

REVIEW

## A Review of ‘Bad River: The Cooks River’

Film by Beau Miles. Published on YouTube 28 July, 2022.

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Link to film: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xmxKUwB8VFQ>

I have always had a fascination for rivers. I grew up camping by them every long weekend. The water captivated me, and I would spend hours moving river rocks, making pools and dams until I was chilled to the bone. As I grew up, I fell deeper in love with rivers through paddling. I became a river guide and an outdoor environmental educator, where I share my fascination and love of rivers with students. And it is carrying this backstory with me that I came to watch *Bad River: The Cooks River* (or ‘Kayaking the sickest urban river in Australia’ as the video is titled on YouTube). The short film jolted and provoked me, thus now I’m writing this review to unpack some aspects of the film and what it may offer outdoor and environmental education practitioners.

*Bad River: The Cooks River* is the first of four films to be released by Beau Miles and his co-producers Mitch Drummond and Jodi Evans. The basic concept of the film involves Beau (an adventurer and former lecturer of outdoor education) paddling an old kayak down what is proclaimed the sickest river in Australia. Beau describes this river as “an overwhelmed watershed unable to cope with so many humans” (Miles, 2022, 00.21). What drives Beau’s adventure (and resultant short film) is the desire to see what makes a “bad river” bad. Hence, he sets out to see “every inch of the sickest urban river in Australia” (01.05), roughly 20 km, by simply following it in his kayak.

The film is alluring, confronting some of the issues of colonisation and urbanisation in an engaging style. As Beau demonstrates, small waterways in urban areas have been controlled and domesticated – made efficient. But they are also forgotten unseen places that cop the abuse of consumptive throwaway lifestyles. Beau takes you on his journey and you feel the shock and disgust with him as he sees the state of the waterway. The most affective moment is when Beau finds himself waste deep in water full of plastic waste, balls, polystyrene and who knows what else. Words are lost. A positive outlook and spirit of adventure wear thin. What is left is a profound silence that speaks volumes. Unsure how to react, the usually jovial and good-humoured Beau appears muted. Afterwards he proclaims that “every student of Sydney should see this” (11.10) and that the river “needs love” (11.35). I agree.

In outdoor education, we often head to wild, beautiful places and enjoy time outdoors. This can have a romantic undertone, where we aim to appreciate a wild nature. Yet as I have argued previously, following rivers and being open to all manner of encounters, including the harsh realities of environmental damage, can be educative (Jukes, Stewart & Morse, 2022). Even the affective power of rubbish can provide a pedagogical provocation (Jukes, Stewart & Morse, 2019). For outdoor and

environmental educators, rubbish and waste can become pedagogical in that they have an affective capacity to shock and disgust us, but potentially call us to action. Beau demonstrates that we do not have to travel far to find a waterway and do this, and that following a waterway can teach us something about how humans relate to rivers.

Along the way the film offers contrasts; clean golfers playing on their manicured grass, with a dirty ragged Beau paddling the unkempt waterway off to the side. Contrasts of affluence and waste. Of humour and seriousness. Of wildness and domestication. Of visibility and invisibility. Of past and present. Of health and sickness. All this sheds light on contemporary society and human values. Which is to say, for me the film offers an accessible entryway into critiquing advanced capitalism (processes of overconsumption and wastage), colonisation (processes of erasure and domination/forgetting the previous histories of a place) and urbanisation (processes of degrading the previous functional integrity of an ecosystem in preference of an efficient tamed ecosystem). Overall, such processes are easily overlooked in day-to-day life, but the effects are intense on the river system and its more-than-human inhabitants.

It is this concept of sickness that I will focus on last, as I believe we can easily put it to work in environmental education practice. To offer an example, earlier this year I set my students the task of watching *Bad River: The Cooks River*. The next tutorial we left the classroom, walked out the back of our campus and found our local waterway. Inspired by the film, we set off to follow the little creek, discussing the idea of sickness and whether our local waterway was sick. We discussed what makes a waterway sick, what makes it healthy. We observed our waterway and the relationship it has with the surrounding urban landscape. We saw what called the river home and what had somehow made its way into the river. We paid attention to an entity that none of us had even considered until now. We got muddy feet and were a little shocked by what we saw. Following our local waterway opened discussions about sustainability and society, and what we might do in our home places.

In closing, *Bad River: The Cooks River* is well produced, providing engaging yet critical viewing. I recommend this film for educators who want to explore rivers and how contemporary society sometimes treats them. The film may be examined itself or used as a prompt before heading outside on one's own adventure. I look forward to the future films that are coming out in this series.

## References

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**Scott Jukes** (PhD) is a lecturer in Outdoor Environmental Education at Federation University, Australia. His research explores pedagogical development and experimentation in outdoor environmental education, inspired by posthumanist and new materialist theories. He is particularly interested in ways we may grapple with place-specific environmental problems and engage with more-than-human worlds. He has a passion for the river, mountain and coastal environments of south-eastern Australia and enjoys teaching and spending time in these places.