

# ENVIRONMENTALLY SIGNIFICANT LIFE EXPERIENCES: WHAT DO THEY HAVE IN COMMON?

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## **Abstract**

A primary aim of Environmental Education (EE) is to promote respect for environmental values. Environmental Education needs to explore new approaches that encourage a deeper, more powerful process of environmental consciousness-raising that is both long-lasting and far-reaching. Significant learning experiences (SLE) about the environment are a powerful, fast and long-lasting way to achieve this objective. SLE are regarded as a useful means to this end, which can lead people to make decisions and take actions to protect the environment. Although their mechanism is not understood in depth and they cannot be reproduced at will, it is worth paying serious attention to them on the grounds that they have great potential as consciousness-raising events. Although SLE have so far received little scholarly attention, EE needs a deeper exploration in this interesting field. This article analyses 14 cases of SLE with a view to conceptualizing, understanding and clarifying these experiences, identifying some characteristics that they have in common, and explaining some of the ways in which they influence people's lives.

**Keywords:** environmental education; environmental epiphanies; environmentally responsible behaviour; ecological spiritual intelligence; significant learning experiences.

## **1 AN APPROACH TO SLE**

The term "significant life experiences" (SLE) (Tanner 1980; Chawla 1998, 1999, 2001) is used to refer to personal experiences that are hugely meaningful for individual people. The people who have experienced SLE may develop a profound pro-environmental interest, sharing in deep concern and pro-environmental actions throughout their lives (Chawla 1998). This type of consciousness-raising goes beyond what many EE programmes can achieve in terms of the durability of the learning experience it entails, its far-reaching scope, and the magnitude of the environmental decisions and actions that result from it. In short, such experiences can lead people to make a lasting commitment to environmental causes, like EE attempts (Baca-Motes et al., 2013). Tanner (1980, 20-21) was aware of the potential this offers for EE, and recommended that it should be investigated further. He proposed that environmental educators should learn about the processes involved in order to promote them through their work. Palmer (1998) recommended foster that experiences for the XXIst century EE. This could be one of the routes to explore in the quest for alternative approaches to EE, of the kind proposed by Tsevreni (2011) who recognised that we need an alternative type of EE. Vining and Merrick (2012) proposed deeper investigations on this topic because of the enormous possibilities that it presents to advance our understanding of the bond between human beings and nature. However, SLE like environmental epiphanies are rarely studied or mentioned in environmental educational literature (Hawks 1994), maybe because they enter emotional or spiritual realms that are difficult to rationalize.

## **2 NATURE AND CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING POTENTIAL OF SLE**

Following Tanner's recommendation, we must emphasize a category of SLE that involves a superior level of consciousness-raising, which may be close to the maximum that could ever be produced. These experiences, which happen through, with or in the environment, are what are known as environmental epiphanies (Vining and Merrick 2012). These authors define them as: 'An experience in which one's perception of the essential meaning of their relationship to nature shifts in a meaningful manner'. For their part, Williams and Harvey (2001) refer to 'transcendent experiences': '[...] one characterised by strong positive feelings of happiness and freedom, a sense of union with the universe or higher entity, absorption in the moment and a sense of timelessness'. This type of experience produces an extremely intense reaction and possibly an emotional and spiritual state (Hawks 1994) that is highly potent, rarely experienced, and therefore long remembered or even unforgettable (Vining and Merrick 2012).

Vining and Merrick (2012) say that such environmental epiphanies are 'common occurrences': not in the sense that they occur daily in the life of a person, but that many people will experience them at some point in their life; Vining and Merrick (2012) say that '... it is obvious that many people have experienced epiphanies and that these experiences have changed their lives in very meaningful ways'.

These aspects may be important in forming the link person-nature (Abram, 1996, 2010; Barnhardt y Kawagley, 2010; Clayton and Myers, 2015) and in forming people's beliefs, values and attitudes about the environment (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002). Regarding the spiritual realm, authors like Keniger et al. (2013) recognize the scarcity of studies combining nature and spirituality (around 5% of all the studies carried out about nature), and emphasize the special importance of these aspects, since "experiences in nature are an opportunity for spiritual growth".

### **3 ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION AND ECOLOGICAL SPIRITUAL INTELLIGENCE**

Many authors regard spirituality as a fundamental aspect of the human being which can also be addressed by education (Jennings, 2008; Benson y Roehlkepartain, 2008). It has even been suggested that there is a spiritual or transcendent intelligence (Gardner 2010; Caverro 2012). Although EE is an interdisciplinary area it does not always manage to incorporate this "spiritual" dimension into its activities. If we acknowledge the existence of spiritual intelligence, we can make some progress in this direction. Wolman (2001, 1) defines spiritual intelligence as "the human capacity to ask ultimate questions about the meaning of life, and to simultaneously experience the seamless connection between each of us and the world in which we live". This definition could be relevant for EE. As Hedlund and de Witt (2013) explain, the link between spirituality and nature is increasingly important for sustainable development. Spiritual intelligence seeks to understand our world in a way that will answer the questions about what it means, which arise when we come into contact with nature, by studying or contemplating it (Puig et al., 2014). It facilitates an all-round understanding of environmental problems, and of the human being's place in nature. The environment can give us a sense of personal well-being (Keniger et al., 2013) that is related to spiritual intelligence. And this can play an important role in protecting nature, since the spiritual undervaluing of the environment is one of the reasons underlying its deterioration (Mallarach 2008, 13). The encyclical letter *Laudato si'* promotes the concept of "ecological spirituality" (Santa Sede, 2015, n.216) pointing the ecological spiritual intelligence.

A form of EE which also attends to the spiritual development of human beings (understood as we explain above) would be an interesting approach that would help us understand and value more deeply the relationship between people and nature, also including the moral dimensions of this relationship: as Leopold says, (1949): '[...] the need to love and respect the earth is an extension of ethics'.

This article is an attempt to address these concerns and to broaden the study of spiritual environmental SLE, by examining the experiences of 14 individuals.

### **4 OBJECTIVES**

The main aims of this study are:

- To gather together and document spiritual environmental SLE experienced in the environment by real people, in order to conceptualise and characterise them.
- To test whether these spiritual environmental SLE bring about significant changes in the environmental understanding of the world in the people who experience them.
- To learn more about the processes that take place in spiritual environmental SLE, in order to take them into account as strategies to apply in EE.

## **5 METHODOLOGY**

### **5.1 Sample and data gathering**

The first step was to identify people who had experienced SLE at some time during their lives. To do this, we took a sampling period of one year. During this time, we mentioned this type of experience to people aged 18 or over, who belonged to the author's circle of personal and professional acquaintances. Contact was made on a one-to-one basis.

The aim was to follow the guidelines established by Pujadas (1992), to ensure that there was 'a good level of harmony and understanding' with the people involved. I proceeded as follows: once I was alone with the person, I allowed a period of silence long enough for the listener to answer. In some cases, the subject reported no particular experience. In others, the subject said that he/she had indeed had such an experience. By using this method I was able to collect 15 SLE.

### **5.2 'Biographical narrative' as methodology**

When selecting our methodology for analysing these 14 experiences, the exclusive, personal, differentiated and subjective nature of these experiences led us to take a more social approach which would help us to account for the peculiarities of our data on a personal level and bring out what the different narratives had in common within our sample. Our intention is only to study the 14 SLE that we found, in order to describe them and suggest what they have in common. For these reasons, following the recommendations set out by Thomas and Znaniecki (1958), our methodology was based on the personal account, which some authors call a biographical narrative (Pujadas, 1992). We are aware that since we only analyse 14 SLE, it is not possible to apply statistical methods, but we consider that this disadvantage is outweighed by the qualitative interest that our cases present, and the possibility that we may be able to establish some common features on this basis. Our approach enables us to study the SLE as personal experiences which may point to the existence of a social phenomenon.

Among the different subcategories mentioned by Pujadas (1992), we chose the questionnaire as a means of eliciting the narrative, as it enabled us 'to prompt the subject so that he/she could provide clear answers [...] and [...] give us some guarantee concerning reliability'. Moreover, the quiz helps each person to describe their subjective experience in some detail for each of the aspects of the SLE that interest us. Pujadas (1992) acknowledges the validity of this methodology 'in spite of the criticisms that many social scientists have expressed, to build a research design that meets the requirements of representativeness, reliability and validity'. We designed the present study along the lines suggested by Pujadas (1992), seeking not so much a representative sample, but rather the study of subjective cases which can reveal to us the way in which people experience SLE and the impact that these may have.

Using this method, we sent an online questionnaire to the 14 people we had identified, and they returned it to us. To ensure the confidentiality of the data, each subject was assigned a numerical code.

## **6 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In what follows, we shall explain and discuss some of the results of the survey. We shall focus on the most significant results, and those which were most strongly associated with the characteristics described by Chawla (1998):

### **6.1 The nature and intensity of the experience**

Of all the people interviewed believed that their SLE could be described as a "spiritual experience". As for the value they placed on the intensity of the experience, the average obtained was: 9.57. For example, one interviewed stated that the SLE was "engraved in fire on their heart for ever". These results suggest that the SLE has an intense spiritual component.

### **6.2 Perception of time**

The onset of the SLE was sudden for 80% of those interviewed (12 people). 13 people lost track of time completely (7) or more or less lost track of time (6). Some answers seem to suggest that the

perception of time was distorted: "At its most intense, the first time you feel and accept the experience, I don't think it was a long time, but its effect lasted several hours"; or "Minutes. From 5 to 40 minutes. From 2 to 15 minutes. But I am not sure". Another commented: "It lasted only an instant, but its effects last, last and last".

### **6.3 Elements that triggered the SLE**

There are answers like: "A view of the mountain range in the Sierra de Guadarrama", "Chamois", "Birds and otter", "The beech grove", "Dawn", "The views of Mount San Donato", "The green of spring". Somebody commented that they had also had such experiences at particular times during their life, such as "the birth of their first child". Another said: "It wasn't started off by something environmental: it was more about understanding more about what life is".

### **6.4 Degree of emotion**

The degree of emotional experience was given a mean value of 9.15. 10 values were the maximum (10). In 57% of cases, the feeling made them cry, which may indicate a high degree of emotionality.

All of them believe they will remember this experience all their lives. A representative answer was: "Yes (and it still brings tears to my eyes when I remember)". The mean evaluation of the permanence of such memories is 9.64 out of 10. In the light of these data we may conclude that SLE were very emotional and also extremely memorable.

### **6.5 Significant changes**

The SLE awakened an acute awareness of something new, something to which the person had previously been blind, in 11 cases (79%). One of "no" answers nevertheless asked: "I do not think, was rather once again realize our helplessness before God and nature".

As for significance, SLE brought about significant changes "in the way they are" in 13 of the interviewees (93%), and "in their actions" in 11 cases (79%). 10 people (71%) believed that these changes would last all their lives. The mean value for these changes was 8.92 and the mode was 10 (6 values). In 73% of cases, the experience had made the subjects change in relation to the environment, or in their perception of the environment. These changes were rated with a mean value of 9.40, and a mode of 10 (6 values).

In 80% of cases, the people thought that the experience had brought about a spiritual change, which they rated with a mean intensity of 8.92 (mode 10, 6 values). They commented on these changes in the following terms:

"I understood inside, with a clear perception, which is freedom."

"Everything about my being in the world had changed, my attitude and predisposition, my joy... and as a result, my projects, my loves, the meaning I give to all things. I live in immense gratitude, every day, living for something outside myself, that is not me."

"Feeling of universal Love, belonging and communion with the whole of Humanity and with the environment."

"Spiritual change in the way I perceive everything. I think we are so far off when we study and interpret the environment, when we work or carry out our projects, since we study the things that happen with our mind focusing only on scientific things, we try to decode everything from this point of view, and of course, that is important, but it is incomplete.... I also think that we disconnect ourselves as a species from everything else, because perhaps we have been looking at everything from this point of view for a long time, and we no longer know how to see the spiritual side of things.... reaching this without the experiences that I had, and I think that I would still think that otters and birds are just born, reproduce and die."

In this sample, 11 (79%) people thought they had experienced changes in the way they saw or related to the environment. They rated the environmental changes with a mean score of 9.40 (mode: 10, 6 values). The high means and mode of 10 for all the numerical values gives us some idea of the huge impact that SLE have in terms of effecting changes in people, and particularly, in the way they relate to the environment.

## 6.6 Consciousness-raising

When asked to compare other methods of raising people's consciousness, 80% of interviewees were unable to think of any method that is as powerful in terms of intensity and long-lasting effects.

## 6.7 Feelings: unity with humankind and the environment, well-being, peace and joy

SLE produced a feeling of union with humankind and the environment in 13 of the 14 people questioned. The mean score for unity was 9.86 (mode: 10, 12 values). Regarding the depth and complexity of this experience, we should mention that some of the questions seemed to offer an impoverished view of what people experience in SLE. In the case of this particular question, one person stated:

“...feeling is a very poor word, even a ridiculous word, one which lends itself to superficiality. And it's more than that, because the feeling I had was not so much one of communion with the environment, but rather I felt that I was coming close to Life itself, with no intermediaries of a material or environmental kind, but I was able to understand it.”

A sense of well-being was also mentioned by 13 people, which was rated with a mean of 9.42 (mode 10, 10 values).

In all the cases there was also a sense of peace, rated with a mean score of 9.79 (mode: 10, 11 of 14 cases). One person said “...peace at the same time (and I know it is hard to understand) as a sensation of serene (yes: serene) excitement (yes: excitement), because I was conscious of the transcendent knowledge that I had just understood”.

As for the sense of joy, this was experienced by 13 of those questioned, and rated with a mean score of 8.64 (mode: 10, 8 out of 14). One person said: “Yes. But I would say while not changed their level... and it was high. It seems contradictory huh? Because it was not what prevailed: Questions lot to "feel" you ... when what matters is "what" made him, if you want, feel.”

The high mean scores and modes of 10 are noteworthy, since they give us an idea of the vast potential that SLE have to give people these intense feelings.

## 6.8 Individual help

SLE generally happen when people are alone (12 cases), although 2 happened when the people were with others. 12 of those questioned believe that it is not necessary to be alone to have these experiences.

Of those interviewed, 8 out of 11 (73%) had a feeling of isolation (3 people did not answer this question). Of these, 6 people rated their degree of isolation as 10. Nine people believe they received a personal message (4 do not know, and one believes that he/she did not). One person wrote: “...I was absolutely certain that I had received a huge gift. That was not mine”. All people said that their SLE had helped them in their lives, rating it with a mean score of 9.30 (mode 10, 7).

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

Few published reports concerning SLE are available. It would be useful to pursue the study of SLE, since they offer a powerful way of achieving the aims of Environmental Education, with an unusually high consciousness-raising capacity and the ability to bring about lasting changes in people's behaviour. It would be useful to explore this promising route as a strategy for environmental education, by creating situations in which young people can have such experiences by bringing them close to the natural world and encouraging profound contemplation.

It is possible that SLE occur more commonly than we imagine. The fact that we were able to locate 15 such experiences within the period of one year, among the limited circle of acquaintance of one author, seems to suggest that such events are more widespread than is generally thought, as Vining and Merrick (2012) suggest.

The survey method, incorporating questions designed to quantify the subject's experiences, though a limited tool for analysing the complexity, profundity and variety of SLE that people have, proved useful in conceptualising and characterising SLE in this case. The use of questionnaires should obviously be

complemented by the application of other data gathering methods which can help us to move forward in our understanding of these rich and promising experiences. SLE are deep, complex individual experiences, which generally affect the spiritual dimension of the person. The high values (both mean and mode) obtained in our study show that they have a huge potential for sensitizing people to particular issues, are very emotional and intense, and have a lasting impact over time. SLE are regarded as experiences which bring about deep, significant and lasting changes in the way people perceive, value and relate to the environment, and may change the course of people's lives in this respect.

Many different aspects of the environment can trigger an SLE. This is yet another reason why it is necessary to conserve every single element of the natural world around us. Some features of the SLE suggest that it causes a distortion in time, a sense of one-ness with nature and humankind, an intense feeling of well-being, and a profound feeling of peace and joy. People who experience SLE feel that they have helped them in their lives, and they place a high value on this help. This again brings out the way in which contact with the environment is beneficial for human beings.

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