

Going Away to the Wilderness for Solitude ... and Community: Ecoambiguity and the Semester in the Wild Experience

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One of the first lessons of ecological experience is that of relationship. Try as we might to leave society behind, we always carry its intellectual trappings with us, and we forge new societies, new networks of interaction, no matter where we go. This is not a bad thing. The hermetic myth offers an alluring vision of simplicity and perspective and focused commitment in such narratives as Kamo No Chomei's "An Account of My Hut" (1212, Japan) and E.J. Banfield's *Confessions of a Beachcomber* (1908, Australia). In the American context, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854, United States) and many-volume personal journal are among the literary icons of solitary retreat. But relationship is the abiding motif in all of these works—Kamo No Chomei cannot fully abandon the political complications of urban Japan. Banfield and Thoreau establish relationships with Dunk Island on the North Queensland coast and Walden Pond in suburban Boston, respectively. Thoreau writes famously, in his chapter "Solitude" in *Walden*, about his sense of kinship with the trees and other natural organisms at the pond. Ecocritic Karen Thornber uses the term "ecoambiguity" to describe this sense of relationship, of community, while in conditions of solitude—and to explain other forms of environmental irony. In this talk, I would like to consider a form of pedagogical ecoambiguity in the context of the University of Idaho's Semester in the Wild Program, which sends approximately a dozen undergraduates deep into the Idaho wilderness each fall, where they spend three months living at a research station while taking a full schedule of classes, ranging from river ecology to environmental writing. Many students are attracted to the program because of the allure of quiet solitude in a beautiful wilderness—they imagine themselves "front[ing] the essential facts of life" and breaking through the buffers of twenty-first-century civilization to learn the realities of ecology. Some of this does happen. But the students and professors who participate in Semester in the Wild also learn a lot about getting along (and sometimes *not* getting along) with other people, and about establishing other kinds of relationships, during the semester-long adventure in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. Careful reading of Kamo No Chomei, E.J. Banfield, Henry David Thoreau, and many other avatars of exurban retreat could have predicted this.