

Gardening in the Wind: Exploring life with the weather in Highland Scotland

The wind, understood as the perceptible movement of air, is an integral part of life on earth, and its influences are legion. From the breath in our lungs to the physical form of the land, from the settlements we live in to the transport systems we design, from the practical to the frivolous, the wind unavoidably informs the shape of our lives.

In this paper, I use a focus on gardening practices in my field site of Caithness, a largely rural county in the far north of Scotland, to demonstrate how paying attention to commonplace experiences of the wind encourages us to recognise that life processes are continually informed by relationships with the surrounding world.

I argue that wind can be understood both as an influence that mediates action and as subject to influence by actions. Thus, everyday understandings of the wind are primarily practical, developed in relation to specific tasks and places.

The Wind in Everyday Life

Wind is important.

As Ingold (2007, 2011) points out, the wind is the medium in which life is lived, influencing our capacity to see, to hear, to smell and to touch.

Studies in medical anthropology acknowledge the significance of wind in everyday life, particularly focusing on its relationship with human wellbeing in Chinese and Ayurvedic medical traditions (Hsu, 2007, Jankovic, 2007; Lloyd, 2007; Low, 2007; Low and Tsu, 2007; Strauss, 2007, Zysk, 2007) – a link that is reflected in modern Western medicines' continued interest in the impact of winds on human health (c.f. Corbett, 1996; Macey, Schluter and Ford, 2000; Ngan and Toth, 2011).

Similarly, everyday religious practices often invoke the wind. From the Roman '*Venti*' and the Greek '*Anemoi*' (Lloyd, 2007), to the spirits residing in the Andamanese landscape (Pandya, 2007), or even the '*Holy Ghost*' in Christianity, the personification of the wind, often in the form of gods, goddesses or spirits with formidable powers over human destiny and wellbeing, is not uncommon. Such winds may require veneration and appeasement, so special significance is attributed to those people who are said to be able to direct the winds (Frazer, 1922, pp.105-109) and to those rituals and actions which are supposed to control the wind (Pandya, 2007).

Ideas about the 'temporality of the landscape' (Ingold, 2000) are often intimately linked with experiences of weather as part of an ongoing cycle (Orlove, 2004; Sanders, 2004; Strauss and Orlove, 2004), informing the planning of agricultural strategies, rituals and other everyday decisions.

Anthropology draws our attention to how, in many non-Western settings, aberrations in anticipated weather events, as evident to people who have spent a long time in a place becoming accustomed to its weather, can inform and interact with scientific discourse to provide valuable insights (c.f. Cruikshank, 2005; Ellis, 2004; Finan, 2004; Henshaw, 2004; West and Vasquez-Leon, 2004). Simultaneously, historical accounts emphasising a steady progression from preoccupations with locally experienced wind and weather in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries to a globally measured climate problematise meteorology as a form of discourse prohibiting alternative understandings of weather (e.g. Jankovic, 2000, 2007; Golinski, 2007; Anderson, 2005).

By and large though, it seems that in the West, our relationship with the wind is such a familiar experience that it tends to be unremarked upon in anthropological writing, almost disregarded in its ordinariness. In exploring people's relationships with their environment, we have tended to focus on the tangible materialities of an environment, those aspects that can be grasped by the hand and moulded by our actions. Have we assumed, then, that we behave passively towards weather and wind? Or that such forces are merely a capricious backdrop to life, of no consequence for our engagement with the world? Surely not.

Jackson and Fannin (2011) challenge us to re-think our elemental prejudices towards solid and fluid matter, suggesting that a focus on *aerography* – as opposed to *geography* – may lead us to query long-held materialist assumptions in favour of more holistic analyses. This paper combines a geographic and an aerographic focus, recognising that whilst our bodies move through the air and wind in which we are immersed, our feet remain firmly on the ground. Thus, movement through an environment merges an experience of wind with an experience of land. It is the mingling of these elements, our simultaneous relationships with them, that constitutes our lived experience of a lifeworld.

My field site was Caithness, a rural county in the far north-eastern corner of Scotland. Roughly triangular, it is surrounded on two sides by sea. The fertile farmlands along the coast and straths¹ are contrasted with an interior covered by thick peat and bogs. Sometimes referred to as 'the Lowlands beyond the Highlands', its level, low-lying terrain provides little protection from wind. During fieldwork, I encountered many instances of how people incorporate an intimate knowledge of the

¹ A strath is a wide, shallow river valley.

wind into their everyday practices, from forestry and fishing to surfing and housework. This illustrated how people are both directed by the wind and act towards it in ways which mediate its influence.

In this paper, I will draw upon ethnographic material focused on gardening practices to demonstrate that we are neither submissive nor impervious when it comes to experiencing the wind. The material not only illustrates how the wind participates as an actor in its own right within the relationships of which it is a part, but also is acted upon by those who come into contact with it, thus facilitating a continual dialogue of force and resistance, adaptation and compromise, drawing our attention to a notion of life as continually regulated by the surrounding world.

Gardening in the Wind

The impressive Castle of Mey, built in the sixteenth century by the Earl of Caithness, sits in an exposed location on the far north coast of Scotland, just a few hundred metres from the salty waters of the Pentland Firth and wide open to winds from all directions. Here, enclosed within high stone walls, plants unseen in other parts of Caithness flourish.

Without the shelter provided by the twelve to fifteen foot high walls, built at considerable expense shortly after construction of the castle itself, the planting possibilities would be significantly limited. The prestige afforded by the ability to produce locally rare fruits, vegetables and flowers must have played a role in motivating the early occupants of the castle to establish such a garden.

Yet, as I am to learn, building a protective wall is only the first step in an ongoing endeavour to maintain a fertile garden in this windswept landscape.

"The wall doesn't keep the wind out," explains Campbell, a gardener at the Castle of Mey for twenty-five years, "it just takes the brunt out of it. Then, depending on which direction the wind is blowing from, it can get trapped in the garden, swirling around and causing all kinds of destruction."

Andrew, the head gardener since early 2013, describes how they have three *"lines of defence"* against the incursion of winds: firstly, the walls which surround the entire garden and are higher towards the north and the west where the prevailing winds originate from; secondly, lines of Caithness flagstone fences which separate the different plots, providing a ground level windbreak; and, finally, rows and rows of hedges which create a sense of rooms and corridors throughout the gardens, their penetrable structure allowing wind an escape route, rather than trapping it. *"Between them all, they take the force out of the wind and break it down a bit,"* says Andrew. *"We still have a job on our hands managing what's left of the wind though."*

Exploring the bare bones of the garden in mid-January when it is normally closed to the public allowed me a privileged insight into the mechanics that underpin it. Many of the support structures that have been instated over the years to help manage the wind are invisible to summer visitors, hidden behind lustrous leaves and fine blooms. In winter, however, when the garden is stripped of its summer foliage, it is easy to see the bulky stakes that run through the centre of the hedgerows; the vivid blue twine holding the brash fence fast against the wind stands out against the dark colours of winter; the climbing frame for the sweet peas is unmasked as a sturdy metal lattice typically used in the building industry for strengthening concrete structures – a standard garden trellis would not suffice here.

A tale circulates amongst the gardening staff which tells that a fierce wind once whipped all the cabbage heads from the vegetable plots, flinging them twenty feet over the garden wall. Andrew showed me a technique he has learnt from Campbell to lessen the possibility of this happening under their watch. Brassicas are usually planted by digging a small hole in the earth for the juvenile plants to sit in; here, narrow trenches, or “*draw-holes*”, are furrowed out along the length of the plot and the hollows for the cabbages are dug into the base of the trenches. Thus, the cabbage sits more deeply in the ground, affording them additional protection from the wind.

At the herbaceous border, Andrew pointed out that all the plants have been cut right back to the ground to help them stay rooted during the winter, otherwise the strong winds will catch the upright stems, rocking the plants on their bases and undermining their stability. As well as planning work schedules in relation to seasonal cycles, the men explain that wind may play a part in determining their work for the day; seeds, for example, are always sown on calm days.

The proximity of the gardens to the coastline adds a further complication to the story: a strong wind from a seaward direction will drive salt into the garden, which may prove fatal to some species. Roses particularly dislike wind and salt, but are a popular bloom with visitors so the gardeners are encouraged to grow them. As well as selecting hardier breeds, Andrew and Campbell have learned to prune the roses as seldom as possible. Campbell explains this strategy: “*If we prune the rose bushes, the wind will drive salt into them and burn the shoots, which means we have to prune them further back again to get to the healthy plant. If we leave it as long as possible before pruning, then hopefully we’ll reduce the salt burn damage.*”

For Andrew and Campbell then, wind – or its potential – permeates their thoughts and actions relating to the garden and their work there. As Andrew states, “*Gardeners are always thinking about the wind, it’s always on our minds as it always affects our plans.*” This resonates with Lingis’

conception of the wind as a sensuous element in which we are immersed, a “depth[] without surfaces or boundaries” (Lingis, 1998, p.13) which nonetheless qualifies our movements, thus drawing our attention to a notion of life as continually regulated by the surrounding world.

Ingold’s (2000) relational approach, which states that neither persons nor environments are discrete entities, but should rather be conceived of as an indivisible totality, provides a way of taking seriously the wind as a force that influences our actions and is in turn influenced by our actions. He states that things (including both human and non-human organisms) exist as nodes in a meshwork of relations which evolve interdependently, with each node’s characteristics being constantly generated through the course of its relationships with other nodes. It is through action and movement through the world that nodes (humans, non-humans, things and environments) simultaneously gain meaning, becoming active agents in a continual creation and recreation of each other.

Ingold posits a ‘dwelling’ perspective, suggesting that our knowledge of the world is constituted through practical engagements which lead people to attend to features in the environment in particular ways based on prior interactions. Thus, over time, people become accustomed with the nuances and rhythms of a familiar place, learning to orient themselves and their activities in relation to it, and ascertaining significance in its affordances in distinct ways. This, of course, includes the winds that blow there.

Here we have seen how the gardeners have developed a particular sensitivity to the wind, learning to predict how it is likely to affect their practices and thus initiating various adaptations, from purposefully selecting hardy breeds or compromising on crop varieties to planting lower in the ground or observing the day’s weather before planning particular activities such as seed sowing.

Practices which acknowledge the influence of the wind are common to gardeners throughout Caithness. In particular, designing shelter for plants appeared time and again in my conversations with gardeners. Helen, 52, who has always lived in Caithness, describes how shelter might be crafted spontaneously from whatever is to hand:

“You’ve got to make shelter for the plants. I’ve got the Caithness flagstone fence round about the garden. That helps, but it’s not enough. You can make shelter out of anything: if it’s a low plant, you might just put a log or a rock in behind it to protect it. Cut the bottom off yogurt pots and stick it in the soil for seedlings. I stake in green plastic to make windbreaks for bigger plants too.”

Mary, a retired ranger, who began work on her garden over twenty years ago, describes how the process of creating shelter is an ongoing one, which often requires long-term planning and patience:

"Having shelter is a major help. I started off by fencing the garden with old pallets from what was then the Norfrost factory in Castletown...The pallets are still here although in bits now and some lying at angles of forty-five degrees, but they gave things a start. I also put in tree wind breaks like faster growing willow and then gradually added more interesting species. I always stake things too, and plant closely so plants can support and protect each other."

These gardeners are not content to allow wind to do what it will. Rather, they actively intervene in its blowing, re-directing it, deflecting it or dispersing it. As Vannini et al point out in their paper on experiences of weather – mainly rain – in British Columbia's coastal regions, "we are not victims of weather...we act toward the weather...in agentic ways. As the weather moves, we move" (2012, p.377). Drawing on Ingold's concept of dwelling, the authors propose the notion of 'weathering' to describe the skilful practices that allow us, as active inhabitants immersed in a world of ephemeral and multi-sensory weather experiences, to make sense of the weather in ways that are significant to our relationships with our environment.

"In the process of weathering people make and remake dynamic places and selves in a performative ecology of movement...To weather is an active, reflexive, practical disposition to endure, sense, struggle, manipulate, mature, change, and grow in processes that, over time, implicate the place-making of one's dwelling. To weather, in short, is to dwell."

Vannini et al, 2012, pp.361-2

To weather, to dwell in a place, implies an intimate knowledge of environment acquired through specific relationships with it. This idea is underlined in stories that gardeners tell where the process of learning about the wind in relation to a specific practice – gardening – carried out in a *particular place* is emphasised. Knowledge of wind acquired in other contexts is certainly germane, but is not sufficient. It needs to be qualified and adapted in relation to *this* place, to *this* activity, continually re-learnt through movement and action.

Lynn, 47, grew up in Suffolk and moved to the northern Highlands in 2011. Always a keen gardener, she set about establishing a vegetable patch, but soon found the change in climate, and particularly the strong winds, to be a hindrance.

"I was quite cocky about gardening because I've always been able to grow things and I didn't reckon I'd have any difficulties here, but I've had to think about planting in a different way."

Some things just won't grow...Runner beans are really part of my summer ...so when I moved to the Highlands it was a shock not to see the beautiful red flowers of the summer...I got straight to work on planting out my runner beans and they managed to grow to around three feet high – I was very proud of my effort! I had listened to the local comments of concern and erected what I thought was adequate protection from the Highland winds that would be blowing down the strath. Oh how wrong I was! I woke one morning to find my green plants shriveled and withered from what apparently in the eyes of the locals was a fairly 'moderate' wind in the night. It was a harsh lesson but I learnt very quickly why root crops were favored and that for all the protection and barriers I would put around my runner beans and however much care and time I gave, it would never be a match for the winds that blew down the strath."

Lynn, accustomed to the wind as she had experienced it in Suffolk, was not yet able to accurately estimate its effects in her new northern garden. On the other hand, Kune, 33, who took up gardening when she moved from Belgium to the Highlands twelve years ago, is more habituated to the peculiarities of gardening in the wind here, living as she does in the heart of one of the largest blanket bogs in Europe. This vast expanse of level peatland is notoriously difficult to cultivate, not only because of its high water content, but also due to its extreme exposure to winds.

"Living somewhere that is so open to wind does make growing plants more difficult, but usually predictably so. You learn where you will need a wind shelter and what kind of plants will grow well. I would never try to grow tall plants, like runner beans, in an environment like this as it would just be a waste. I tend to stick to low-growing plants. You quickly learn to work around the wind."

Jean, 65, who has lived on the northern coastline of Caithness for over forty years, describes how the combination of local specifics produces a particular environment that has to be acclimatised to:

"As you know, I love my garden...It's not the cold up here but the wind and salt that is the killer: the sea keeps the temperature up in winter and down in summer, so we don't have the extreme cold and bad frosts that you get fifty miles inland, as at Altnaharra. I grow plants that I know to be tough as old boots."

This notion of wind and weather being locally experienced and known is further reflected in the relationship between Andrew and Campbell at the Castle of Mey. Having learnt his trade further south, many of the practices used to deflect, distort or diminish the influence of the wind on the garden are still unfamiliar to head gardener, Andrew. On several occasions he explained to me that

various strategies they have employed to mitigate the wind are Campbell's idea. He says, "*Campbell will take account of the wind automatically whereas I'm still learning: Campbell shows me a new trick and I take note of it.*" Campbell, who has worked in the gardens for twenty-five years, attributes the introduction of some techniques to particular individuals he has worked with over the years; other techniques are "*just what we do, what we've always done.*"

These stories draw our attention to how experience and understanding of wind is localised and built up in relation to the geography of a particular place. The way wind is experienced *here* is different to how it is experienced *there*. This echoes both Ingold's 'dwelling perspective' (2000), and Vannini et al's notion of 'weathering' (2012). Engaging with the environment around them through a process of gardening, Lynn, Kune, Jean, Andrew and Campbell become familiar with the affordances of their particular garden and learn to predict how the wind – and other factors – might influence it. Orienting their activities to make the most of those affordances, they gradually learn ways to accommodate, adapt to or, indeed, alter those influences.

Simply being told that one ought to create a wind shelter for plants to grow is not enough to skilfully carry out the task; you must also know from which directions the wind tends to blow most strongly, how its blowing is influenced by other features in the environment and how each plant is likely to develop, all fine-tuned knowledge that becomes incrementally comprehended through a process of dwelling, of movement through an environment. In Ingold's words:

"information, in itself, is not knowledge...Our knowledgeability consists, rather, in the capacity to situate such information, and understand its meaning, within the context of a direct perceptual engagement with our environments."

Ingold, 2000, p.21

We can thus describe wind in its relationship with gardening practices in Caithness as directional: directing attention and activities toward particular tasks and ways of doing things, rather than others. Having acquired some degree of fluency in understanding local winds, it begins to inform where our gardeners site their plants, which species they select and how and when they carry out particular tasks. These decisions are made based on prior interactions with landscape and wind and become ever more attuned to local subtleties as experiences with the environment and of the particular task at hand accrue. As Jackson and Fannin assert, "*air's apprenticeship is the modulation of attention*" (2011, p.438).

The Social Life of Wind

I began this paper with an acknowledgement that wind is an important part of our everyday experience of the world, yet it has frequently been missed out or glossed over in our stories of human-environment relationships.

This exploration of gardening practices in Caithness has demonstrated not only that the wind influences everyday practices, but that through our relationships with it, we learn ways to influence the wind with the intention of producing desired outcomes. Our knowledge of the wind is built up through an active engagement with a particular environment. These conclusions contribute to the growing body of anthropological literature that describe forms of life as emergent through their relationships with the surrounding world.

An growing recognition that the wind influences our ways of life is valuable in providing holistic analyses of human-environment relationships. However, there is still much work to be done to fully explore the ways in which wind forms a part of our social relationships. In what ways do we exploit the wind, using its force to our own advantage? Can we argue that the process of continual negotiation with wind is akin to human relationships with forms of power that we are more accustomed to discussing, such as state power?

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