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Wonder and the sublime in surfing and nature sports

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on surfing to consider the attractiveness of using the sublime to describe experiences and emotions in nature sports. The sublime is shown to be a red herring in scholarship as it fails to account for many of the valuable experiences available to nature sports enthusiasts. The article draws on the work of Genevieve Lloyd to propose that wonder is a more suitable concept that gets to the heart not only of the terror and awe that nature can inspire, but also to the orientation towards our finitude, difference, and the stimulation of growth and practical knowledge that nature sports also inspire (and that are not accounted for in the sublime).

KEYWORDS Surfing; aesthetics; sublime; wonder; nature sports

The world of nature sports, encompassing activities such as mountaineering, backcountry skiing, and surfing, presents a captivating blend of physicality, immersion in natural landscapes, and profound emotional experiences for their participants. This paper examines the role of wonder and the sublime in these experiences in nature sports. I suggest that wonder provides a richer framework for understanding the experiences and motivations of athletes in contrast to the sublime, which is more applicable to spectators. What will emerge as we consider the further meaning of adding wonder to the variety of emotional experiences in nature sports is a conceptual bridge between the experiences of the athletes, and the wider value of nature sports, praised by commentators. Such as offering examples and opportunities of considering our relationship to a dynamic nature, particularly in a time of environmental crises. I focus on surfing because that is the sport I am most familiar with, but my claims apply to nature sports in general.

The examination centers around Kevin Krein’s insights on nature sports, which not only identify the common elements that connect nature sports within the broader category of sports but also highlight their distinctions...
from traditional sports (2014, 194). Krein posits that nature sports share a fundamental structure where the natural environment assumes at least one of the primary roles typically held by human competitors or partners in traditional sports. While conventional sports involve athletes competing with or against other humans, nature sports emphasize interaction with natural features as essential for skill development. Here, a particular natural element, or a combination of them, takes on the central role of teammate or adversary. This unique dynamic underscores that the seeming unpredictability of those natural features is central to the nature sports experience – that is, the way the athlete negotiates their movement with the natural features is a defining feature of these sports (Krein 2019, 70–71).

Krein’s work also unveils the special values inherent in these activities. Nature sports transcend traditional boundaries, mediating our conceptions of nature and providing interactions with the natural world that other practices cannot replicate. This expanded perspective enhances our understanding of humanity’s place in the natural order – a crucial insight, especially in an era dominated by climate change and erratic natural occurrences. Krein writes that through the aesthetics of nature sports ‘[w]e can experience a unity of ourselves with our activity. In doing so, we can experience an at-home-ness in activity and environment. We can experience a graceful way of being in the world’ (Krein 2019, 160). This graceful experience is juxtaposed with anthropocentric views of sport which privilege the experience of the athlete over the natural feature they engage with. For Krein, the sublime is a concept which leads to such anthropocentrism (Krein 2019, 83–84). Whereas for Roland Barthes, grace in sports (referring to bullfighting) represents the achievement of humanity as they move beautifully in an impossibly dangerous situation, Krein, on the other hand, is pointing out that nature sports are not about the transcendence of the athlete, but their being in their situation (Barthes 2007, 9).

The concept of the sublime frequently emerges in discussions of the value of nature sports and the profound interactions with nature embedded in them. The sublime, with its inherent capacity to evoke emotions such as terror, awe, astonishment, and experiences beyond the bounds of reason, often serves as a linguistic bridge connecting these pursuits to discussions of risk, beauty, and the extraordinary. However, the use of the sublime in describing nature sports is at best an ambivalent endeavor. It can both critique the value of these sports, reducing them to mere risk-taking, and underscore aspects of their worth. Krein has been accused of defining nature sports by their relationship to the sublime (Howe 2019, 94). However, he firmly rejects the notion that the sublime encapsulates the primary emotional experience of nature sports (Krein 2019, 84).

What I find curious is that the descriptions of a nature sport aesthetic do seem to invite connections to the sublime; yet deeper analysis shows this to
be a red herring. Hence this paper aligns with Krein’s arguments, contending that the sublime falls short as the prime explanatory framework for these sports. Instead, I propose the concept of ‘wonder’ as a more fitting and fruitful way to capture the essence of the interactions with immense natural phenomena in nature sports. This often-overlooked concept and its relation to the sublime in the history of philosophy explains the tendency to equate discussions of immense nature with the sublime but also goes further to establishing the values of nature sports. Modern conceptions of wonder encompass diverse components – risk, beauty, terror, awe, and curiosity – offering a comprehensive framework to elucidate the value of these sports.

The examination of the sublime in sports philosophy predominantly adheres to a Kantian perspective. However, this inclination proves somewhat restrictive, given the historical evolution and contextual nuances inherent in the concept of the sublime. While alternative interpretations, such as those proposed by Edmund Burke or Arthur Schopenhauer, surface in sports writing, the dominance of the Kantian paradigm remains apparent. This poses a challenge, particularly for thinkers like Krein, who contend that the Kantian sublime diverges significantly from the essence of experiential flow in nature sports (2019).

Expanding on Krein’s argument reveals a crucial distinction between the experiences of the spectator and the athlete within the Kantian sublime framework. Kant’s sublime, rooted in the elevated thinking of the spectator during contemplation, does not seamlessly align with the dynamic movements intrinsic to the athlete’s engagement with nature sports. While intellect certainly plays a role in the athlete’s experience, it is one facet among many, and its involvement is not sublime in the Kantian sense. Instead, I argue, intellect contributes to the creation of conditions conducive to the flow experiences that Krein advocates (2019, 76). Moreover, the distinction between the spectator and the athlete emerges as a fundamental consideration. Drawing examples from the world of surfing, I emphasize the need to distinguish between the examples presented in media – filmed or photographed – and the athlete’s lived experience. Failing to acknowledge this distinction often leads to a facile integration of the sublime into discussions of nature sports. Consider, for instance, the act of watching a surf competition from a safe distance, whether from home (online) or on the beach. The spectacle may evoke sublime feelings as viewers contemplate the awe and terror inspired by powerful waves. However, this experience encompasses multifaceted elements, including lulls between waves, observations of water movement over reefs or sandbanks, and the strategic positioning of competitors – none of which align with the sublime. These nuanced aspects of spectatorship often go unnoticed in surf media.

Delving into the athlete’s emotions provides further rationale for reconsidering the sublime in the context of nature sports. I argue that the attraction
of the sublime for sports writers is best understood from their position as an observer. What we see and feel in relation to our observation, and what the surfer sees in relation to their position in the wave are clearly different and should be separated in analysis. I argue that the concept of wonder better captures the emotions of the athlete. Rooted in the western philosophical canon, wonder encapsulates the evolving prudence, respect, and reverence that athletes develop toward the natural features of their chosen sports. Moreover, wonder instigates a curiosity and motivation to tackle more challenging waves, enabling a richer description of the captivation with natural beauty and the enjoyment of the embodied experience – attributes not fully encompassed by the Kantian sublime despite the intricacies of Kant’s aesthetic theory.

To explain the value of wonder to sports philosophy, I utilize Genevieve Lloyd’s work in Reclaiming Wonder. Lloyd problematizes the role the sublime has taken in modern philosophy and argues that wonder should take its place in describing active thought processes in encounters with astonishing natural features (2018). My contention is that much of the disagreement in scholarly discourse regarding the role of the sublime in nature sports dissipates when we consider wonder as the primary emotion of experience for participants in these pursuits. Wonder, embodied in the surfer’s curiosity and awe, provides a more accurate description of the motivation that drives them to ride the waves. Furthermore, as Lloyd contends, wonder directed at the immensity of natural phenomena fosters a heightened awareness of the fragility of our world – a key value of nature sports, especially in an era marked by climate change and unpredictable natural events. The sublime on the other hand, is not usually understood as producing that perspective (Latour 2011).

While my analysis extends to various nature sports, I focus primarily on surfing, a sport intricately linked to aesthetics and the sublime. While surfing indeed offers an aesthetic experience, one that allows individuals to embrace unique forms of beauty, there is more than the superficial experience of pleasure. I have some sympathy for Margus Vihalem’s perspective, who argues that all sports should be considered aesthetic endeavors due to the continual interplay of bodily sensations and the environment. However, surfing and nature sports more broadly encompass more than bodily experiences. I concur with Krein’s assertion that these sports enable interactions with nature in ways unparalleled by other activities. Krein’s position extends further, suggesting that nature sports do not rely solely on the allure of risk to explain their desirability (Krein 2019, 81). The beauty of surfing, for instance, does not consistently hinge on great risk. Yet, the appeal to the sublime, on the face of it, makes sense because it captures something of the visual and reflective aspects of the nature sport enthusiast’s experience – as well as the instantaneous shock and awe that large waves evoke. Surfing’s embodied experience, characterized by speed and graceful turns, provides enjoyment
beyond superficial experiences of beauty. Surfers gain access to visual experiences unavailable to the wider population – an experience exemplified by the barrel, where the surfer is fully enclosed within the collapsing wave, enveloped by its mesmerizing beauty. This visual encounter, though rooted in embodied sensations such as feeling the wave and contorting the body to fit inside the barrel, transcends the purely physical. The hypnotic vision of the wave’s movement, witnessed only by skilled and practiced surfers, stands as one of the sport’s most cherished experiences – it is described by some as ‘meeting God,’ at the very least surfers talk about an oceanic feeling akin to a meditative state (Melekian 1987).

While appeals to the sublime partially capture this experience, they fall short in elucidating the complex emotional tapestry driving surfers to the waves. To better articulate the value of nature sports, we must delve deeper into the emotional experiences that accompany riding waves and encountering nature in these pursuits. It is through this exploration, and the concept of wonder, that we can unlock the profound emotional dimensions underpinning the allure of nature sports, offering a more comprehensive understanding of their value.

The emotions of surfing

The world of surfing introduces us to the intriguing concept of ‘stoke,’ a term employed by surfers to encapsulate the exhilarating and thrilling sensations associated with riding waves. Nick Ford and David Brown delve into the simile inherent in the term, likening ‘stoke’ to the act of stoking a fire (2006, 146). Their focus on the past-tense inflection, ‘stoked,’ highlights how surfing generates a form of bodily desire that demands satisfaction. However, stoke is far more intricate than a simple descriptor of post-wave euphoria. It would be overly reductionist to equate surfing solely to an itch that must be scratched, as if the waves were a mere drug. The relationship between surfing and stoke transcends simplicity, as evidenced by the largely negative reception of artificial wave pools – at least in terms of their viability as a replacement to ocean surfing – where ‘perfect’ waves can be conjured at will. Many surfers find watching surfing in wave pools to be insufferable, not because of the quality of the waves themselves, but due to the absence of crucial elements that make surfing a profound experience.¹

As I have previously argued, one of the key components of surf knowledge is the ability to ‘read’ the ocean. Surfers invest time in understanding the intricacies of wind, tides, swells, sandbanks, reefs, moon phases, and various other natural phenomena that influence how a wave breaks (Brennan 2021). This knowledge is integral to the essence of surfing, yet it is largely discarded in wave pools, where the experience, even for spectators, may still hold elements of the sublime. Stoke, therefore, remains more elusive than the
sublime can account for. Being ‘stoked’ isn’t solely a consequence of encountering a big wave; it encompasses a comprehensive set of activities before and during the ride, activities that facilitate a deep connection between the surfer and the wave.

Each sport boasts its own idioms and slang, often relying on clichés to capture the intensity of the feelings evoked. The surfwear company Billabong skillfully capitalized on the indescribable nature of surfing emotions with their highly successful slogan, ‘only a surfer knows the feeling.’ However, this commercialization of stoke highlights a fundamental contradiction in surfing and nature sports more broadly. On one hand, these activities are pursued for their intrinsic connection to nature and the profound experiences they offer. On the other hand, the desirability of these experiences has paradoxically led to their erosion through commercialization. Tetsuhiko Endo, for example, laments the overshadowing of surfing’s cultural pursuit by consumer culture (2015). Mark Stranger’s analysis of surf culture unveils a multi-layered identity, with some aspects commercialized while others remain authentic (Stranger 2016). However, even Stranger’s analysis, which acknowledges the complexity of surf culture, is built on the idea that a sublime surf aesthetic underpins all these layers.

Hence, many surfers are deeply concerned about preserving and stewarding the culture of surfing. They aim to safeguard, nurture, and, if necessary, rediscover the profound emotions that underlie the sport. Furthermore, Krein and other philosophers have articulated additional values inherent in the contemplation of these activities. These values extend beyond individual experience, offering tools to address pressing global challenges such as climate change and unpredictable natural events. Steven Connor, for instance, contends that big wave surfing holds more than a moment for sublime reflection. He emphasizes the notion of making nature one’s auxiliary – a sentiment that warrants further exploration (2011). The value of big wave surfing and the risks associated with it demand a form of prudence in practice. The language employed is not one of conquering or mastering the ocean, but of joining with it as a vulnerable and mortal individual. This perspective, distinct from the sublime, places prudence and the accumulation of knowledge at the forefront of the sport’s self-image. Connor’s claim underscores the complexities of surfing emotions, which transcend the confines of the sublime.

One notable example from competitive surfing further illustrates the allure of the sublime in describing the sport’s value, as well as the pitfalls associated with its use. Kelly Slater, the most successful male competitor in the world, performed a maneuver known as a ‘carving 360’ throughout his career. This highly skilled maneuver involves executing a full 360-degree carving turn across the face of a wave. Remarkably, for much of his career, Slater was the only surfer capable of performing it in competitions. However, despite the
spectacle and awe it inspired in commentators and spectators, the maneuver was never highly scored by judges. Instead, modern surf competitions seem to promote athletes performing sublime spectacles, such as large aerial maneuvers, over critical ones, which only a discerning audience would recognize. This disconnect between what surf judging deems the greatest spectacle and what surfers themselves value as critical and highly skilled technique, highlights the gulf between the pursuit of sublime spectatorship and the lived experience of surfers.

Therefore, a deeper exploration of the emotional experience of surfing and its extrapolation to nature sports offers a valuable contribution to the defense and nurturing of the values inherent in these activities. At the heart of this endeavor lies an examination of the profound emotional encounter with the ocean, an encounter that defines the very essence of the sport – very often that encounter is described as sublime, and it seems to have all the makings of that emotion, however, as we shall see, the sublime might be better put aside for better ideas.

**Nature sports and the sublime**

The idea that elite athletes’ performances can evoke transcendental experiences among spectators is common in sports writing. David Foster Wallace, for instance, in an emblematic article argues that watching athletes like Roger Federer on the tennis court can produce a quasi-religious encounter for sports aficionados. In describing the seemingly impossible movements of Federer, Wallace claims that the beauty of Federer’s athleticism is not that of cultural norms, but rather a kinetic beauty that ‘is human beings’ reconciliation with the fact of having a body’ (Foster Wallace 2006). This idea, linking the movements of athletes to a sense of awe, admiration, and mystique, bears resemblance to the concept of the sublime. That connection is explicit in Carl Thomen’s thoughts on surf spectatorship; he suggests that observing the best surfers riding perilous waves can be a path to experiencing the sublime (Thomen 2010). His perspective combines elements of Kantian aesthetics with Schopenhauer’s emphasis on the self-annihilating aspect of sublime encounters. Thomen contends that when we witness surfers challenging their lives amid the grandeur of massive waves, it offers benefits to viewers who contemplate the inherent danger. It’s an experience that elicits feelings of awe and fear, much like what Kant and Schopenhauer celebrated. But there’s a question that lingers: does the sublime experience for spectators truly mirror the emotions surfers themselves undergo when confronting nature’s immense forces? The question leads us to a critical distinction – between the sublime as perceived by spectators and the emotional reality faced by athletes in nature sports. We must recognize that the sublime for spectators is a meticulously crafted aesthetic, skillfully presented by editors,
artists, photographers, and media producers who aim to encapsulate facets of the athletes’ experiences. The gap between the spectator’s narrative and the athlete’s actual reality prompts us to explore what motivates athletes to take on such challenges and what emotions they genuinely encounter.

Mark Stranger’s exploration of the sublime in surf culture deserves attention (2016). He delves into the risk-oriented aesthetic presented through photography and film in surf media, highlighting the way it influences surfers’ engagement with the sport’s aesthetics. It is undeniably true that surfers often react to images in surf media in ways that affirm Thomen and Stranger. Surfing enthusiasts identify with surf-media aesthetics, making it an integral part of their subculture. However, it’s crucial to remember that the sublime experience for spectators is a constructed, authored aesthetic. The Kantian sublime requires a safe distance from terrifying natural features, making it distinct from the athlete’s experience. The athlete, in contrast, confronts these forces directly, often transcending their own limits and becoming one with their environment – perhaps this is what is meant by an oceanic feeling. As we venture deeper into the concept of the sublime in nature sports, we uncover these subtleties that the concept alone may not fully elucidate.

One approach to exploring the athlete’s experience is to delve into their preparation before confronting the raw forces of nature. Take, for instance, surfers who meticulously plan before tackling colossal waves. A recent cover for the magazine White Horses makes is an illustrative example for considering a wider gulf than otherwise assumed in the conflation of knowledgeable spectatorship and activity. In the 43rd issue, the cover image, by photographer Ted Grambeau (n.d), shows a surfer, Roderigo Reino, precariously on top of a breaking wave which is sucking him back into as it breaks on to a shallow reef. The photo of the moment when the surfer is clearly seconds from a brutal wipeout invokes feelings of the sublime. The enormity of the wave, the relative smallness and vulnerability of the surfer, and the knowledegeable assumption of what is to come, combined with knowledge of the power and danger of the particular reef the wave is breaking on to give the viewer the kind of awe and fear that Thomen describes. Yet Rienso, interviewed after the publication of the photo (the interview took place because some people thought the image was artificially manipulated), claimed that the wipeout itself was not as bad as the photo suggested it would be (Rienso 2023). In fact it was the next wave following it that was really scary, as he was in a more precarious (but less photogenic) situation. Philosophers of sport should not conflate the aesthetic experience of the spectator with the aesthetic experience of the athlete. Furthermore, the surfer disclosed that he spent hours observing the waves before deciding to venture out himself. This preliminary phase could be described as a ‘spectator’s sublime.’ Positioned safely aboard a boat in the channel, surfers may
encounter moments of both awe and fear while observing the waves that might contain sublime reflections. However, it’s more than just the terror or the sublime that they encounter; they also engage in focused curiosity and mental rehearsals that transform the waves from being simply terrifying to potentially ‘rideable.’

In essence, while the sublime certainly holds value as a framework for understanding certain emotional aspects of nature sports, it’s imperative to recognize its inherent limitations, particularly in the context of athletes versus spectators. As we delve further into this realm, we unveil the nuanced layers of emotions, experiences, and motivations it becomes increasingly apparent that the sublime’s attractiveness for connecting the spectator aesthetic to the experience requires rethinking. The next section will explore the limitations of the Kantian sublime in nature sports scholarship and propose the passion of wonder as a more viable alternative that accounts for the wider range of experiences in nature sports.

**Wonder and surfing**

The concept of wonder, as explained by Genevieve Lloyd in Reclaiming Wonder is central to the analysis of this section (2018). Wonder, Lloyd points out, is a deeply historical concept meaning different things to different epochs and contexts. She laments that philosophers today seem unconcerned about wonder even if we admit that it may be the emotion that began a mode of thinking. Wonder is at once the stupefying force of astonishment, a hiatus of mental activity as one pauses thought to wonder, the drive of curiosity and the beginning of inquiry. Lloyd’s approach is not to privilege one critique or definition over another but to show how all of these historical understandings impact our present moment. Her work then presents us with an opportunity to recover wonder.

The capacity for wonder is commonly seen as an endearing trait of childhood; its charms are less beguiling in adulthood. We may regret the decline of that capacity – along with other inevitable costs of the benefits of maturity. Having put aside childish things, we are in our adult lives uncertain what to think about wonder – and about how to think with it. (2018, 1–2)

For Lloyd, reclaiming the role of wonder in serious intellectual engagement with the world is key to challenging the kinds of false certainties that permeate science and politics today. Wonder’s ability to make us pause and consider, to be curious and to admit that we don’t know certain things is a direct challenge to the polarizing debates of our times. It is my contention that it also a rich concept for understanding the connection of athlete to nature in nature sports and challenges interpretations of nature sports which use the sublime to describe the encounter between athlete and the natural object.
Some scholars have specifically claimed that the athletes of some extreme sports do have access to certain sublime encounters (Ilundáin-Agurruza’s 2006) paper, ‘Kant goes Skydiving,’ offers an exploration of Kantian aesthetics in the realm of extreme sports. He skillfully demonstrates the intricate interplay between scientific, artistic, and athletic trends that transformed mountaineering from a means to an end into an activity pursued for its own sake. The Enlightenment’s thirst for understanding the natural world’s mysteries, combined with the modernist artistic sensibilities that sought to capture the impressions left on the ‘inner eye’ during these lofty explorations, played pivotal roles in shaping the modern concept of mountaineering. This shift suggested that the experience of scaling a mountain could be valuable in and of itself, offering emotional richness rather than serving merely as a means to other ends. Central to these three motivations – discovery, artistic expression, and intrinsic value – is the concept of the sublime and to elucidate that Ilundáin-Agurruza turns to Kant. An issue for this is that he is only referring to extreme sports and not all nature sports are extreme sports. Yet the confluence between them is not always clear. Surfing, for instance, is sometimes an extreme sport. Accounts such as Ilundáin-Agurruza specifically relate to the athlete’s emotions and not the participants, however as Leslie Howe points out, there are problems in placing the sublime on a pedestal, at least in nature sports, as such privileging is also an exclusion of many other modes of experiencing in nature sports. Howe identifies that Krein, in his account of nature sports seems to use examples that align with extreme sports, and that use the language of sublime, and so in her critique of Krein she encourages us to look beyond the sublime’s intensity. She writes,

Thus, a nature-oriented sport offers us a sporting experience of no less intensity than that offered by the active-sublime, but one more broadly democratic in its aesthetic possibilities in that it offers accessibility beyond what might otherwise be restricted to an athletic elite and in the sense that its intensity does not require the anthropocentric drama of the sublime. (Howe 2019, 105)

This is an important criticism of the limits of the sublime for promoting the value of nature sports. By referring to what she calls ‘nature-oriented sports.’ Howe is narrowing down on the way that certain sports, through their orientation to the natural world, allow a revelation of our being-in-the-world by a certain kind of attention to the world. That is, rather than sublime experiences, it is the way that such sports allow a greater paying of attention to our place in the natural world that makes them valuable (Howe 2019, 105). Krein responded to Howe’s critique in his book, Nature Sports, offering a different perspective that I have built my argument here upon. He asserts that the core of nature sports is not sublime reflection but rather a response to the dynamic features of nature intrinsic to the sport. Athletes in nature sports engage with spontaneity, and their experiences revolve around the
connection with these dynamic elements. In essence, Krein challenges the notion that the sublime is at the heart of nature sports – a view that aligns with Howe’s sense of the value of these activities. So what we need is a concept that allows us to talk meaningfully about the experience of awesome nature, as well as the potential for individuals to experience that nature in their own ways, at their own levels. The missing link in this discussion, largely forgotten in philosophical scholarship and entirely absent in the philosophy of sports, is the concept of wonder. Like the sublime, wonder resists a singular definition, and throughout history, it has been interpreted in various ways. Genevieve Lloyd’s work in Reclaiming Wonder: After the Sublime underscores the pressing need to revisit this concept. I will demonstrate that when we speak of the value of nature sports, wonder emerges as a central element, shedding light on why this exploration is of paramount importance.

For Rene Descartes, wonder is the first of all the passions (2015, 220). He writes, in The Passions of the Soul,

In wonderment, the soul is suddenly taken by surprise, which causes it to consider attentively the objects that it finds rare and extraordinary. Thus, it is caused first and foremost by the impression formed in the brain which represents the object as rare, and consequently worthy of close consideration; and then by the movement of the spirits, which are disposed by this impression, first, to rush towards the part of the brain where it is located in order to reinforce it and preserve it there, and, secondly, to flow from there into the muscles that serve to keep the sense-organs in the same state as they are now, so as to keep the original impression going . . . (2015, 225)

What is key in this passage is the connection of wonder to the body. The body’s muscles associated with the experience of wonderment, work to maintain the experience. Wonder presents its object (the thing to wonder about) to the mind as something novel and unusual. From here we can attempt to resolve the novelty by gaining satisfactory knowledge about it. Descartes was critical of those who wonder excessively as the contemplation of novelty could stop us from acting to more important things. A related excess of wonder for Descartes was astonishment, which for Descartes was a kind of stupefaction. We might see that stupefaction if we imagine staring at an immense natural feature like an enormous breaking wave with an accompanying astonishment at the incomprehensible size of the wave, volume of water moving seemingly so slow and fast at the same time, and the booming sound of the explosion as the wave’s lip dives into the ocean’s surface. What would it take for us to think, I want to be there, on that wave? Astonishment alone is not enough, in fact, in illustration of Descartes’s criticisms, astonishment does not motivate action or the satisfaction of learning.

Lloyd points out a major shift in our understanding of the use of wonder as it emerged in Edmund Burke’s writings on the sublime. Whereas for Descartes, astonishment was an excess of wonder, for Burke, astonishment was a different
kind of emotion, unrelated to reason – that is, Burke explicitly separated astonishment and curiosity (Lloyd 2018, 60). The effect of the separation is to remove the drive to understand from the emotion, privilege the intensity of the astonishment – that is the stupefying, or irrational aspect of wonderment is privileged over the ability of wonderment to promote intellectual inquiry. That separation, for Lloyd, has meant that the sublime, even coming to Kant, contained the seeds of its own destruction. Lloyd shows how Kant’s sublime centers attention on the human ability to reason in sublime encounters – the sublime, rooted in astonishment and separated from curiosity, celebrates reason’s ability to overcome imagination that is overwhelmed by an experience. Reason then, allows us to rise above our stupefied astonishment. But reason is, by its very nature, abstract and intellectual. What is hence missing from this account is the component of the encounter that includes the emotional and physical connection with the natural object. That is, if we focus on the sublime in nature sports we have great examples of the mind’s ability to grapple with the vastness and majesty of nature, but very little to describe the development of technique, style, and further value to the activity. Consider, for instance, Thomen’s paper on Kelly Slater and the fearful waves of Pipeline. For Thomen, the value of watching Slater surf those waves is to remind him of the human ability transcend fear (Thomen 2010). The importance of the wave, and the connection to the natural object, as well as the kinds of thoughts that went in to the determination of how to ride such waves, are absent. The separation of curiosity and astonishment is further evidenced in the post-Kantian, Romantic uptake of the sublime.

For Lloyd, the Romantic movement led to a surge in interpretations and discussions about the sublime, which, in turn, gave this emotion a moral quality, linking it to a person’s character or moral disposition (2018, 78). That is, the Romantics privileged the mental struggle involved in the sublime. Consider, for instance, Arthur Schopenhauer’s view that the sublime allowed a transcendence from one’s mundane situation, or the connection of sublime intoxication with artistic vision. In the romantic mindset, the ability to experience transcendence or to have deep aesthetic experiences is an indication that one is a superior human being. That coupling of the sublime with character is worth pausing on because it captures well the rightful criticism of the sublime in Howe’s response to Krein. Howe argues that the sublime presents a narrowly exclusive value in nature sports, accessible only to a few, thereby excluding the majority from its profound experience. Furthermore, it suggests that those few who do seek the sublime may be driven by the desire to affirm their intellectual prowess, rather than simply enjoying the sport itself. The idea that the surfer of large waves is becoming a sublime consciousness, or that their exploits speak to the pre-eminence of humanity and the superiority of rationality, seems from a bygone and mistaken era. Howe is right that the sublime is problematic for valuing nature sports, but incorrect
that when Krein mentions the powerful natural features of nature sports that he must be talking about the sublime. The critique of romanticism is ongoing, like a specter informing the present moment.

Surfing, when stripped of the sublime, reveals key emotions such as finitude, uncertainty, and difference that are integral to all levels of the sport, from beginners on small waves to dedicated water enthusiasts on larger waves. These emotions orient surfers toward the natural elements rather than their imagination. Wonder, as described by Lloyd, not only reconciles reason and imagination but also connects nature sports athletes to their environment, suggesting its potential for enhancing the environmental aspect of these sports.

At all skill levels in surfing, knowledge is essential – not complete knowledge, but the growth of understanding within the dynamic relationship between the surfer and the surf-break. For instance, beginner surfers may experience fear, but they also feel elation and wonder about improving their technique. This sense of wonder motivates them to study the waves and their skills. The valuable experiences in the sport require practical wisdom rooted in wonder, driving surfers to keep challenging themselves.

**Conclusion**

In our exploration of the sublime in nature sports, we've uncovered a recurring theme challenging the conventional view that nature sports are rooted in the sublime. It's clear that the traditional sublime, as defined by Kant and embraced by the Romantics, doesn't fully capture the diverse human experiences in nature sports. The key issue lies in recognizing human limitations. The traditional sublime often implied transcending these limitations, emphasizing human supremacy over nature. However, the modern perspective differs by highlighting the fundamental differences in how individuals encounter nature, including their own limitations. In contemporary nature sports, people confront not only the grandeur of nature but also their own fears and vulnerabilities, regardless of their skill level. This perspective encourages acknowledging these differences in human experiences with nature.

Against this backdrop, the concept of the sublime as a symbol of human dominance appears increasingly outdated. The modern perspective values diversity, revels in the acknowledgment of our finite existence, and invites us to explore these differences without an insatiable thirst for absolute knowledge or the need to conquer what we encounter. This shift is fundamentally ethical, emphasizing respect for the varied ways individuals engage with nature and recognizing the validity of each experience – it also speaks to the great value of nature sports. This sentiment resonates with Leslie Howe's critique of Krein's placing nature at the forefront of his analysis – however, once we see that wonder, as explained by Lloyd is a better fit for the relationship of athlete to nature in nature sports, we can have our cake and eat it too.
Krein is also right that the natural feature cannot be downgraded in their importance, but that does not mean that we are privileging sublime experiences.

In the world of nature sports, we witness individuals willingly immersing themselves in the grandeur of nature’s formidable elements. However, their intent is not to conquer but to engage in a profound dialogue with the environment. Surfers, mountaineers, and kayakers do not seek dominion over nature; instead, they yearn to harmonize with its intricate rhythms. This harmonious coexistence is grounded in humility, acknowledging that, in the face of nature’s might, we are both insignificant and profoundly connected. It is a relationship founded on wonder – an appreciation for the beauty of the world and the recognition of our place within its awe-inspiring tapestry. Nature sports teach us that the true beauty of human engagement with the environment lies not in conquering but in co-experiencing. Athletes revel in the awe and wonder inspired by the natural world, recognizing that each encounter is an invitation to explore the boundaries of their own capabilities while respecting the boundaries of the environment.

On the importance of wonder in a time of environmental collapse Lloyd writes:

We can now grasp the real possibility that the conditions for our life to flourish are diminishing. We face the prospect that the earth may cease to sustain human flourishing – not just, inevitably, in a deep future, but under more imminent conditions, brought about contingently by the very capacities that made beings distinctive. Older affirmations of awe at distinctively human powers are now counter-poised to apprehension about the fragility of life itself in the world they have shaped.

Kantian awe at the starry skies above is no longer readily juxtaposed with self-congratulation about the grandeur of the operations of the human mind within. Yet wonder is intensified, rather than weakened, by increased understanding of just how tiny that human speck is in relation to the immensity beyond (2018, 217–218).

That is, unlike the sublime, wonder does not demand the conquest of nature or the assertion of human superiority. Instead, it invites us to revel in the novelty of our encounters and encourages us to explore without necessarily seeking mastery. The transition from the sublime back to wonder in our descriptions of encounters with natural phenomenon in nature sports is justified in the narrative of the history of philosophy. Edmund Burke’s redefinition of astonishment, separating it from curiosity, paved the way for a more nuanced understanding of wonder. Astonishment, for Burke, became an emotion distinct from reason, allowing us to experience awe without the compulsion to dominate or fully comprehend the object of our wonder. This shift in perspective, as noted by Lloyd, led to a separation of wonder from the sublime and an exploration of wonder’s potential to unite reason and
imagination without necessarily prioritizing one over the other. Wonder, in its essence, acknowledges the vastness of nature and our place within it, emphasizing the recognition of difference rather than the imposition of human dominance. Moreover, wonder offers an essential bridge between the athlete and the natural environment in nature sports. It invites us to go beyond the confines of our imagination, not to conquer nature but to be humbled by its enormity and complexity. When we wonder, we acknowledge that we are part of a world much larger than our understanding, and this recognition fosters an intrinsic connection between humans and nature.

Notes


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