campers adjacent to Ningaloo Marine Park, Western Australia, similarly found a strong emphasis on social interaction and family functioning. The associated meanings were characterized in this Ningaloo study as social

bonding (Kyle, Graefe, & Manning, 2005) and “everybody's happy” (Tonge et al., 2013), the latter used to describe what it felt and looked like when families were functioning well.

Research and literature relating the meanings that nature based campers ascribe to their experiences and how understanding these can potentially improve management, is similarly limited. This could be because such experiences and associated meanings are difficult to define and ascertain and cannot be generalized; therefore, they are more difficult to apply to management practice (Cole, 2004; Farber & Hall, 2007; Garst et al., 2009). Setting contributions to management aside, there is an important body of literature relating direct contact with nature by visitors to positive benefits for individuals and society outside of the setting (Driver et al., 1991; Garst et al., 2009; Louv, 2005; Patterson et al., 1998; Shultis, 2003). A deeper understanding of the more intangible aspects of experiences and meanings can add to this body of knowledge, further supporting the assertion that nature based tourism, and camping specifically, is much more than an industry or a simple accommodation option; it can hold extraordinary meaning for people far beyond the immediate campsite (Garst et al., 2009; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006).

This study synthesizes and blends a number inherently interconnected bodies of knowledge in parks research to help understand the complexities of motivations, experiences and meanings associated with camping in national parks. In particular, it builds on Garst et al.'s (2009) research to propose a heuristic for understanding these meanings and experiences and the relationships between them. Additionally, this paper explicitly considers and includes motivations, drawing on Crompton's (1979) push and pull factors, as developed and applied to tourism elsewhere.

Methodology

An inductive, qualitative methodology was used to understand the experiences of campers in two national parks in Western Australia. The overarching paradigm of social constructivism was used (Jennings, 2009) which includes the ontological perspective of the interpretist social sciences (Jennings, 2009; Neuman, 1994). This approach assumes that the social world is continually constructed and revised by social actors. Similarly, an interpretist epistemology was used, with an emphasis on understanding the world from the perspective of those being studied (Bryman, 2004). Such an approach was chosen so that the meanings constructed and re-constructed through interactions (with the natural environment, others and self) could be accessed and analyzed, as could the place of motivation and experiences in these interactions.

Sites and Participants

Two national parks offering camping in very different parts of Western Australia (Table 1)—Warren National Park and Karijini National Park—were selected to ensure inclusion in this study of a diversity of opportunities and experiences in natural settings. Independent tourists were targeted rather than those on organized tours. This was primarily because independent travelers were more common at both parks and a broad range of respondents was desired. As each park was different by nature of its usage and its accessibility to the researchers, respondent selection differed accordingly.

At Warren National Park, the numbers of campers was low due to cold, wet weather over the survey period (autumn 2012). As such, a convenience nonprobability method (Bryman, 2004) was employed, with any camping group approached and asked if they would be involved in

the study. Interviews with groups rather than individuals were conducted because of the group-based nature of camping and group interviews mimicking the social interactions that are part of camping. Data saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Lamont, Kennelly, & Moyle, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) determined how many interviews were conducted. Saturation is reached once no new concepts emerge, and it is evident no new material is forthcoming that can add to theory or development of codes. This was reached after 13 interviews with a final 14th interview conducted to be sure; the fieldwork was then terminated.

At Karijini, because of higher visitor numbers, a nonprobability quota method was used (Bryman, 2004). Park staff identified three main groups of campers, based on age/life stage: backpackers (younger, working-aged travelers with no accompanying children); families with children; and grey nomads (retired travelers with no accompanying children). Respondents from each of the three groups were selected using a convenience approach. Every fifth camping group was approached, taking into account that camps were often empty because people were off hiking or sightseeing, or were cooking dinner and as such were not approached, while keeping in mind the required three-group quota. The reason for identifying and targeting respondents from these groups was to obtain the richest and most diverse responses possible, to enhance theory building. It was not an attempt to segment campers and understand and analyze these segments. After 14 interviews, no obviously new material was forthcoming from the interviews with respondents from any of the three groups, with data saturation reached. A 15th interview was held to be sure, and then the fieldwork terminated.

Data Collection

A total of 29 open-ended semi-structured interviews were conducted with small groups of campers at the study sites. This qualitative method of data collection is an effective tool to deeply explore experiences and meanings because it allows respondents to answer in their own words and gives the freedom to describe affective emotions and reflect on personal meaning, rather than conform to preconceived answers (Garst et al., 2009; Jennings, 2009; Patterson et al., 1998). A list of questions was created based on those asked by Garst et al. (2009) in their study of forest campers, with an expectations question (see below) added to access motivations and experiences. Four pilot interviews with colleagues who had been camping recently were used to test and modify the question set. Questions included:

- What kinds of things have you done while you have camped here?
- What are the best experiences you've had camping at this national park?
- What about the not so good experiences? Can you tell me about those?
- What kinds of expectations did you have about camping here? Have your expectations been met?

Probing follow-up questions were used to access and elaborate on campers' motivations and the meanings associated with camping.

Interviews were undertaken at Warren National Park on four weekends in April to June 2012. Weekends were selected since this ensured the greatest possible number of campers were present. This national park is close enough to large population centers that weekend camping

trips are possible. At Karijini National Park, interviews were carried out during the school holidays in July 2012. In contrast, this park is remote from major population centers and only experiences high numbers of campers in school holidays. July is the busiest time of year, and this choice of survey time ensured the greatest possible number of campers being available for this study. Campers were interviewed only if they had camped at least one night at the site, and most interviews in the two parks were conducted in the afternoons and evenings when campers had returned from their day's activities.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used as a method in this study to interpret the interview data and thereby enhance understanding of the experiences and meanings of camping in natural areas. While it is an inductive approach positing that study findings are “grounded” in the data collected and not from outside sources such as grand theory or hypotheses (Charmaz, 2006), as a methodology it is also informed by theorizing from previous research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 12) defined it as “theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process. In this method, data collection, analysis and eventual theory stand in close relationship to one another.” The intention is to enhance understanding, not to generalize to a broader population. As such, sample size is not important; rather the focus is on data saturation (Lamont et al., 2014).

Interviews were transcribed, which assists the in-depth analysis of interviews by correcting natural limitations in memory, allows repeated and more thorough examination, and serves to

counter validity issues (Babbie, 2008; Bryman, 2004). Interview excerpts were hand coded through assigning a word or code to a portion of text in a two-step process. First, initial codes were allocated to blocks of text. This open coding is a basic process of breaking down and examining data (Charmaz, 2006). In this study open coding was undertaken at different levels of abstraction, including more obvious codes such as “activities undertaken,” as well as derived codes such as “pride in overcoming challenge” and “social interaction.” Constant comparisons across interviews and with other codes led to the addition of missed codes, awareness of potential connections between codes, and the formulation of new higher order codes (Charmaz, 2006). All coded data were stored and manipulated in Excel.

Creating a more abstract, theoretical set of codes was the next step, with this focused coding making connections among codes and subsuming them into more theoretical categories and concepts (e.g., awe, family functioning). This process was repeated again and resulted in a small number of codes conceptualizing the higher-order meanings of the camping experience at Warren and Karijini (e.g., reconnection). Inter-coder agreement was sought to assist in ensuring the coding was reliable (Kurasaki, 2000; Babbie, 2008). A second researcher coded and re-coded the interview data until approximately 80% inter-coder reliability was achieved. Having multiple coders can increase the reliability of the study findings (Kurasaki, 2000), so a third researcher reviewed and revised the study analyses and findings to further enhance to reliability and validity.

Results

A total of 29 groups of campers were interviewed; 14 from Warren and 15 from Karijini (65 individuals in total) (Table 2). In the majority of interviews, more than one person answered questions. At both Warren and Karijini National Parks, the interviewed groups encompassed male and female couples without accompanying children, groups of adults without accompanying children, and families with children less than 18 years old. At Warren, almost all interviewees were from Australia, with most being from Western Australia. There was a higher number of international and interstate campers present in the groups interviewed at Karijini.

The following results are presented according to the research focus of this article: the motivations and experiences of campers. Included are motivations, organized as push or pull factors, and meaningful experiences in nature, where respondents' constructions of meanings in nature at their destination are explored. A simplified heuristic is used to organize these results (Figure 1, bottom three triangles). Interview excerpts are provided as evidence for the themes, with the names of respondents changed to ensure anonymity. This heuristic is an emergent product of this research and is based on the interviews and the researchers' interpretation of these interviews. Higher-order meanings, as interpreted from these results and shown as the apex in Figure 1, are presented in the Discussion section.

Motivations Using the Push and Pull Concept

Push factors were a major motivation for campers to both Warren and Karijini. These push factors, the emotional influences on the choice to travel to a destination (Goossens, 2000;

Klenosky, 2002), included escape, disconnection, and self-identity. At Warren, campers sought *escape* by choosing to camp during the quieter cooler months, by choosing campsites away from other campers and by “doing nothing.” Sally stated, “As a general rule you go away to get away and I deal with people all day every day. I’d rather choose just for a little while who I have to speak to.” Jay was escaping aspects of society he did not like: “It’s just nice to get away from everyone, away from consumerism.” At Karijini, campers also expressed a desire to escape from daily pressures; however, it did not seem as pressing an issue as at Warren. Some campers wanted to relax away from their busy home lives and saw camping as an escape from other less relaxing types of holiday. Kevin at Warren said, “Both of our wives are school teachers, so they get to the end of term and they need to chill. The last few times we’ve been to Bali [Indonesia] and I don’t think either of us really relaxed that much.” Others wanted to get their children away from technology: “A lot of family and friends of ours use movies and DVDs as babysitters... We want to teach them [our children] that you can make up your own games and do your own thing; you can enjoy yourselves without being entertained by technology” (Mick and Kate).

Linked with the desire to escape was the feeling of *disconnection*—from others, nature, and self. The feeling of detachment from others was the most common type of disconnection expressed at both parks. Campers felt that they could not have the relationships they desired with friends and family in the home setting due to factors such as technological distractions, time and opportunity. At Warren, Sally felt camping gave her the opportunity to connect with her partner on a level she could not get at home: “We get to speak about things other than work... To sit and talk about the leaves or the stars or the moon; to not actually always have that automatic conversation.” In Karijini, June commented that modern society supported

disconnection saying, “In general in our society everyone leads such busy lives. It's hard to just get back to being simple. You get caught in the rush of everything.”

Feeling disconnected from nature was expressed predominantly by campers at Warren. Simone said “...We live in the city and you're surrounded by four walls every day basically and it's the same stuff over and over again. To be able to come down here, what 4–5 hours away and it's a completely different scene. And it's peaceful.” Parents also spoke of their children's disconnection from nature. Tom felt this for his children and sought to teach them about the connections between organisms: “I bore them with all the information about the landscape and the animals [laughs]. So hopefully they'll learn a lot about their country, which they probably wouldn't learn in school.”

Feelings of disconnection from self were only overtly expressed by Scott at Warren who commented: “I like the isolation. I'm friendly in the city but when I'm out here I just want to shut off from the world and just do my own thing.” Others hinted at this feeling, noting that they were living their life largely disconnected from what they personally regarded as meaningful. Scott explained:

Me not knowing my future is more of a burden than anything the day can bring...I've got a dead end job and I do the same thing. It makes life go faster as well 'cos it's not like every day is different, you've got these two week blocks [of holidays] and you're living for those. The whole year goes so quick. And I think, ‘What am I really living for?’

Affirming self-identity was a push factor based on campers' past experience, with camping perceived as part of who they are, and pushing them to camp again to realize this emotional need. For Scott at Warren, he saw camping as a way of getting back to himself: "For me it more about getting back to nature and back to ancient roots of who you are, how you're supposed to live, not the desk job that I work." At Karijini, Ruby and Kate saw camping as a reflection of who they and their family are saying, "We tend to be national parks people. Even when we go overseas we do the same sort of thing, national parks."

For both parks pull factors, the perceived emotional benefits provided by a destination (Goossens, 2000; Klenosky, 2002), included experiencing nature, aesthetics, and creating self-image. All campers spoke of *experiencing nature* as an important motivator. At Warren, the tall eucalypt trees, the Warren River, and the cool weather were the most common natural attractors. While some campers expressed that the natural settings were the main attractors, others emphasized that it was the nature-based activities such as hiking, fishing, kayaking, and observing nature that the natural setting allowed were most important. At Karijini the main natural attractions were the gorges and the landscapes. Mick from Karijini said, "It's a lot more nature based [than other destinations], it's the reason we travel, to get into places like this. You get to go walking, see waterfalls." Experiencing nature was clearly an important factor in campers' experiences; it was the setting in which they chose to spend their leisure time.

Linked to experiencing nature was the attraction of natural beauty; the *aesthetic* of the parks. The aesthetics of each parks drew in campers. Both Warren and Karijini have spectacular natural features that campers felt visually and aurally attracted to. At Warren, Kylie said,

“The scenery is just drop dead gorgeous, especially when you live up north [northern Australia] for so long, there's no trees. So this is just beautiful.” At Karijini Ruby said, “The Pilbara [region in which Karijini is located] has just blown me away...sort of soft but still rugged...we're always looking through a camera lens; it's just so easy on the eye yet so dramatic.”

The pull factor *creating self-image* was connected with campers wanting to camp as it contributed to an image they desired for themselves. This is creation of a persona to be shared with and admired by others as opposed to the more personal matter of re-affirming aspects of a presently constructed identity, as elaborated previously. The emotional desire to construct this image was a pull factor. Jemma wanted to camp at Warren in the cool winter as it allowed her “bragging rights” with her friends when she returned home. At Karijini, the concept of “something that should be done” was mentioned by several campers and as “...something you have to tick off. Been there, seen it, tick!” (Eva).

Meaningful Experiences in Nature

Each of the campers interviewed explicitly described their experiences and meanings of camping in nature. These experiences encompassed awe, adventure, and pride in overcoming challenge, rest and relaxation, play and fun, family functioning, and strengthening friendships. These were meanings constructed through interactions at the destination.

Feelings of *awe* triggered by experiences in and of the natural environment were expressed by campers in both parks. At Warren, the tall karri trees and their potential for destruction

inspired awe: “We just heard a tree fall down... I could seriously hear a tree falling down!” (Dylan). At Karijini, the power of nature inspired awe as well as the vastness of the landscape in both temporal and physical dimensions. Larry felt humbled by the gorges. He said, “It reinforces the age of the earth, you think ‘My God! This is millions and millions of years old.’”

At Warren, the *adventures and challenges* that campers described were often regarding their overall experience and predominantly within their own campsite. Camping in the cool, wet weather was an adventure in itself. Sally's entire camping trip was an adventure as her husband forgot to pack many essentials: “Yeah, we've had to really rough it—we even forgot the tent, pans, and the cups!” Instead of this ruining her trip, it enhanced it. She went on to say,

We've done well. But it's things like that I think that we get to show the kids as well, because Violet's first reaction was ‘Oh no! This was supposed to be the best camping trip ever! We've got no tent, no cups, no pans.’ And it's just showing them as well that you can make something out of nothing, which we've managed to do.

This inner challenge was meaningful to Sally as it allowed her to teach her children important life lessons such as making do with less. At Karijini, it was the challenging physical environment that was most commented on. Mick found the risk involved with the activities exciting and liberating, saying, “Some of the tracks around here, I don't think you'd be allowed to do that over east. They take the fun out of things ‘cos they're too worried about someone getting hurt and suing.”

Rest and relaxation was important to many campers, especially at Warren. Rita went camping at this time to specifically “do nothing.” She spoke of always having washing or cleaning to do at home; she did not allow herself to “do nothing.” By changing her environment, Rita was released of her responsibilities at home. At Karijini, rest and relaxation was not as high a priority as at Warren; however, it was still expressed by many campers. One of the young Swiss campers interviewed spoke of the difference between being on an organized tour and camping independently, saying, “Yes, they do things very fast. Here you can slow down and relax. Enjoy the nature more.” Many campers spoke of the quiet, natural surroundings being conducive to relaxation.

Fun and play were both expressed by campers of varied ages at both Parks. Children had the opportunity to play and parents expressed their joy at seeing their children engage in unrestricted play. At Warren, Sally spoke about the benefits to her children, saying that being away from electronics has made her children use their imaginations more. Jemma specifically wanted to teach her daughter the skill of using her imagination, saying, “I think it's good that you can come down with a three year old and you don't have to entertain her. She's learning to entertain herself. Not watching TV or those types of things, it's really good.” Adults also had fun through play. At Karijini, Debbie spoke of walking along the trails and feeling like she was a child again, exploring the world. She said, “I really loved Kalamina [Gorge] because there was no walking track... there you can do your own thing. We were crossing over the stream and then crossing back...it was like we were little kids! Adventure again! Exploring. I loved it.”

For families, camping fulfilled the role of facilitating *family functioning*, such as through increased quality time, socialization, and mutual problem solving. Campers at Warren spoke of increased family cohesion between and with their children and with their partners. Peter enjoyed the fact that he spoke with his children more than at home when he said, “They actually become a lot more social in a camping environment. You can socialize with your kids a lot better when you’re camping than when you’re around the house.” He attributed the lack of communication at home partly to their fast paced lifestyle and technological distractions. Spending more time together away from distractions also increased family cohesion at Karijini. Carl encapsulated this meaningful experience when he said:

The great thing about this is, being a family with young kids, I love that we've actually lived. We've sat here and talked as a group, we've had a laugh, played board games; there they are right now playing Monopoly. That to me is living.

The absence of distractions and obligations also contributed to *strengthening friendships*. This was seen both between friends camping together and also with newly formed friendships. Campers at Warren tended to stay within their own campsites and spoke about how camping improved the relationship with the friends with whom they were camping. At Karijini, campers also spoke of camping being meaningful in strengthening existing friendships, as well as contributing to meeting new friends: “We've been having people come and talk to us, it's been really good. You wouldn't get that in the city...when you get to places like this, you’re forced to mingle. It's been good, very friendly.”

Discussion

The results have detailed the motivations and experiences of camping in Western Australian national parks through the qualitative analyses of interviews. Evident from these analyses and the higher order coding described in the Methods section are a set of higher-order meanings. These meanings are more abstract and have explicit psychological and/or social aspects. Included are re-creation, reconnection, and reaffirmation. Although higher order meanings are located in the top corner of the triangle in Figure 1 because they represent a complex and developed understanding of the whole experience, they encompass both push and pull motivations and meaningful experiences in nature, the emotions felt as well as the broader benefits realized through camping (Farber & Hall, 2007; Garst et al., 2009; Watkins, 2013). These meanings share strong similarities with personal higher-order benefits from recreation in parks (Driver, 2008; Moyle, Weiler, & Moore, 2014). A discussion of these higher-order meanings follows.

Camping allowed people the opportunity to *re-create* and rejuvenate themselves, away from the responsibilities of home such as work and school, from traditional roles, and from social expectations. As Naomi commented during her camping trip to Warren National Park:

As soon as you walk out you forget about the bills, the kids' schooling; you're just away. Even though it's only four days it's like a holiday; you've gotten away, you've rejuvenated and then you're happy to go back and start all over again.

Naomi felt re-created by camping; by having fun, relaxing, and spending time with her family, it allowed her to become refreshed and able to return to her "center" back home. This

return to one's center was expressed differently by Scott, who said that being among nature was more his center.

Re-creation, as a return to one's center, was similarly described by Cohen (1979), who noted that tourism acts to restore a general sense of wellbeing and adherence to the home center. Another part of re-creation, again described by Cohen (1979, p. 189), is the “experimental” mode of tourist experience, where “his [sic] is essentially a religious quest, but diffuse and without a clearly set goal.” This was the mode expressed by the respondent Scott, where camping was meaningful as it facilitated a re-creation of himself, one that had become lost in the everyday, in the profane.

Also relevant to re-creation through camping in parks, is Graburn's (1989) conceptualization of tourism as a kind of modern pilgrimage, moving from the profane to the sacred, from the ordinary to the extraordinary. This was seen when campers spoke of their desire to escape from their everyday lives and to have meaningful experiences in nature. These meaningful experiences were had in the “micro life” of the camping holiday. The experience or ritual of camping facilitated a re-creation of the self by getting away from the profane, and closer to the sacred. This sacred place had other meaningful values beyond monetary ones, and was a place where campers could go back to being themselves (Rolston III, 2003; Vespestad & Lindberg, 2011).

Camping allowed people to *reconnect* with nature, family and friends. It facilitated this reconnection through simplifying life; there was no power, no televisions, no phones, and no

employment. Campers had little choice but to communicate with each other and with nature. And this was their choice; they chose to camp in the cold at Warren, they chose to camp at Karijini where there is no power or water. Campers may not always choose their destination for its recreational opportunities (Driver et al., 1987) or its natural aesthetics (Crespo de Nogueira & Martinez, 2003); rather, they feel a void in their lives that needs to be filled. They chose to make life more difficult for themselves because it is here, stripped of distractions and pretense, where life is actually much more simple. Because of this, people could connect with each other and with nature on a level they could not do at home.

Reconnecting with nature is a point of great interest for all those who care about or are involved in researching or managing natural areas. Many campers came from cities; they spoke of their stresses at work, dependence on technology, and ordered lives. Increasing urbanization, the commodification of nature, and a predominantly sedentary lifestyle have increasingly distanced many people in the developed Western world from nature (McCurdy, Winterbottom, Mehta, & Roberts, 2010; Popkin, 1999). Campers felt disconnected from the natural world as they had been living in a world entirely manufactured by humans. The simple acts of viewing the gorges at Karijini or gazing upon the Warren River were meaningful because they represent a part of life that is not ordered by humans. When Sue spoke with wonder about Warren National Park, she focused on being able to see and feel the beauty of nature and life: “The way the sunlight comes... you've got these little soft smaller trees and when it comes through there it's all mellow. Makes you wonder why some people take drugs. Just come to a national park!” She saw and felt nature's beauty and power without any help at all, and at that moment she reconnected with the source. Perhaps people are genetically connected to the natural environment and have an actual physical need or instinct to reconnect with it, of biophilia (Kahn, 1997; Wilson, 1984).

Reconnecting children with nature and with their families was a recurrent theme in this study. For children, having unstructured free play in a natural environment has been linked to fewer instances of obesity and increased cognitive and mental health functioning (Kellert, 2002; Louv, 2005; McCurdy, et al., 2010). These benefits were juxtaposed by those interviewed against issues at home with extended use of technology and too few opportunities to talk. Being able to teach children about nature was particularly important. Tonge et al. (2013) found a similar result in their recent study of campers adjacent to Ningaloo Marine Park, Australia, and Garst et al. (2009) noted children's learning as an important part of the camping experience in the 21st century.

Reconnecting appeared to encompass family functioning, strengthening friendships, as well as a response to feelings of disconnection (Figure 1). Social interaction was identified by Garst et al. (2009) as an element of the camping experience as well as an important meaning associated with forest camping. These authors identified the importance of camping for enhancing family functioning as a recent finding with this meaning not reported from studies in the 1960s and 1970s. They also noted the greater importance of in-group socializing relative to out-group socializing in their study compared with the results from research in the 1960s and 1970s. This Australian study showed both as important to campers.

For many people, camping represented a part of their current identity or a part of who they wanted to be in the future and by going camping this image was *reaffirmed* or *affirmed*. It may have been that they have always camped, that they have memories of camping with loved ones or that they feel a personal connection to the natural environment. (Re)affirmation is similar in many ways to reconnection and re-creation, but it differs in that reaffirmation

does not begin with a sense of disillusion, rather it begins with a knowledge of one's self or desired self-image. For Scott, his camping trip reaffirmed that he has an identity external to work and the city he lives in and camping helped to affirm this. Camping facilitated the fulfilment of an image that campers desired for themselves, as detailed in Desforges's (2000) study on identity construction through tourism. MacCannell (1989) argued that travel and tourism facilitates people alienated by modernity in re-constructing their own authentic identities by allowing them to rediscover their sense of self and feel their place in the world.

This study has further built on the work by Garst et al. (2009) of identifying the meanings associated with nature based camping. The descriptions in this study of higher-order meanings—re-creation, reconnection, and reaffirmation—provide a deeper analysis beyond Garst et al.'s (2009) life-context meanings (i.e., restoration, novelty, family memories, and appreciating nature). Concepts from the study reported in this article, such as reaffirmation, are abstract, psychological concerns providing insights into what camping truly means to people. The utility of the framing provided by Garst et al. (2009) is also somewhat limited given overlaps between their frames. For example, “restoration” appears as both a “life-context meaning” and an “associated meaning.” Additionally, both these two categories appear to be very similar to the “lower order, meaningful experiences in nature” category from this study and Moyle et al.'s (2014) “personal experiential benefits of recreation in parks.”

Additionally in the study reported in this article, the separation of higher order meanings associated with camping from experiential meanings, such as awe and family functioning, can contribute to theorizing about a hierarchy of meanings, to help further progress

understanding of this complex domain. Inclusion of motivations, understood and analyzed as push and pull factors, as part of describing and analyzing camper meanings (Figure 1) is also part of this effort to build theoretical completeness and clarity. Although Garst et al. (2009) made important contributions to preliminary theorizing, their inclusion of concepts such as social interactions and restoration in several interpretive frames makes further conceptual clarification essential.

There is some complementarity between the meaningful experiences in nature identified in this study (specifically challenge, rest/relaxation, and strengthening friendships) and the personal experiential benefits identified by Moyle et al. (2014) and others (e.g., Driver, 2008). The additional meanings identified in this study, namely play/fun and family function, could usefully inform further developments of benefits-based typologies. The higher order meanings identified in this study, while sharing (re)connection with Moyle et al.'s (2014) identification of connection with nature as a personal higher order benefit, go beyond this benefits literature to deeply explore how meanings are constructed. Two examples of this deeper exploration are the themes of re-creation and re-affirmation explicated in this study. There is clearly the potential for research into meanings and benefits to be complementary and synergistic.

Opportunities for future research are immediately evident, created both by the findings from this study and its limitations. One limitation is the small number of study sites, with an obvious opportunity provided by extending this study to campers in other national parks. The number of participants was adequate given data saturation was reached at around 13 interviews in both parks. Therefore, future research could be extended to new parks drawing

on a similar number of respondents to this study. The focus of these efforts could include using meaning-based research to contribute to the development of benefits-based typologies and further theoretical development of hierarchies of meanings for experiences in nature. Complementary research could develop constructs and associated scales for quantification of these higher order meanings.

Conclusion

Campers seek a diversity of experiences, experiences that are of great importance to their lives. The natural environment setting for these campers was often of lesser importance to the role of nature in facilitating meaningful experiences, for example family functioning and social interaction, a finding consistent with previous research by Dorfman (1979), Garst et al. (2009), and Tonge et al. (2013). Camping serves important functions in peoples' lives; re-creating the weary self away from modern society, reconnecting with nature and others and reaffirming a sense of self. Wider social forces such as increasing urbanization and fast-paced technological change have contributed to the importance of reconnecting with nature, others, and self through camping (Garst et al., 2009). Camping is far more than an inexpensive holiday close to nature; it rekindles the human relationship with the natural environment and serves as a conduit for beneficial and meaningful experiences to occur that have positive impacts on campers' lives.

Camping in national parks offer a way to realize these meanings, importantly offering a way of reconnecting people to natural environments both to increase awareness and respect for nature as well as for personal and societal benefit. One of the most direct ways of

reconnecting with a dynamic ecosystem is becoming fully immersed through camping. Camping can help address physical detachment through rising urbanization and emotional detachment, manifested in increasing personal health problems, lack of environmental awareness, and social dysfunction (Louv, 2005; Popkin, 1999). In a time of fast-paced technological change, environmental disasters, and overconsumption of limited resources, the relationship between people and natural environments has become increasingly strained and disconnected. Camping offers a way of addressing this disconnect through assisting in the creation and re-creation of meanings as detailed in this article.

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Table 1 Summary details for Warren and Karijini National Parks

Characteristic	Warren National Park	Karijini National Park
Climate	Mediterranean	Tropical semi-desert
Vegetation and features	Tall, wet eucalypt forest, Warren River	Grass and shrub lands, spectacular Hamersley Gorges
Activities	Canoeing, fishing, hiking, camping	Hiking, camping, nature study
Campgrounds	2 campgrounds with total of 22 sites; not accessible to caravans or motor homes	1 campground* with 144 sites (generator and non-generator sections); accessible to caravans and motor homes
Facilities	Non-flush toilets, 1 camp kitchen with gas barbeques / 1 communal wood barbeque. No power, no showers. Walk trails	Non-flush toilets, communal gas barbeques. No power, no showers. Walk trails
Campfires	Fire rings, firewood provided (during permitted season)	Fires are not permitted
Camping fees	Yes	Yes

*A privately operated campground within Karijini was not included in this study.

Table 2 Characteristics of the interviews and those interviewed

Characteristic	Warren National Park	Karijini National Park
Number of group interviews	14	15
Total number of people interviewed	35	30
Mean size of group interviewed (& range in size)	2.5 (2–4) people in group	2 (1–4) people in group
Mean age (& age range) of those interviewed	38 (18–50+) years old	41 (18–50+) years old
Gender (M/F)	19M, 16F	11M, 18F
Home location*	25WA, 4NSW, 2VIC, 2SA, 2OS	13WA, 4NSW, 2VIC, 1SA, 4QLD, 6OS
Children present	Present in 4 groups	Present in 5 groups

*AUSTRALIAN STATES: WA – Western Australia (Australian state in which the two study parks are located), NSW – New South Wales, VIC – Victoria, SA – South Australia, QLD – Queensland. OS – visitors from overseas.

Figure 1 Experience of camping heuristic.

