OUTDOOR EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE LIVING?: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE POTENTIAL OF SCOTTISH LOCAL AUTHORITY RESIDENTIAL OUTDOOR EDUCATION CENTRES TO DELIVER PROGRAMMES RELATING TO SUSTAINABLE LIVING

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ABSTRACT

Human beings are dependent on natural, physical and biological processes for their survival and health and it is argued that the ‘well-being’ of nature is inseparable from the physical and psychological ‘well-being’ of the human condition. However, there is evidence to suggest that the earth’s resources cannot provide indefinitely for the requirements of the human race given their present rates of consumption.

Deep ecology is used as a standpoint to understand the relationship between the human and non-human world and is the basis from which different ways of knowing is explored. Outdoor education provides opportunities for one way of exploring these relationships. Theoretical perspectives associated with these concepts are explored together with empirical data to ask, ‘what can outdoor education do for sustainable living?’

Results are presented of a qualitative study of five local authority residential outdoor education centres. The research approach involved observations of, and interviews with, instructors followed by interviews with centre principals, visiting school teachers and senior officers within education (or community education) departments.

Findings show a greater amount of time is spent on outdoor activities and the personal and social development aspects of outdoor education with very little time spent on environmental education. The reasons for this are historical precedent (this is the way it has always been done), a desire to be associated with the 5-14 curricular guidelines (to be seen as educationally respectable) and instructor preference. I identify three aspects of personal and social development (interpersonal relationships, self-esteem and self-awareness) as outcomes that instructors claim to be working towards. However, there is some doubt as to their validity given the absence of internal evaluation or external empirical support. The outcomes are nevertheless verified by different sources of data. I suggest that this incongruity is metaphysical in origin where the inductive claims of practitioners, whilst being appreciated by a range of sources, do not find external validity when exposed to external analysis.

Environmental aspects within outdoor education courses are identified as marginal and unfocussed with the study revealing only one example which tends towards ecocentrism. Correspondingly, the majority of outdoor education practices are more readily associated with anthropocentrism. Any move from anthropocentric to ecocentric education will involve significant political, strategic, pedagogical, organisational and perceptual change. A role is identified for the Scottish Executive to provide political recognition that outdoor education can act as a provider of sustainability education. Strategic direction would need to be influenced by the concept of sustainability in line with international documentation such as Agenda 21. Pedagogy would need to move beyond the current conception of the environment as ‘the green environment’ to include social, political and economic dimensions. To deliver such programmes, centres would have to consider new goals and structures which would require staff training at all levels of the organisation. This would need to be accompanied by a shift in perception on the part of instructors, principals, visiting teachers and local authority officers for successful implementation.