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Seal Eco-Tourism: Spaces of Liminality

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Abstract

This paper is a theoretical and empirical exploration of the seal eco-tourism industry in Kaikoura, New Zealand. Post-structural interpretations of nature provide the theoretical framework from which to examine the practice and performance of tourists' swimming with seals. I use qualitative methods, specifically, analysis of tourism brochures, websites and postcards combined with data gathered from semi-structured interviews.

There are four main points to my discussion. First, I argue that Kaikoura has been constructed as liminal through textual representations. Second, I suggest that the embodied nature of swimming with seals produces feelings of liminality. By entering the liquid world (ocean), tourists' experience emotions ranging from fear through to excitement as they transition between the human (cultural) world and the 'natural' world. Third, I conceptualise the different representations of seals that exist within society. I explore the anthropomorphic responses that people have towards seals such as 'cute', 'fat' and 'intelligent'. Finally, I investigate the 'Othering' of seals within the marine tourism industry and suggest that they are a 'socially object group' (Young, 1990) in relation to dolphins and whales.

This study offers an example of new possibilities for eco-tourism studies. It challenges the taken-for-granted constructions of nature, culture, non-human and human in Kaikoura, New Zealand.

Introduction

A popular form of eco-tourism in New Zealand is the viewing of, and swimming with, marine mammals such as dolphins and seals. Tourists are lured to eco-tourism destinations by images of a scenic paradise and promises of 'nature' in an idyllic wonderland. These representations are closely linked to New Zealand's reputation as pure nature, untouched and 'clean and green' (Besio, Johnston and Longhurst, 2006). Animal-human experiences are actively promoted through eco-tourism ventures and have proved to be popular with both domestic and international tourists. The small town of Kaikoura, on the east coast of the South Island, is well known for its cruises that enable the viewing of, and swimming with, seals.

This paper critically examines the eco-tourism practice and performance of swimming with seals in Kaikoura. I start with the assumption that 'nature' is a highly contested term (Castree, 2005; Wilson, 2002). Furthermore, and in line with other tourism academics (Johnston, 2001; Veijola and Jokinen, 1994), I consider embodiment to be crucial to the tourism experience. By deconstructing discourses of 'nature' and 'bodies' I aim to reveal the ways in which Kaikoura, and the activities performed there, may be understood as liminal. The place of Kaikoura (both land and ocean) are conceptualised as liminal and this plays an important role in its success as a tourism destination. Furthermore, the importance of the embodied and sensuous nature of swimming with seals is discussed to highlight the constitutive and powerful relationship between bodies and environments (Crouch, 2000).

The aims of 'new' animal geography is to investigate how animals have been socially defined, used as food, labelled as pets or pests, as useful or not, or as irrational 'others' (Philo and Wilbert, 2000).

Human and animal relations are structured by power, which often results in the oppression and domination of animals by humans (Philo and Wolch, 1998; Wolch and Emel 1998; Wolch 2002). Animals have been classified as the 'other' and humans as the 'self', or humans as 'culture' and animals as 'nature' (Watts, 2005). Following this literature, my paper asks research questions such as: 1) Why is it important to swim with seals? and 2) How and in what ways does seal eco-tourism provide insight into the hierarchical nature of human and animal interactions?

The research draws upon three different qualitative methods. These are 1) participant observation at the seal colony in Kaikoura; 2) interviews with tourism operators; 3) analysis of tourism websites, postcards and brochures. The choice of qualitative methods employed in this research has been influenced directly by the post-structuralist basis of this study. All three methods stated above allow me to examine multiple and conflictual discourses that construct nature. The context, meanings, discourses, experiences and social processes are illuminated by the qualitative methods.

The purpose of using three methods was to gain a full and rich understanding of my topic. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to cover the topics and issues that I needed to, as well as enabling the emergence of a more open dialogue from the interviews (Hay, 2000). I conducted six key interviews: three of these being with seal tourism operators, one with a Department of Conservation staff member, another with a commercial fisher and the last one with the manager of the Top Ten holiday park in Kaikoura. I also interviewed tourists who were visiting the seal colony.

Observation was one of the methods used in this research as it allows for the analysis of the performativity of tourist interactions with seals, and helps raise new questions and ideas that could not be extracted through interviews alone. Observation took place at the seal colony in Kaikoura. I observed and took notes on the characteristics of the tourists and how they were interacting with the seals and the environment.

I collectively analysed all my data on the discourses surrounding seals. Following this I then conducted discourse analysis of the interviews and textual material by categorising the data in themes (Cloke et al, 2004). Through the critical analysis of texts I have uncovered multiple layers of meaning that have been produced. I conducted discourse analysis on websites, postcards, tourism brochures, and data collected from interviews to gain insight into the construction of nature and seals, and the clean and green images that have been used to frame New Zealand. I collected approximately one hundred tourism brochures and postcards during my stay in Kaikoura. This material was collected from the information centre and souvenir shops in Kaikoura. I chose to collect brochures and postcards that either talked about, or used imagery of either Kaikoura or New Zealand.

My position in this research is paradoxical as I reside between critiquing eco-tourism and seeing its potential as an environmentally aware form of tourism. I see flaws in the ways that eco-tourism is practiced, but I also see how eco-tourism has a positive goal in mind. Therefore, in this research my positionality shifts between a critical perspective and an optimistic perspective of the things that eco-tourism can offer. It is also difficult to determine my position within all these contradictory concepts as I see the notion of truth as contestable. There is not one right way to be, or a certain side that I should have to pick. Therefore, this research may appear ambiguous and contradictory as there is no one right answer, rather I aim to critically examine multiple truths that construct the dominant discourses surrounding nature.

In what follows I first consider the notion of liminality and place. I explore the discourses of liminality that have been produced through textual representations, and the ways in which Kaikoura has been constructed as in-between land and sea through these texts. Second, I suggest that the embodied nature of swimming with seals produces feelings of liminality. By entering the liquid world (ocean), tourists' experience emotions ranging from fear through to excitement as they transition between the human (cultural) world and the 'natural' world. In this section I delve into the different representations of seals that exist within society. I explore the anthropomorphic responses that people have towards seals such as 'cute', 'fat', and 'intelligent'. Finally, I investigate the

'Othering' of seals within the marine tourism industry and suggest that they are a 'socially abject group' (Young, 1990) in relation to dolphins and whales.

Kaikoura: A Liminal Place

Liminality is a concept which refers to feelings, or a state of being 'in between'. Rob Shields' (1991, 84) notes that "liminality represents liberation from the regimes of normative practices and performance codes of mundane life because of its interstitial nature". Places come to be defined as liminal or marginal for a number of reasons. Firstly, they may be situated in "hard-to-reach geographical locations", may be "a site of unlawful social activities", and may exist on the "periphery of cultural systems of space and carry an image, and stigma of their marginality" (Shields, 1991, 3).

Shields (1991) draws on examples from Brighton Beach to explore the notion of liminality and place. The geographical location of Brighton Beach is on 'the edge' of the British Isles, rendering it geographically marginal (Shields, 1991). Brighton Beach became known as a zone appropriate for specific behaviours and interactions outside of the norms of everyday life. Its liminal status came from its "shifting nature between high and low tide", the "absence of private property" and its "unterritorialised status" (Shields, 1991, 84). Brighton beach as a liminal place also emerged from its transitioning nature from a health resort to a space of 'dirty weekends'. People travelled to Brighton Beach to escape the routines of everyday life and to 'let loose' (Shields, 1991, 84).

Claudia Bell (2002) has also considered the concept of liminality in relation to tourism studies. She explores New Zealander's 'OE' (overseas experience) as a time in which the individual is in a liminal state. The big 'OE' is recognized as a rite of passage, the individual becomes detached from their current fixed state upon leaving for their 'OE', and once they have left a liminal period follows (Bell, 2002, 146). The 'OE' is a time where the traveller does not have the responsibilities of adulthood; they are able to reconstruct themselves (Bell, 2002, 146). They are in the stage between 'childhood' and 'adulthood'.

Kaikoura is a seaside town located on a thin strip of coastline. Kaikoura, like other seaside towns and beaches, can be theorised as liminal. Geographically, Kaikoura is located in between the rugged Kaikoura mountain ranges and the South Pacific Ocean, existing between the land and the sea. It is situated on the 'edge' of the eastern part of the South Island on a peninsula. As a result of Kaikoura's position between land and the sea it is subject to the transitional nature of the ocean. The sea shore is constantly transitioning between high and low tide and due to this there is a lack of private property (Shields, 1991). Kaikoura has utilised its position on the sea shore by creating numerous tourism ventures based on and in the ocean, namely tourism based on marine mammals. Tourists have the opportunity to view and/or swim with marine mammals such as whales, dolphins and seals. The prospect of partaking in this form of tourism entices tourists to the area where they become encapsulated by the chance to experience and be part of nature.

Kaikoura is promoted as a liminal place through various media texts, and this notion of liminality was also reflected in the dialogue of the interviewees. While in Kaikoura I came across a free tourist newspaper titled *Experience Kaikoura*, and on the second page was an paper entitled *Kaikoura- between the mountains and the sea*.



Figure 1: 'Kaikoura- between the mountains and the sea' (Source: *Experience Kaikoura and the Alpine Pacific Triangle*, July 2005, page 2)

This paper uses Kaikoura's location as 'in-between' as a marketing tool and this is summarised by a statement in the paper. "While here, visitors are greeted by a breathtaking sight, the Kaikoura mountain range on one side, and the sea on the other" (*Experience Kaikoura and the Alpine Pacific Triangle*, July 2005, page 2). This reflects the importance of Kaikoura's geographical positioning within the tourism marketing of Kaikoura.

The *Jasons Holiday Parks and Campgrounds* brochure also draws upon this notion of Kaikoura as a liminal place. Kaikoura is described as "Beautifully situated between the ocean and the seaward Kaikoura Range. Kaikoura is known as the marine capital of the south". In the *Dive Kaikoura* brochure it is described as "a special place... On one side mountains rear up from the coastline, while on the other deep ravines plunge into Kaikoura's nutrient rich sea waters, attracting an abundant marine wildlife and offering unique opportunities for underwater experiences".

Another example is displayed in the *Kaikoura Close to Nature* brochure where the slogan used is "Kaikoura... magic where the mountains meet the sea". All of these brochures are developing upon the liminal positioning of Kaikoura as 'in-between' the land and the sea. This representation of Kaikoura sets Kaikoura up as being between nature and culture.

One of the interviewees, Aaron, also constructs Kaikoura as liminal.

Just outside the stones that are over there you've got a whole reef of crayfish and marine life. Just outside Lyle creek over there and the mountains they've got the only birds that live in the snow in New Zealand (Interview, 1 st August 2005).

Another interviewee, Sam states "There are not many places where you can see mountains, bushland, farmland, the sea. It's pretty amazing, but yeah tourists love it" (Interview, 2 nd August 2005).

Sam also expands upon the notion of Kaikoura as liminal.

It's just the whole environment. Um people have been snorkelling in tropical areas and they see all the reefs and things, and coral and stuff. They come here in cooler waters and they just can't believe all the plant life; huge ones all the way down to little delicate ones. There's just amazing plant life out here that blows people away. The mountains and the sea, it's the whole package (Interview, 2 nd August 2005).

These interviews and media texts show that Kaikoura is promoted and developed as a liminal place. Discourses of liminality have enticed tourists to the area with the hope of taking part in a life changing experience, such as swimming with seals. Tourists believe that they will become part of

nature as though they are making a transition from culture into nature. The possibility of this transition to nature is an important feature of swimming with seals. Not only are these discourses apparent in the media texts but they have also come into play within the dialogue of my interviewees. It is important to consider these discourses as it is revealed how powerful they can be, and how they shape the way tourists', and the tourism operators have come to 'know' Kaikoura.

Kaikoura's Liquid World

In this section I move from a focus on the land and geographical positioning of Kaikoura to the liquid world (ocean) of Kaikoura. I conceptualise swimming with seals as dissolving the boundaries between the solid and the liquid world. Marine tourism in Kaikoura market swimming with marine mammals as a journey from the human world into the 'natural' realm.

Seal swimming is a prime example of the performativity of nature and culture. The tourist is able to enter the 'natural environment' of the seal and become 'close to nature'. A brochure created by the *Black Cat Dolphin Swimming Group* as shown below, uses the phrase "Step out of your world and dive into ours" (*Black Cat Group*, brochure).

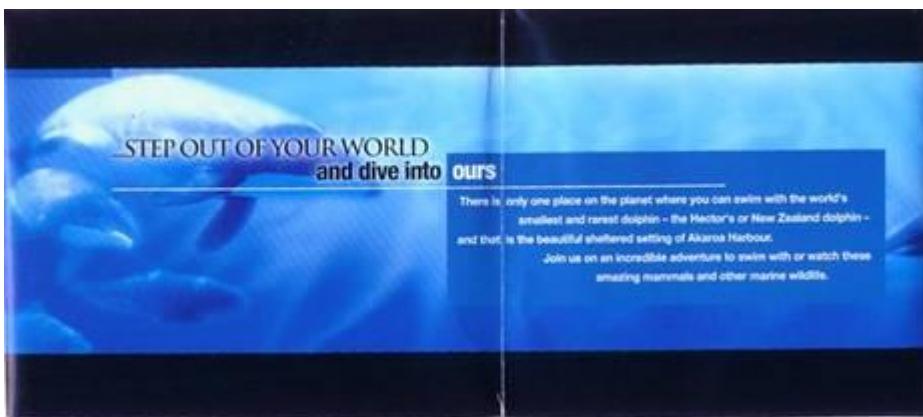


Figure 2: 'Step out of your world and dive into ours' (Source: *Black Cat Group*, tourism brochure)

By swimming with a marine mammal such as a dolphin, the tourist is stepping out of the 'human' world and into 'nature'. They are crossing the boundary between humans and non-humans, to enter the liquid world of the mammals.

Another example of this transgression into 'nature' is exemplified in *Dive Kaikoura's* brochure. This brochure markets both diving facilities and seal swimming. The brochure entices tourists by using the slogan "Experience adventure in a liquid world" (*Dive Kaikoura*, brochure). The term liquid represents 'nature' in this case, evoking the sense that culture is solid and nature is liquid. This notion of nature as 'liquid' alludes to being in a liminal state, as a 'liquid' world may cause boundaries to dissolve. Mary Douglas (1966, 39) uses the analogy of dipping one's hand into a jar of honey to represent the ways in which liquid can disrupt the boundaries between the self and the other.

An infant, plunging its hands into a jar of honey, is instantly involved in contemplating the formal properties of solids and liquids and the essential relation between the subjective experiencing self and the experienced world.

Seal swimming can be related to Douglas's conceptualisation of the disruption of these boundaries. Swimming with seals, as I have discussed earlier, dissolves the boundaries between nature and culture, between solid and liquid. When swimming with seals the tourist enters into a fluid world and their bodily boundaries no longer appear or feel stable. The liquid (ocean) surrounds and consumes their body and they are placed in an in-between state, amid both the solid and liquid properties. Douglas (1966) introduces the notion of the viscous, which she defines as a state of being half-way between solid and liquid. This is considered an unstable condition that is transitional.

This notion of viscous can be applied to swimming with seals. The body is solid, whereas the environment is liquid, and both these two components are acting upon one another. The liquid and the solid are no longer separate entities, rather they become entwined in a state half-way between solid and liquid (Douglas, 1966). Douglas theorises fluid as a "borderline state", as "liminal", and as "disruptive of the solidity of things and objects" (Longhurst, 2001, 31). This fluidity is a major part of swimming with seals.

While swimming with seals tourists wear wetsuits and this also plays a major role in conceptualising seal swimming as liminal. The wetsuit traps the water close to the body, which disrupts the boundary between the body and the ocean. The wetsuit acts as a barrier between the individual and the liquid world but once the water enters inside the wetsuit the barrier collapses. This may cause feelings of abjection. Abjection is defined as "the affect or feeling of anxiety, loathing and disgust that the subject has in encountering certain matter, images and fantasies - the horrible - to which it can respond only with aversion, nausea and distraction" (Longhurst, 2001, 28). Elizabeth Grosz (1989, 74), drawing on the work of Julia Kristeva (1982) uses the example of "disgust at the skin of milk- a skin which represents the subject's own skin and the boundary between it and the environment". A wetsuit can also be theorised in a way similar to the skin of milk. The wetsuit represents a boundary that may be permeated. The water trapped inside the wetsuit becomes warm and the individual feels no longer separate from the ocean. While this state may not cause feelings of repulsion (like the skin of milk) it may provoke feelings of fascination. Furthermore, the wetsuit helps to modify bodily boundaries to the point where individuals may be unsure as to where their body ends and where the water begins. As a result of the disruption of the boundaries between solid and liquid, self and other, human and animal, seal swimming can be conceptualised as liminal.

Embodiment is a "process of experiencing, making sense and knowing through practice as a sensual human subject in the world" (Crouch, 2000, 68). Embodied experience, unlike looking from afar, allows the participant to experience 'nature' with all the senses, and by doing this it evokes a mixture of emotions. Soile Veijola and Eeva Jokinen (1994, 140) state that "when you hear, see, smell, sense and taste, you are in a context, connected. Thoughts may wander around and emotions vary, but a person has become a part of the unity, become a participant".

The prospect of being 'close to nature' plays an important role in the marketing of seal swimming and the reasons for its popularity. The embodied nature of seal swimming as I stated earlier, provides the opportunity for a life changing transition. Shields (1991) suggests that one of the reasons for Brighton Beach's liminality is that it is a space where life changing transitions occur. Tourists participated in pilgrimages to Brighton Beach to experience the ritual dippings in the seaside. The ocean was claimed to have healing properties, and as a result of this many people flocked to the seaside. Tourists professed that ritual dippings at the seaside were a life changing event. Similarly, being 'part of nature', and the changing emotions that tourists experience during a seal swim could possibly be a life changing event for many tourists. This is one of the reasons for its popularity. Kaikoura is also a place where transitions occur.

The *Topspot Seal Swim* brochure draws on the notion of an embodied experience.

Feel at one with nature, swimming with our most playful marine mammals. Delight in their antics as they frolic around you against the spectacular backdrop of the Kaikoura Mountains (*Topspot Seal Swim*, brochure).

Dive Kaikoura's brochure also markets seal swimming in an embodied way.

See how they duck, dive and spin their way past you in a dazzling array of underwater aquabatics! Be amazed at how close they come and their non-stop energy (*Dive Kaikoura*, brochure).

Aaron, a tourist guide, expresses the importance of an embodied experience.

I think it rates up there with, you know, some of the real big mammal type things you can do, you know. You can see elephants and lions [in the zoo]. Very rarely can you go and see a massive 250 kilo wild animal and [have] it come right up to your face and basically almost lick you (Interview, 1st August 2005).

Another interviewee, Sam, reflects upon the interactive and embodied nature of swimming with seals. He states "they are actually interacting with you it's not just being able to have a look. They actually come around and deliberately come and interact with you" (Interview, 2nd August 2005).

I have drawn from the work of Shields' (1991) theorisation of Brighton Beach as a liminal place. Whilst the information and ideas gained from Shields' has been fruitful, I have extended my research beyond this to explore how liminality can be conceptualised further. The work of Douglas (1966) helps explain the disruption of bodily boundaries. By examining discourses of liminality I hope to point to the potential to re-think nature/culture and its associated dualisms.

Anthropomorphising Seals

Anthropomorphism is a concept that is common when looking at western human/animal relationships. Many humans tend to place human characteristics upon animals. For example, people may use the terms 'cute', 'intelligent', 'best friend', when describing an animal to someone else. This is often the case with companion species such as dogs or cats, but it also happens with wild animals. For example owls are usually seen to be wise and penguins are compared to aristocrats because they look like they are wearing a tuxedo. Pys Gruffudd (2000) uses the example of penguins at the zoo to explain anthropomorphism. He states:

The penguins 'produced' by the pool were continually anthropomorphised, one cartoon in Punch showing a row of snooty penguins impatient at being held up at a 'pedestrian crossing' between the two ramps (Gruffudd, 2000, 229).

This example shows how human characteristics are attributed to the penguins. They are constructed as having human emotions such as being 'snooty' and 'impatient', and are also shown to be waiting at a pedestrian crossing.

It is a common misconception that to anthropomorphise an animal is to attribute positive human characteristics to an animal. However, anthropomorphism also includes negative human characteristics such as 'fat', 'smelly' and 'lazy'.

I begin with a consideration of the negative representations of seals. An example of the negativity towards seals recently featured in the *Otago Daily Times* on June 13th and 14th of 2005. In June of this year five men were seen shooting seals from a boat near Tairoa head on the Otago Peninsula. The paper states that 20 shots were fired but the men stated that they were after rabbits not seals (*Otago Daily Times*, June 14th, 2005).

This incident was given substantial media coverage not only in national newspapers but also on national television channels. The reasons for this are that firstly, the New Zealand Fur Seal is a protected species under the Marine Mammals Protection Act, and secondly the incident is thought to have been deliberate and premeditated rather than an accident as the men originally claimed. The owner of the land bordering the rock face where the seals were shot was extremely angry about the incident. He states that:

There are rabbits on the farm, but the steep 10m high rock face isn't exactly a haven for rabbits. There are not exactly many rabbits digging their burrow in the rock face (*Otago Daily Times*, June 14th, 2005, page 1).

This quote shows that the incident seemed to be intentional as the direction that they were shooting was a location where rabbits are not likely to be. The men who shot at the seals did not make any comments in this paper as to why they were shooting at the seals. It is possible here that

these men shared the opinions of a Kaikoura fisher, one of my interviewees, Mitchell who stated that seals needed a "good culling out" (Interview, 3rd August 2005).

Although seals are often perceived as skilled and clever mammals in circuses and children's books, there are also negative perceptions of seals. Seals have been constructed as 'clowns' in staged tourism sites such as zoos and circuses, however, tourists seem to be disappointed by the reality of seals at seal colonies. The seals at the seal colonies generally stay in the one place with very little movement. This comes as a disappointment to tourists as they have been led to expect certain cheeky and clown like characteristics. It is at this point that the perceptions of seals shift from seals as clowns and cheeky to lazy, fat animals void of movement. Feelings of abjection towards seals are often constructed as the reality of seals for tourists is 'smelly' and 'lazy'. The reality is that tourists are more fond of the 'staged seal' as opposed to the wild seal.

The stereotypical image of the seal revealed in the dialogue of the interviewees is that seals are 'fat' and 'lazy', as Sam illustrates:

It's just the fact that people visit them on the rocks and they look lazy and fat, but they have done all their feeding at night, and people get this impression that they are smelly things that lie around on the rocks all day (Interview, 2nd August 2005).

The uses of the words 'lazy' and 'fat' anthropomorphise the seal as these are negative terms that are often associated with humans. In both cases, humans and seals, these terms refer to the behaviour of the subject, here the seal is being compared to an overweight person. Society denigrates overweight people as they are often represented as being glutinous, 'out of control' and unhealthy people. By making this comparison people develop feelings of abjection towards seals in the same way as they do towards 'fat' people.

Another anthropomorphic expression that is used to describe seals is 'rabbits of the sea'. Lance states:

The image of the seal is a stinky and biting sort of animal, and they've been called everything from rabbits of the sea to something that fishermen are wanting to, you know, exterminate because they think they eat their fish (Interview, 1 st August 2005).

The phrase 'rabbits of the sea' is referring to the breeding patterns of seals. Graham claims that people perceive seals as 'overly sexed' as the numbers are increasing at a fast rate in New Zealand. Although seals have been likened to a non-human species there is still a chain of anthropomorphic thinking. Rarely are animals seen as having sex lives. Sex for animals is usually understood as being necessary for population growth, whereas sex for humans is perceived as a site of enjoyment and pleasure. Therefore to refer to rabbits as having rampant sex lives is to create an image that rabbits enjoy sex in the same way that humans do (see also Besio, Johnston and Longhurst (2006) who discuss dolphins as 'sexy beasts and devoted mums'). This can be seen as an example of attributing human characteristics to animals.

This is an interesting example as it is firstly the rabbits who have been anthropomorphised as having rampant sex lives and this image has been transferred to seals. Desmond (1999, 191) explores how the sexual characteristics of animals "provides a category of anthropomorphic possibility for us to frame the activity within". Although the animals may appear different to humans, the unknowable similarity of their sexual attributes is perhaps one of the reasons for the popularity of 'gazing' upon animals (Desmond, 1999).

I will now explore the positive representations of seals that have arisen in my research. Examples of traits given to seals are 'cute', 'intelligent', 'inquisitive', 'cheeky' and 'interactive'. Sam states:

Especially the younger ones, they are just downright inquisitive, cheeky, [and] nosy, and their quite intelligent. In fact if you go along the coast about 200m above the sea there's a rock pool, and these little seals climb up there over the rocks and go and swim in this rock pool, unbelievable aye!

So they're not silly, obviously one found it and went back and told the rest. But they're actually quite intelligent (Interview, 2nd August 2005).

In this quote Sam describes seals as 'inquisitive', 'cheeky', 'nosy' and 'intelligent'. The use of analogous actions and postures for humans and animals temporarily removes the nature/culture divide, placing animals as 'culture' and humans as 'nature' (Desmond, 1999).

Lance illustrates the playful nature of seals. He professes that seals surf the waves for enjoyment, rather than as a way to get to different locations:

I just think they are playing, and you know it's funny because sometimes you can actually see seals surfing the waves, and I don't think they are surfing the waves to get from Point A to Point B. I just think they are doing it for enjoyment, and you'll see 5 or 6 surfing the waves at one time, they are just playful animals (Interview, 1st August 2005).

Sam describes the interactive nature of seals:

A little seal will come up with big eyes and big eyelashes and whiskers, and actually looking at them, it's quite amazing! They'll dart round you and come back up, they can actually see you. The seals are interactive, and it's not just a blob they're seeing, you know, and um people come away and they feel buzzed because of this animal. It's a wild animal, [and] has actually taken an interest in them (Interview, 2nd August 2005).

Here Sam is giving human agency to the seal by positing that seals take an interest in humans and are making a 'choice' to interact. By maintaining that seals have agency he is addressing animals as cultural beings and brings nature into the social realm (Desmond, 1999).

Aaron discusses the contradictory constructions of seals:

They look all smelly and they don't do much when they are sitting on rocks, but they're still really, really intelligent, you know, they give off that air of intelligence just with their looks, their motions (Interview, 1st August 2005).

In this quote Aaron is asserting the fact that seals are intelligent mammals and their intelligence is shown through their bodily attributes. He refers to the seals as having hands rather than flippers, and claims that they have intelligent facial expressions and motions. The anthropomorphism of animals is a way of understanding that the binary between animals and humans is not absolute (Desmond, 1999). By attributing animals with cultural features the dichotomy between humans and animals is problematised, revealing that animal/human relationships are ambiguous.

I suggest that the anthropomorphising of animals are significant for the tourism industry and knowledge. By associating human traits with animals we are 'culturing' the animal, the binary between 'self' and 'other', and 'nature' and 'culture' is disrupted. Tourists are consuming the bodily difference as well as sameness of the seal, and I suggest that the popularity of marine eco-tourism is based on this principle. Tourists want to see something 'different', but at the same time they are drawn to marine eco-tourism as they can identify with the animal that is on display. I think it would be beneficial to expand these ideas, and an exciting area for future research could be a comparative and contrasting study of eco-tourism that has not derived its popularity from anthropomorphising animals.

Seals as tourism's 'Other'

This section brings together the previous two sections by discussing those things which exist on the border between material and imagined constructs of Kaikoura as liminal. Previously, I considered tourists' bodies in relation to abjection. Here I explore the embodiment of seals as a site of abjection. Seals are both fascinating and disgusting.

Bodies become 'Othered' when they do not fit western notions of the norm. Examples of 'Othered' bodies include women, animals, disabled bodies and elderly bodies. These bodies have become marginalised as they are different to the 'self' and they are placed on the inferior side of the 'self/other' and 'mind/body' dichotomy. I consider the embodiment of the seal and how it is 'Othered' within the Kaikoura marine eco-tourism industry. I suggest that seals as tourism's 'Other' can be linked to the notion of abjection and I consider how tourist's feelings of abjection towards seals influence the popularity of seals as a marine eco-tourism attraction.

Earlier in this paper I explored the notion of abjection in relation to wetsuits and liminality. Abjection is a useful concept to consider aspects of marginality. Kristeva (1982) argues that the abject provokes fear and disgust because it exposes the border between self and other. Iris Young (1990, 142) uses the category 'socially abject groups' to argue that some groups are constructed as 'ugly'. She suggests that it is the bodily characteristics of some groups that produce feelings of abjection towards them. Young (1990) discusses human bodies and I extend this analysis to non-human bodies. New Zealand Fur Seals may be understood as a 'socially abject group'.

There are negative stereotypes that surround seals. From the analysis of my interview data I am led to believe that this is due to the bodily characteristics of seals. As discussed earlier in this chapter seals have been anthropomorphised as 'smelly', 'fat', 'lazy' and 'dangerous animals'. These stereotypes may produce feelings of abjection as these characteristics are not those that are attributed to the clean, rational and ordered body. These characteristics are also attributed to overweight bodies who may also be represented as a 'socially abject group' (Young, 1990). Two of the interviewees remarked upon seals as tourism's 'Other'.

Aaron, in response to my question 'Why did he think seals were perceived as third to whales and dolphins?' illustrated that:

Most of the time they just want to experience wildlife and they've got the whole dolphin, whale thing in their minds, it's part of the deal to come to Kaikoura and do that although I think the seals certainly aren't as popular as they could be, it tends to be 3rd on people's agenda. Whales, dolphins and then seals, you know' (Interview, 1st August 2005).

Aaron illustrates here that when tourists visit Kaikoura they have already planned to view and/or swim with the dolphins and whales. It seems to be expected of them. He affirms the fact that seals are not as popular as they could be. From this information I suggest that this is because of the differences in the bodily characteristics of dolphins and whales compared to seals. Dolphins and whales are represented as beautiful, intelligent creatures whereas seals are often characterised by the odours they emit or the size of their bodies.

Mitchell also discusses the construction of seals as marginal to dolphins and whales. He states "I think for tourism sectors here it's more to do with the whales and the dolphins" (Interview, 3rd August 2005). This quote emphasises further the prioritising of dolphins and whales over seals. It could also be suggested that seals are third on people's agenda as seals are easily accessible in a lot of countries. Whereas, whales and dolphins are usually only found in rare places such as Kaikoura.

From the interview data I found that the abject feelings that tourists feel towards seals is possibly a result of the disruption of the nature/culture boundary. Seals possess characteristics associated with 'socially abject groups' such as being 'fat and lazy', 'dangerous' and 'smelly'. These characteristics are those that threaten to dissolve the border between the self and the 'other'.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the ways in which various humans engage with the non-human world of seals in Kaikoura, New Zealand. Eco-tourism ventures claim to provide 'real' and 'authentic' experiences of 'pure' nature. This paper has held the concepts of nature and embodiment up to scrutiny by uncovering the multiple discourses that make up their contested meanings. Eco-tourism

is constructed through powerful nature/culture dualisms. I stress that an upheaval of these dualisms is needed in order to rethink hierarchies between humans and animals.

One way to create an upheaval of nature/culture and animal/human dualisms is to consider the notion of liminality. I discussed the ways that Kaikoura has been produced as 'in-between' the land and the sea through media texts. I introduced the importance of the body in constructing seal eco-tourism as liminal. The construction of seal swimming as a journey from the human world into the 'natural' world is highlighted as this transition produces feelings of liminality. The hierarchical nature of human and animal interactions has also been examined through the concept of anthropomorphism. It is concluded that anthropomorphising animals both reinforces and threatens to dissolve the hierarchy of humans over animals. The theorising of seals as a 'socially abject group' has also provided useful insight into the human/nature, animal/human binaries.

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