From Wild Living to Living Wild: *The use of wilderness as part of an overall intervention strategy in programmes for young offenders in Scotland.*

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And finally, to Gaia who nurtures all of us.

Greg Watson

*An Chomraich*

Wester Ross

West of Scotland

(*meaning: the sanctuary in gaelic*)
Abstract

This study set out to investigate the use of wilderness as part of an alternative intervention programme for young offenders aged 16-24. The Venture Trust had recently adjusted their course from a residential base to a wilderness-based expedition journey called Living Wild.

My rationale for this study was to answer the primary research question of whether the wilderness “works” and, or if has an effect on participants. A secondary purpose was to ask those who referred participants and those who worked with those participants how important they felt wilderness was in relation to the overall intervention programme.

The author’s full time work with the Venture Trust offered an opportunity to observe at first hand the effect of the wilderness environment upon participants. Over ten courses were used during a research study period between October 2008 and October 2009. Diary observations were made in the wilderness and narrative vignettes were written for each course. In addition over ten interviews were undertaken with representatives across the organisation as well as with key funders and referrers; including the Scottish Minister for Justice, sheriffs, probation officers and social workers.

The main recurrent themes that appeared from the data collection supported the idea of wilderness as “working” were “offering a different perspective”, “involving real choices and consequences” and finally wilderness as “a catalyst” or “stressor”. This third and final theme was the hardest to quantify and yet it was the most pertinent and central to my rationale for the research the notion that the wilderness itself could have an effect on participants.

Whilst other factors, such as facilitated personal and social development were acknowledged as been part of the overall intervention programme, the importance placed on wilderness was varied; there was consensus that the wilderness “offered a different perspective”, but it was less than conclusive on whether or not wilderness “involved real choices and consequences”. In relation to idea that wilderness could be “a catalyst”, the difference was a very subtle one of emphasis between those who saw the wilderness as a mere stage or “setting” and others who saw wilderness as more central to the process.

There have been some concerns that wilderness based programmes can fail to address the social problems that they set out to solve. The results of this research suggests that the wilderness does at least offer a different perspective to people that are willing to begin the process of change and in some cases it may even be the catalyst for that change.
…scattered throughout the wild sea lochs of the Western Highlands and the Hebrides, and in the description of one the reader may perhaps find the likeness of others of which he has himself been fond, for these places are symbols. Symbols, for me and for many, of freedom, whether it be from the prison of over-dense communities and the close confines of human relationships, from the less complex incarceration of office walls and hours, or simply freedom from the prison of adult life and an escape into the forgotten world of childhood, of the individual or the race. For I am convinced that man has suffered in his separation from the soil and from the other living creatures of the world; the evolution of his intellect has outrun his needs as an animal, and as yet he must still, for security, look long at some portion of the earth as it was before he tampered with it.

Gavin Maxwell, Camusfearna 1959.
INTRODUCTION:

I wanted be honest and disclose bias, at the outset of this research study, about my own conviction in the inherent and intrinsic value of spending time in the wilderness. Many of my earliest formative experiences and memories were based on nature. From an early age I recall a trip to the Lake District in the North of England on a typically wet weekend in my orange cagoule. Later, once home I tried to recreate that experience by crouching under a hedge in the park opposite my terraced home in the rain. Following this simple experience, I had the opportunity to travel the world and have always sought nurture from nature wherever my travel or work has taken me, whether that were Africa, Australasia, North America or latterly the West Coast of Scotland.

I entered the outdoor education field relatively late in life, after somewhat of a sea-change. Part of the reason for this was a personal need to work in an outdoor environment, but also because I felt that nature had brought me many life-long learning experiences, I wanted to enable young people to realise that these experiences were there for them not just across the world, but in their own backyard.

The initial rationale of my research into wilderness and was mainly for personal interest and professional practice. I hoped too, that it might offer an insight into the potential of wilderness for any reader that might be interested in using the wilderness to help young people develop and grow. It was my intention to focus on the process of being in the wilderness and to at least try to gain a better insight into the effect of being there. This was of course difficult to define or isolate, let alone quantify. To help with this research, I also sought out the perspectives of staff and organisations that used the wilderness for their work.
The Venture Trust’s “Living Wild” programme:

My work was at the time of writing specialised in the area of young people who for various reasons were deemed to be at risk from the effects of drugs or alcohol or other issues. My full time employment with The Venture Trust presented an opportunity to investigate this phenomenon at first hand. The Venture Trust had run courses for young offenders as part of a broader intervention programme on behalf of the Scottish Government for over ten years. The course had recently changed from a residential-base to a three week wilderness journey called “Living Wild”. Not only did my employment situation seem to be an ideal opportunity, but so too did the timing as there was an increasing emphasis on the use of the wilderness when many other programmes such as Outward Bound in Scotland and the UK seemed to be using less wilderness and more residential setting.

The “Living Wild” programme offers three week wilderness-based expeditions for young offenders (aged 16-24) called Living Wild in the Highlands and Islands region of the West Coast of Scotland. Field Staff deliver one-to-one support to each participant every day of the course, before the participants return to their communities. The course is part of a broader personal and social development programme and is funded by the Scottish Government. It is supported by a referral process from the Criminal Justice system, the probation service, social services and Venture Trust’s own outreach team that work with participants prior to attending a course and preparing them for it. A community links service is offered by Venture Trust following the course with the intention of encouraging the participants into education, training and ultimately employment.

Rationale: What is this research for?

My own rationale for this study into the wilderness phenomenon was primarily a personal interest, as well as a personal justification for my professional practice. This gave me the basis for my initial research question: Does the wilderness work?

This has in turn, led to an academic interest in my work. The academic interest was perhaps initiated some eight years ago when I undertook my professional training in Australia in conjunction with a diploma in Outdoor Education at that same time. It was during this period I was introduced to the concept: “Do the mountains speak for themselves?” At that time I was not aware of the origins of this thought. This study has stimulated me to discover more about this idea.
From an academic perspective, the need for looking at setting was highlighted by Barrett and Greenaway (1995). Among their recommendations for future research for outdoor education within the United Kingdom and specifically in the area of “youth at risk,” they suggested the need to research:

…the effects of different programme settings, (e.g. young people’s own inner city, urban or rural communities, residential centres, wilderness and open country expeditions, sail training voyages and foreign travel) and their inherent strengths and weaknesses. Whilst considerable research into the use of wilderness settings has been undertaken abroad and some theoretical research exists in the UK, the potential benefits offered by different settings do not seem to have been sufficiently examined to best inform UK practice.


And secondly they recommended the need to research those:

…aspects of outdoor adventure practice that may distinguish it as a particularly effective developmental intervention, (e.g. the spiritual dimension of outdoor adventure, the immediacy of experiential learning processes used, the integrity of genuine experiences and consequences, the removal of distracting influences to focus on fundamental issues, the potential for 'cognitive dissonance'*. ) Theoretical research exists on many of these areas but may not inform practice in all applications of outdoor adventure.


*Cognitive dissonance was defined by Barrett & Greenaway as "an inconsistency between present perceptions and reality that results in a change of perception to reduce the frustration or disequilibrium existing with present reality."

And interestingly they also suggested investigating further into:

Outdoor adventure practice with troubled young people that has been unsuccessful, (e.g. courses that have closed early, that have excluded young people, in which staff have found themselves working beyond their experience, where participants have sabotaged programmes or damaged property). Most outdoor adventure staff are likely to be familiar with these types of experience, but 'post-mortems' may often only take place internally and the potential that these experiences have to inform and improve wider practice may often be lost at risk of other programmes replicating mistakes.

Research Question development

It is these thoughts and broad themes that were brought together to further develop the main research question to:

Does the wilderness work as part of an alternative intervention strategy with young offenders?

Other research questions that were addressed, or at least provided an insight into, were:

How important or integral is the wilderness viewed by staff and organisations that use it as a programme setting?

To what extent is the use of the wilderness seen as an important factor by referrers, funders and other key stakeholders involved in such programmes?

In stating these research questions, I should emphasise at the outset that it is not my intention to discredit other factors or variables that might come into play, such as personal and social development work, quality of teaching, facilitation and support towards transfer of learning as part of the overall and wider programme offered by organisations such as The Venture Trust. Research has been done in this area previously by The University of Edinburgh (Newman, McLaughlin, Higgins & Allison 2004) in which one of the recommendations made was for evaluation to be done on an ongoing basis towards longitudinal outcomes (This is now ongoing with Venture Trust).

It has been perhaps natural, that much of the literature and research pertinent to young offenders had been outcome-focussed due to the stakeholders involved (government and local authority and the political agenda inherent in this sector). However it was not my intention to justify or decide otherwise, whether or not a programme worked (that was for the stakeholders themselves to decide), but why the wilderness was used. What was the process or phenomenon at work in the wilderness and was there an effect that could be identified?

Wilderness: towards a definition?

It is perhaps useful to try to define what was meant by “wilderness” at least for the purposes of this research inquiry. My previous work in Australia had used wilderness journeys or expeditions and these took place in the “bush” or the “outback”. The “outback”
is a term synonymous with Australia and is equally difficult to identify. In the early days of
the white settlers it was understood to mean “out the back” (i.e. beyond where one lived), the
other side of the great dividing range, unless you lived there in which case it might mean in
the red centre or the desert. In relation to North America, the word “wilderness” was used in
a similar vein to mean beyond human habitation and even before that it has been used to
mean “untouched” by human presence. Earlier in biblical times, people went to, (or were
banished to), the wilderness to be away from society. In the modern day and heavily
populated British Isles, one might question whether we have any “real wilderness” left.
Certainly it is unlikely to be untouched by human presence, but what I mean here is any
journey that takes place away from the everyday distractions and pressures of urban living
such as other people (family and friends), cars, computers, “iPods” and mobile phones and
the like.

Methods used

My position as a full time employee with the Venture Trust in the field, meant that I
was well placed to make observations and collect data relating to the wilderness setting as
well as staff and participants interactions within that environment. I was able to keep a field
diary over a year which covered ten three week courses. These were later written up as
narrative vignettes. I also conducted ten interviews across all levels of the organisation from
staff in the field to management responsible for programme planning and direction. To add
to these perspectives I sought interviews with key referrers and funders of the programme.
All this data was coded from the main themes that had emerged. After analysis of the main
themes through the research questions, different interpretations were discussed and
considered.

What works?

It was not the intention of this study to show that wilderness “worked” over and above
other factors. Rather it was an attempt to see if wilderness could “work” as part of a broader
intervention strategy. The interviews allowed for individual interpretation of “what works?”
How “work” was interpreted would be in the final analysis dependent on your own
epistemological perspective of what “works”.
A REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

The purpose of this literature review was to identify any previous or contemporary literature or research that was pertinent to my central research questions: Firstly, does the wilderness “work”? Secondly, does the wilderness “work” as part of an alternative intervention strategy with young offenders?

The evolution of the central research question:

This literature review started by looking at the two areas of contention that were the source of my initial research inquiry. These were:

- Criminological studies around the “what works?” debate of Martinson (1974).
- “Can the mountains speak for themselves?” debate outlined by James (1980).
Criminological literature

The basis of the key research question alludes to the “What works?” debate within criminological research around prison and probation started by Martinson (1974). He concluded from his research that alternatives to prison did not “work”. McGuire (2000) more recently summed this argument up:

There is a widespread belief that attempts to reduce the criminality of persistent offenders are unlikely to meet with much success. This penological pessimism is often traced to pronouncements made during the 1970s on the basis of reviews of the effectiveness of interventions. Most notably, Martinson argued that treatment, including various forms of education, training or psychotherapy, added nothing to the standard procedures of conviction, sentencing, and punishment that are integral to the traditional workings of the justice system. (p.2).

Martinson (1979) later retracted this stance, and McGuire concluded that:

...on balance, community-based interventions have larger effect sizes than those delivered in institutions…a variety of methods for working directly with offenders can accomplish more positive outcomes, when designed and delivered in appropriate ways. (p.2)

It is perhaps natural that most of the literature and research pertinent to young offenders has been outcome focussed due to the stakeholders involved (government and criminal justice system, and the political agendas inherent in this area). Whilst there is a significant range of criminological literature that deals with probation as an alternative to prison for young offenders, there has been very little that dealt with the use of the “wilderness” itself or even the outdoor environment. One investigation that did was by McCormack (2003) and she stated that one criticism “of the use of outdoor pursuits is that they fail to address the social setting, and therefore the most persistent and influential factor in the development of delinquent behaviour” (p.165).

However, my research focus through the main research question of “does the wilderness work”, was not an attempt to investigate whether recidivism rates or social problems and
such like, could be seen to be reduced through the use of wilderness based courses such as
those offered by organisations such as the Venture Trust. It was more specifically intended to
be an investigation into the use of the wilderness and whether the wilderness itself could be
seen to have an influence on young people.

A starting point: *Do the Mountains Speak for Themselves?*

One area that was a relevant starting point for my own personal interest, professional
practice and academic research, was James’ (1980) paper: *Do the mountains speak for
themselves?* He outlined a debate that was current within Outward Bound at that time in
North America. This debate aligned very closely with my main research question of does the
wilderness “work?” This was intended to be a dual-play on the “what works” debate
described earlier in criminological literature and “the mountains speak” debate that has never
been far from the surface in outdoor education literature (for mountains, read “wilderness”). I
wanted to highlight the main themes they were pertinent and pivotal to my research. On the
one hand there was the idea that the wilderness environment or the “mountains” could be a
transformative experience just by being there:

> When it is applied in a straightforward way, then the mountains, which we might as
> well translate to mean "Necessity" or "Natural Process", do in fact teach their
> valuable lessons to all who are willing to make the effort…From an educational
> standpoint, I would interpret their point of view to be saying that the learning that
> takes place naturally and integrally…does not need elaborate verbalization and
> testing in a controlled group process in order to be conscious, useful and
> transferable. … As in the teaching of skills, it is crucial to maintain the pace and
> authenticity of the experience, not interrupting adventure with contrived interactions.
> (James, 1980, p.2)

On the other hand, was the idea that this process or phenomenon needed to be reflected upon
and the learning transferred for it to have any meaning:

> …the outcome of the stress, challenge and mastery in an unfamiliar environment
> should be to reorient the meaning and direction of the learner’s life experience.
> Direct experience is the key, but there must be some way to help the student
> beyond immediate consumption of experiences to the greater challenges of
> improving their lives back home. The usual label is "transference"…educators are apt
to follow John Dewey’s notion that the challenge of any form of education is to
select present experiences that will live fruitfully and creatively in future
experience…

(James, 1980, p.3)
Therein lay the crux of the debate: James did not advocate one approach over another and left it suggesting that both sides consider the other’s perspective.

This debate had been largely been surpassed by those who preferred to follow an activity/session-based and heavily facilitated “adventure-programming” structure (see Priest and Gass, 1997). But I still saw this debate as having been overlooked or perhaps forgotten; hence my research focus has been to question whether or not it still had relevance in the current day. Neill (2000) offered a rejoinder to this in his article, “Are the mountains still speaking for themselves? A defining tension 20 years on”:

The “mountains” versus “facilitation” tension has continued to thrive in adventure education ever since, and is no less resolved today than it was in 1980… But I suggest the dilemma is a very healthy one and that professional engagement with the issue is vital to the aliveness of adventure education. The debate continues to fuel staff planning meetings and course debriefs every day all over the world and it can be a particularly using topic when structured into staff training.

This seemed to support my personal and professional need to research the actual effect of the “mountains” or what I have referred to as “wilderness”. Some colleagues have suggested that this debate is “history,” but I had often wondered whether in the rush to facilitate almost every experience, we might be losing the actual learning that might take place naturally in the wilderness environment. This was not to dismiss the positive effect of facilitated learning (drawing on what real meaningful experiences), but to avoid over-facilitated learning which can border on the contrived, or what Loynes (1998 & 2000) has referred to as “adventure in a bun”, a reference to the North American influence of adventure-programming or what Ritzer (1993) had previously described as the “McDonaldisation” effect of society. This tension still continues in contemporary outdoor education literature within the United Kingdom. Rea (2006) recently commented on this:

The “mountains speak for themselves” model …or the “first generation of facilitation” model, challenges such deliberately interventionist approaches. The model diminishes the importance of such interventions and argues that the outdoor experience itself, be it a trek, a climb, an expedition, is by far the more important aspect. Thus there is a dichotomy in the literature between those, on the one hand, who see experience as central and those, on the other who see processing the experience as more important…
It was not my intention to take sides in this debate with one side or the other, although I admit that initially I had a preference more towards the “mountains speak for themselves” persuasion, rather than the highly facilitated end of the spectrum. Whilst I did not wish to disagree with Dewey and his followers, my primary research focus was not what happened after the experience, but actually what was occurring during the experience.

**Wilderness and environment based literature writing.**

*In every walk with nature one receives more than he seeks*

*John Muir*

My specific focus then, was to look at the wilderness itself, as a phenomenon and to see what influence it had and how important it was to educators and organisations offering expedition programmes in that environment. One difficulty was that the literature that existed, was anecdotal and not research based. Most of this was based in the North America which has vast landscapes and remaining wilderness and a longer tradition of using these areas for expedition programmes offered to young people. There has been a strong tradition of wilderness writing in North America and one of its most recognised writers, John Muir, was Scottish born and is latterly making a resurgence in his country of birth through the John Muir Trust.

Some of the most profound writing that has placed nature and wilderness at its core was that of the “Deep Green” ecology movement credited to Naess (1989) and the Lovelock’s (1979) “Gaia” theory. Both were scientifically trained but offered very abstract thoughts around the nature of wilderness and the “interconnectedness” with humankind: “The earth is more than just a home, it’s a living system and we are part of it” (Lovelock 1979).

The British Isles has a far more densely populated landscape and seascape than North America and has been for much longer in human history. This may have been one reason why we do not have such a tradition of wilderness literature within our shores. Of course there have been many writers of British birth that have written about wilderness around the world but less so perhaps on the land of their birth. One that has written about the typically Scottish wilderness and nature is Maxwell who I have quoted as the frontispiece of this paper. I selected this quote as I feel it is had greater resonance for my research both in terms of the
geographical setting, the nature of the participants and also because it perhaps summarises a number of reasons for using the wilderness.

**Outdoor Education literature**

In outdoor education within the United Kingdom much of the early literature evoked the work and substantial legacy of Kurt Hahn but this has been recorded in plenty of other areas. Since Hahn, Mortlock has been influential within outdoor education in United Kingdom and his first book *The Adventure Alternative* (Mortlock, 1984) looked at the process been undertaken in the outdoor environment through the idea of “comfort zones.” This had influence perhaps and certainly parallels with what later come out of North America in terms of “adventure-programming” (Priest & Gass, 1997). Whilst the idea of increasing learning through “challenge” and “comfort zones” through outdoor activities has been widely practiced on both sides of the Atlantic, the same could perhaps be said of any challenging activity or even educational process indoors or out. However, Mortlock’s later and more reflective work *Beyond Adventure* (2000), perhaps better explained his thoughts on using the wilderness. This was not only a physical journey, but a metaphorical journey and perhaps also even a metaphysical journey or “a journey within.” He attributed this directly to wilderness environment and is much closer to the phenomenon that I intended to study:

> Our encounters with other people and the environment around us can be seen as our outer journey through life. A degree of uncertainty always attends it. There is a another journey, however, that we all may take, which not only has uncertainty, but is also infinitely more mysterious. This is the journey into ourselves – the inner journey. Every experience we have of the external world has an effect, consciously or unconsciously, on our inner self.

( p.55)

**Environmental and psychology research**

In terms of research into the actual effect of wilderness, most of this came from the wilderness therapy milieu in North America. In terms of selecting from this material, I wanted to concentrate on literature that focussed on wilderness or at least expedition and journey based outdoor education.

(*For a history of the development of the Hahn and the Outward Bound movement in particular see Bacon,1993).*
Kaplan and Talbot (1986) undertook if not one of the earliest, then certainly the most time extensive study of wilderness programmes over a 10 year period. This study was quantitative in its methodological approach and was useful in discovering what had gone before. In their introduction to the study they too summarised the long historical tradition of the wilderness experience in literature:

Biblical as well as other literary and historical sources include numerous examples of individuals whose encounters with wilderness environments have left them with enhanced perceptions and strengthened feelings of commitment to various causes… a number of recent psychological surveys have illustrated popular beliefs which roughly correspond with these images. Both wilderness users and non-users have been found to share perceptions that experiences in natural environments can be highly satisfying and can offer valuable psychological benefits not often found elsewhere.

(p.177.)

but they concluded:

…While such evidence may be intriguing, it does not, in itself, constitute convincing proof of the value of wilderness experiences…efforts to examine the nature and impacts of these experiences directly by collecting data from participants in wilderness programs have been fraught with methodological difficulties…most efforts to clarify the nature of these benefits and to demonstrate the dynamics of their emergence have achieved only limited success.

(p.177.)

“Methodological difficulties” was a concern for my own research, but my line of enquiry was organisation and staff-focused rather than participant-focused through interview and case study (for more on this see methodology and research design chapter). Interestingly Kaplan & Kaplan (1989) later began to use a more qualitative approach in an attempt to better describe participant’s experiences in the wilderness. They were primarily concerned with the restorative benefits of a wilderness or “getting away.”

More recently Haluza DeLay (1999) stressed that this feature had been often overlooked:

Wilderness program leaders can point to anecdotal evidence of the power of program participation, but little systematic investigation has considered the phenomenon of the
"relationship with nature" or developing environmental concern on an adventure program.

(p. 129.)

Haluza DeLay’s interest and that of others (e.g. Chawla, 1998) was particularly in the area environmental awareness and environmental education. My research was not into the wildernes ses potential for producing greater environmental awareness, but for its potential to bring about any change at all particularly personal and social development.

**Wilderness Therapy literature**

The area of “wilderness therapy” is a relatively new concept within the UK, but again it is yet another influence that has come from across the Atlantic. I reviewed some of the literature and research in an attempt to find ways others had used to quantify the wilderness and its effect. Davis-Berman & Berman (2009) have been perhaps the most influential writers and vocal practitioners of this movement. They state: “The wilderness environment is seen as healing yet not sufficient alone to promote change.” (p.67) Naturally, as therapists they would take this stance, but again whilst I do not intend to evaluate the relative merits or otherwise of “Wilderness Therapy,” they themselves describe that the wilderness environment itself as “healing” and that presumably is why they choose to use the wilderness setting for their programmes.

Russell and Farnum (2006) researched the actual process of wilderness therapy programmes. Their study concentrated on three factors which they believed to be “unique” to wilderness therapy: wilderness, physical self and social self. Whilst I did not necessarily agree that these factors were “unique” to wilderness therapy, the research is an important and relatively recent piece of research into the process itself. On the wilderness they stated:

Juxtaposed to civilization, wilderness may create emotions and experiences that can alleviate some of the stress caused by our increasingly and technological culture. The naturalness and solitude that wilderness offers restores and renews our spirit and offers evidence that wilderness is itself therapeutic.

(p. 39).

This also echoed an earlier belief in the restorative powers identified by Kaplan and Kaplan (1989). Russell and Farnum’s (2006) model divided the wilderness expedition programme
into three parts: “Wilderness Beginning”, “Physical-Self Middle-late”, and “Social-self Late”:

1. **Wilderness Beginning**: The wilderness environment, acting alone, can be seen as a restorative environment for at-risk youth who have high levels of anxiety and are stressed from mental fatigue caused by too much direct attention.

2. **Physical-Self Middle-late**: By combining the effects of feeling and looking better physically through consistent physical activity and wilderness activities that are designed to challenge while allowing opportunities for immediate feedback and success, the wilderness works as a therapeutic medium to foster an enhanced image of the self.

3. **Social-self Late**: Research has shown that wilderness experience programs, through a variety of day-to-day activities while on program, helping at-risk youth learn more cooperative behaviours. Breaking down barriers of stereotypes and preconceived notions allows participants to get to know each other better, meeting the needs of youth at risk who have limited capacities to form close interpersonal relationships.

Whilst I recognised similar patterns from practical work experience with these types of groups, I felt these were generalisations about a group as a homogenous entity, when in reality each participant was an individual and the process they go through was an individual “journey.” However as a model it was interesting and they identified later the diminished effect of the “novelty” or “newness” of wilderness as a phenomenon. Later the participants begin to focus more on the “enhanced image of the self” and later still the social self. I think the reverse could equally be proposed in some circumstances.

Russell and Farnum (2006) built on the Kaplans’ research and extracted two causal factors as important effects of the wilderness: firstly simply “been away” from modern distractions. Secondly, and perhaps more interesting from an educational learning standpoint, is the Russell & Farnum’s concept of “soft fascination”:

Soft fascination occurs when involuntary attention--the opposite of stressful, directed attention--is engaged. Clouds, sunsets, and moving river water capture attention but do not require directed attention, allowing room for cognitive reflection. Because demands upon directed attention are diminished, psychological restoration becomes possible. Kaplan and Kaplan argue that these types of natural phenomenon--clouds, sunsets, etc.--are prime types of stimuli to induce cognitive rest. Attention is captured by an interesting and aesthetically pleasing environment that does not necessitate a high degree of cognitive processing. Thus, soft fascination allows for release from stressors that cause mental fatigue, easing away from cognitive strain.

(p.41)

(p.42)
This of course was, and perhaps only could be, an assumption, but later empirical research supported the Kaplan and Kaplan’s (1989) study with quantitative data. “Ordinary natural settings were seen as having the highest overall restorative effectiveness, everyday urban settings as having the lowest, and sports/entertainment settings as in between.” (Hertzog, Black, Fountaine & Knotts, 1997.) Concluding their study, Russell & Farnum (2006) linked their model to the “mountains debate”:

This model suggests therapeutic factors that are reasoned to be working, regardless of whether the mountain is speaking for itself or the leaders are taking a more active and facilitated role in applying a clinical treatment model. The model may help illustrate how the wilderness therapy process is speaking for itself, regardless of the clinical treatment model integrated into the experience.

(p.50).

Whilst wilderness therapy literature naturally emphasised the effect of therapy, it is the use of wilderness setting that is of relevance to this study.

**Rites of Passage through wilderness**

One final area reviewed was the literature that dealt with the concept of “rites of passage” during a wilderness expedition. My own travel and work in Africa, Australia and New Zealand and observations of the connectedness of the aboriginal people of those lands and their natural environment held a personal interest for me. In these cultures the ritual of rites of passage goes back to their earliest history. The ritual has now been lost in western culture. The ritual was drawn upon Belgian anthropologist van Gennep (1909), and developed by Turner (1969) who outlined a series of passages that one passed through in life.

1. separation from one’s original social pattern,
2. liminality, a state of transition, and
3. reincorporation back into an existing social structure.

This process has been researched and critiqued most recently by Bell, Beames & Carson (2010). The first stage, separation, is similar to the idea of “being away” discussed earlier (Kaplan and Talbot, 1983). However, it is the second stage; liminality, that I think perhaps has most pertinence to this study. This is a transformative stage in which intense learning is undergone in different environment from one’s home life. Andrews (1999) had previously
focussed in his study on this stage. He traced the word *limen* back to its Latin origins meaning *threshold*. “Threshold” can be defined in its simplest form as a “doorway” but also as:

3. the starting point of an experience, event, or venture: *on the threshold of manhood*. 4. *Psychol.*. The strength at which a stimulus is just perceived; the threshold of consciousness. 5.a a level or point at which something would happen, would cease to happen, it would take effect, become true…*related adj: liminal.*


It was the first two stages (“separation” and “liminality”) that I wanted to investigate further in this research. There are of course significant difficulties in identifying the second stage.

**Process-focussed Outdoor Education research**

It would admittedly have been somewhat easier to conduct research in this area on a pre-test and post-test methodology. This is perhaps why so much recent outdoor education research has been outcome-based. Higgins and Nicol (2004) iterate this point:

One assumption built into outcome-based research is that by increasingly refining the research tool the researcher will become better at identifying outcomes and making predictions. These meta-analyses may be seen in this light where researchers are using research to demonstrate the effectiveness of *what has already been done.* (authors’ italics). The focus on outcome-based research has been at the expense of a broader research agenda. One of the consequences of this is the failure to locate empirical work within bodies of theory.

(p.4).

Hattie, Marsh, Neil, & Richards (*“Does Outdoor Education Really Work?”* 1997) had undertaken an extensive evaluation of outdoor education and emphasised a need for outcome based research. From my own previous work whilst in Australia, I had been aware of the move there towards outcome-focussed research. I believed that often the motivating factor was not so much for those organisations and individuals that work within outdoor education, but more for the benefit of funders. This view was supported by Allison (2000) in his statement that:

…this work is not unimportant—it is likely to be of interest to a number of stakeholders, may increase our confidence in our work, or may justify programmes to external funders, enabling programmes to continue. However this approach
does little to help improve practice or understanding of the experiences of participants in programmes.

(p.22).

Allison’s next line was pertinent to my own research approach:

More importantly [they] ask and attempt to answer an impossible question. By what criteria does one decide that a programme ‘works’, and who should determine that criteria anyway?... By focussing on a single limited question, we could be seen to demonstrate a lack of understanding of the complexity and subtlety of the experiential learning field... Researchers who identify the ‘does it work’ question as the only research concern in the field of experiential learning undervalue and underestimate its potential and the multiple applications for which it can be used.

(p.23).

(bold text is my own emphasis).

This paragraph was pivotal to my main research question: Whilst “does it work?” was certainly a very difficult question, (though hopefully not limited nor impossible), it was also a critical question, particularly in my intended area of research, which was to focus on the wilderness element or the actual processes that seemed to me to be central. It was not my intention to decide whether or not the course as a whole “worked,” (that challenge is for others such as The Venture Trust, the Scottish Government and other funders to undertake), but rather what influence the wilderness had upon participants, what effect staff believed it had upon participants and why organisations such as The Venture Trust choose to use the wilderness. Rather than seeing my main research question as “limited”, I believed it to be core to understanding why wilderness still plays so significant a part in courses of this nature.

A previous study by Heffer (2002) looked into three variables (“people, place and tutor”) of the processes affecting participants in the setting of wilderness expedition. In this study he highlighted the lack of research into the aspect of “place”:

Although this aspect of the wilderness merits eloquent literary description, it produces little in the way of research. This could be because researchers are still developing the tools to investigate this more ‘spiritual’ aspect, or perhaps it is simply beyond our understanding.

(p.15).
Summary

This literature review started by looking at the two areas of contention that were the source of my initial research inquiry. These were; firstly criminological studies around the What works? debate of Martinson (1974) and secondly: the Do the mountains speak for themselves? debate as outlined by James (1980). Whilst these two debates helped formulate some of my thinking, my central research question of does the wilderness work? was actually an investigation into the setting (i.e. the wilderness environment itself) and whether this could be seen to have any effect on participants.

Much of the literature and research in both criminology and outdoor education with young offenders appeared to have been outcome-based and very little was process-focussed. What literature there was seemed to emphasise the importance of the facilitation processes that were employed and overlooked or perhaps relegated the wilderness to a mere stage or backdrop. This suggested that I would have to rely upon sourcing my own research data from organisations that used the wilderness as the setting for their courses with young offenders and in the wilderness itself.
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Epistemological paradigm and a methodological approach:

Because of my work for The Venture Trust there was a need to be conscious of potential for bias in both my own perspective and those I would observe and interview. Rea (2008) critiqued the methodological approaches in outdoor education research that had concentrated on impact and outcomes of outdoor programmes. He offered “an alternative approach, embedded in a discourse of “situatedness” (p.124, bold added by author). Further, he discussed the use of “fictional narrative” in order to illustrate the experiences of participants, for both the participants themselves and for readers. Whilst this was not necessarily the only influencing factor in my research it did present one approach which made use of an immersion or “situatedness” in my workplace. I had a real opportunity to observe at first hand the effect or influences of that wilderness environment upon participants.

Designing my research

This opportunity allowed me to focus on my central research question of “does the wilderness work?” However, I was aware of the difficulty in isolating this phenomenon from other variables. I also acknowledged that others might just see wilderness as a setting or backdrop and that it was other factors such as facilitation or the overall intervention programme that “worked”. What I wanted to find out from them, was how centrally they perceived the wilderness to be in the overall process. Did they see wilderness in itself, as having an effect on young people? This subtlety required a development of the central research question.

The development of the research questions:

1. Does the wilderness “work”?

As highlighted in the literature review, this central research question was derived from the criminological “what works?” debate (Martinson 1974) and the outdoor education debate of “Do the mountains speak for themselves?” (James 1980). Of course I could not hope to
answer both these tensions within the short basis of one study, and whilst this research question reflected these tensions it was designed primarily to look at the actual process or effect occurring in the wilderness.

Defining “what works” is almost as impossible a challenge as defining “wilderness” itself (see literature review previously). Both are, by their nature, in the eye of the beholder and can only be measured as such. What Martinson (1974, 1976), and the “what works?” debate thereafter, often meant, was a measure of recidivism or repeat offending. What outdoor educators have often meant is either the wilderness environment effecting a change in a person (i.e mountains speaking for themselves James, 1980) or facilitation within a wilderness setting that enables change. This is of course far less tangible and more difficult to quantify.

Naturally whilst my specific inquiry was to be into process occurring within the wilderness, it was important to acknowledge that the use of a wilderness for the Living Wild course was only one part of an overall intervention programme.

The second question was a development of the first question in an attempt to answer a commonly asked question both within the area in which I was working and with interested members of the public with whom I had come into contact and who often asked the simple question: “Does it work?” but what they more often meant by this question was:

2. Does the wilderness “work” as part of an alternative intervention strategy with young offenders?

In considering a research approach that would rely primarily on me collecting data in the field, it was important that I gained other perspectives to hear what other people’s interpretation of the role of wilderness might be in such programmes. I sub-divided these into staff employed by The Venture Trust either in the field or in management which formed question three:

*How important or integral is the wilderness as viewed by staff and organisations that use it as a programme setting?*
Finally, I sought the opinion of some key stakeholders in the programme such as government ministers with a responsibility for funding, sheriffs and social workers that referred young people:

*To what extent is use of the wilderness seen as an important factor by referrers, funders and other key stakeholders involved in such programmes?*

**A qualitative approach**

From the outset of my pre-research phase, I felt that a qualitative ethnogenic methodology would be the most suitable approach. Walliman (2005) summarised this:

As a process of studying human behaviour...the ethnogenic approach has three features: it aims to represent a view of the world as it is structured by the participants under observation by eliciting phenomenological data; it takes place in the undisturbed natural settings of the subjects; and it attempts to represent the totality of the social, cultural and economic situation, regarding context to be equally important as the action.

(p. 96).

My rationale was for following such an approach was twofold: Firstly, the historical and traditional approaches to research in the area of young offenders and probation had been mainly of a quantitative nature and had tended to focus purely on outcomes such as recidivism rates. Secondly, as I wanted to focus on the wilderness itself, and there seemed to be limited research in this phenomenon, meant that I would have to collect my own observation data in “situation” that is directly in the field. By use of my own position of situatedness (Rea, 2006) in the wilderness through the opportunity provided me by my work, I hoped to provide an insight into that effect for the reader (who would not be able to gain that level of direct contact), who then would then themselves have an opportunity to draw from my findings and, interpret them for themselves to reach their own conclusions. I realised that my approach was similar to that of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1992) that allowed for themes and theories to emerge inductively from the data.
This inductive qualitative approach has also been differentiated from a quantitative method by Emerson, Fretz & Shaw (1995):

In quantitative coding, the researcher proceeds deductively by constructing questionnaires with categories derived from theory...Qualitative research proceeds inductively by writing fieldnotes that reflect the significance of events and experiences to those in that setting.

(p.151)

Data collection

1. Ten courses were used for research study period between October 2008 and October 2009.
2. Diary observations were taken only from the field (i.e. the wilderness environment).
3. Ten narrative vignettes were written up from key observations after every course.
4. Ten interviews were undertaken with representatives across all levels of the organisation from field staff to senior management and board members.
5. Selected interviews were undertaken with a key funders and referrers: a sheriff, the Scottish Minister for justice and probation and social workers.

Diary observations and narrative vignettes

My work in the field enabled me to make observations during actual courses. This would be done by use of a field diary for taking observation notes of key events involving participants behaviour and actions in the wilderness setting and talking informally with staff. Any actual discussions with participants were of course kept anonymous and none were actually interviewed and informal (observations were noted in field diary at end of day to avoid intrusion).

After each course and with time to reflect, (which also gave me a breathing space and critical distance from my work), I found time to write up my notes from the threads and weave these
into more descriptive narrative vignettes (Stake 1995) of participant experiences within the wilderness.

Finally, I read all these narrative vignettes drawn from my own field diary observations by searching for recurring themes and insights that emerged from the data. This approach had allowed me to gain a distance from my own observations in the wilderness during a course. The writing up of the narrative vignettes allowed for an element of critical reflection. The subsequent open-coding of the data into categories or themes (i.e., giving the data generic headings that can be used to allow patterns to develop out of key events). Emerson, Feltz & Shaw (1995) also suggested that “the ethnographer should not use pre-established categories to read fieldnotes; rather he should read with an eye toward identifying events described in the notes that could themselves become the basis of categorization” (p.152). In the analysis stage I focussed only on narrative vignette data that correlated with the main themes that had emerged from the other sources of data (the interviews) and considered whether any of this could support or refute my primary question of whether the wilderness could be shown to have “worked” (i.e., Research question 1).

Example:

1. **Field diary observation:**
   “Day 3: mountain peak –mountains speaking to BG? (Extracted from course field notes SG0109)

2. **Narrative Vignette:** This was then later be written up as:
   Mountain summit on the Fannichs with a 360 degree vista. The moment really spoke for itself in reaching the summit...after some time just taking it in we discussed the scene and all responded deeply and positively. BG compared the freedom now to his time in prison...” (extracted from Narrative Vignette code: NVBG)

**Semi structured interviews**

For the second part of my research approach, I decided to use both informal discussions with staff in the field and more structured ones at a later point by use of interviews with key members at each level of the organisation. My rationale was firstly to gain a broad range of opinions from those who work directly in the wilderness with this client group (Research question 3). Then I wanted to follow my interview process up the
organisation to see how integral the wilderness was from their perspective of the key decision makers. Further than that I wanted to see how far the idea of wilderness stretched to key people that might refer participants to programmes that The Venture Trust offer (Research question 4). These were social workers, probation officers and sheriffs. Finally these programmes are funded by the Scottish Government and I thought it would be important to ask for their rationale in using programmes that made use of the wilderness as part of an overall intervention strategy.

In total, I interviewed ten staff: six staff who worked in the field in direct contact with participants. Then I identified four key people within the organisation who had responsibility for directing both the courses and overall programmes. Each interview was designed to be a similar length of time (about forty minutes) and responses were recorded mainly by use of notes in the answer section of an interview template previously prepared. I backed my notes up with a recording device which helped record any areas that I had might have missed during the interview and gave clarification on any areas that needed it. But the main benefit of having the recording device was that I could converse with the interviewee without detailed note taking. It was not necessary to transcribe the whole interview but all were typed up and stored for easily referenced and retrieval. The interview schedule was designed to initially put the interviewee at ease with general questions about their experience and background. For example:

**Q1: How long have you been involved in this sort of work?**

The next set of questions was intentionally open to interpretation as the intention was to get their own viewpoint on what it was that “worked”:

**Q4: How does the living wild course work?**

The next question was asked stimulate thought and discussion:

**Q5: How would you define the term “works”? (“you” was emphasised)**

This often led to discussions related to the either personal & social development work and or wilderness environment. I was careful to avoid “leading” the interviewee into a discussion about wilderness and only occasionally had to prompt it (it was often brought up at some point by the interviewees themselves). Again this was initially a general question which in most cases led to extensive discussion.
**Q8: How important is the wilderness for Venture Trust courses?**

I also decided that it would be important to offer another dimension and interview key decision makers that might be involved in using or referring participants to The Venture Trust courses and programmes. These selected representatives included social workers, a sheriff, and the minister for justice in the Scottish Government, (and ultimately responsible for decisions on funding of such programmes).

**Q1: The Scottish Government has been supportive of innovative, forward thinking alternative intervention strategies in dealing with young people’s personal and social development. Why is this?**

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**A thematic approach to data analysis:**

All the diary observations, narrative vignettes, and interviews were collected and written up. I then spent time reading through all the data with as much impartiality as was possible; I only highlighted recurring themes, patterns and any anomalies. Areas that related to wilderness were given the generic heading “Wilderness Works” and any other areas were grouped under the generic heading “Other factors”:

**Generic themes**

| “Wilderness works” (e.g “Mountains Speak”) | Other factors (e.g Facilitation) |

It should be noted that whilst other factors might have been identified and acknowledged as having an influence on the success of the course or the overall programme, it was not my intention to analyse them. My focus was to analyse specifically only those data that related to wilderness or the influence of wilderness.
The next step in the data analysis process was to give sub-categories to any themes and patterns. The main themes that emerged from the data collection were:

**Sub-Categories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Wilderness works”</th>
<th>Other factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“different perspective”</td>
<td>“facilitation”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“real decisions”</td>
<td>“routine”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“catalyst”</td>
<td>“personal responsibility”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“stressor”</td>
<td>“choice theory”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“the moment”</td>
<td>“pro-social modelling”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“lack of distractions”</td>
<td>“practice skills”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“comfort zones”</td>
<td>“tools for home”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“shared experience”</td>
<td>“you could do it in a classroom”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“solitude”, “freedom &amp; space”</td>
<td>other means e.g. sport art or music.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“stage” or “backdrop”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Because of the variety in terms used to explain the effect or benefits of the wilderness by interviewees, I decided to select the main sub-categories that appeared most often. The main recurrent themes were:

**Theme 1**: Wilderness as “a different perspective”.

**Theme 2**: Wilderness as “involving real decisions and consequences”.

**Theme 3**: Wilderness as “a catalyst” or “a stressor”.

One advantage of this thematic coding was that it could be used to match patterns across both the narrative vignettes and the interviews. Then comparisons were drawn between them.
The use of this thematic approach and in particular the coding was that it allowed me to maintain a critical distance from the data. I drew out themes that supported wilderness as a factor from the data but also acknowledged other factors that had emerged that could be also be interpreted as “working”.

**The overall “case” study:**

The use of two main sets of data collection methods described above would collectively serve to form the basis for the overall case study and give validity to the process (i.e. not only relying on just one source of data).

For this I felt Stake’s (1995) use of case study method as having useful applications for my data analysis and discussion: He believed that three types of generalisations or perhaps better, conclusions could be drawn from case studies: petite from an individual case study; grand generalisations can be applied or transferred to a number of other settings; and finally, naturalistic generalisations that are created by the readers themselves. Allison (2000) also referred to this concept as the author creating a vicarious experience for the reader. “Vicarious” is defined in as “obtained or undergone through sympathetic participation in another’s experiences.” (Collins English Dictionary. 2000). Allison also discusses thick descriptions which allow the reader to make different generalisations.

…thick descriptions are used to paint as accurate a picture as possible of the socio-cultural historical context, to describe aspects such as the aims and objectives, the environmental factors, the group dynamics and the background of participants.

(p.24)

**Limitations in this research:**

In my initial research design, I did consider interviewing participants themselves. After much consideration I decided against this approach. Throughout this research I was working in a full time employment. My main priority in the field had to be to my work with
the participants. I did not want to impact on the normal running of the course with interviews, nor was in the luxurious position of being an observer.

Secondly, the nature of this client group, which comprised mainly of young offenders, meant that there was a need for confidentiality. Furthermore, the condition of their attendance was often as part of a court order and this gave me reservations about interviewing them directly. Participants were often keen to give the “right answers”, as they often perceive their behaviour during the course to be part of an assessment that is reported back to the probation officer and to the sheriff in the court after the course.

Summary

My research methodology was to make use of the opportunity offered by my work to collect data first-hand through my role in the field working directly with participants. These field-diary observations were written up in the form of narrative vignettes and this allowed for critical reflection. In addition interviews across the organisation and with key decision makers in government and the criminal justice system considered other perspectives. The use of these two main sets of data collection, gave more rigour to the process and enabled me to have more critical distance.

Both direct observations and interviews would collectively serve to form the basis for the overall case in study. The approach I adopted for this study was to use a qualitative, interpretive and inductive approach from the data collected. The data was analysed through the main research questions and the recurrent themes derived from the primary data.

The data analysis chapter will deal with the main themes that were identified and the discussion chapter considers both the case for “wilderness as working”, as well make allowance for other factors that had an influence.
DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

The data was analysed to identify those which supported the notion of “wilderness as working” and those which attributed other factors as “working”. Other factors were considered and acknowledged, but it was not the purpose of this research to analyse those other factors. It was not my intention to prove one against the other, but rather to try to focus on those parts of the data that suggested an importance of wilderness and any effect that would be worth looking at more closely.

The crux that emerged from the data collection relating to the wilderness were around the idea that wilderness works (e.g. “Mountains Speak”) and the counter or alternative view that there were other factors responsible such as facilitation of personal and social development training. Three themes in particular emerged to support the concept that the wilderness works:

Theme 1: Wilderness as “a different perspective”.

Theme 2: Wilderness as “involving real choices and consequences”.

Theme 3: Wilderness as “a catalyst” or “a stressor”.

These were each viewed then through the lenses of the main research questions:

1. Does the wilderness “work”?

2. Does the wilderness “work” as part of an alternative intervention strategy with young offenders?

3. How important or integral is the wilderness as viewed by staff and organisations that use it as a programme setting?

4. To what extent is the use of the wilderness seen as an important factor by referrers, funders and other key stakeholders involved in such programmes?
These research questions were dealt with in the order outlined above so as to offer first the views of referrers and those with a distance from the course, and then the perspectives of other staff before my putting forward my own:

The first part of the analysis was to consider the perspectives of key funders and referrers to see what they understood to be the purpose of using wilderness as a basis for courses for young people (i.e. Research Questions 2 & 4).

Then I reviewed the interviews with management and staff at the Venture Trust to better understand their rational for setting their courses in a wilderness setting and their perspectives on wilderness (i.e. Research Question 3).

Finally, I analysed the narrative vignettes drawn from my own field diary observations. This approach had allowed me firstly to gain a distance from my own observations in the wilderness during a course. The writing up of the narrative vignettes allowed for an element of critical reflection. The coding of the data into themes placed another level of distance. Then finally in the analysis stage I selected only narrative vignette data that correlated with the main themes that emerge from the other sources of data (the interviews) and considered whether any of this could support or refute my primary question of whether the wilderness could be shown to have “worked” (i.e. Research Question 1).
Data Analysis:

Research Question 2: Does the wilderness “work” as part of an alternative intervention strategy with young offenders?

Research Question 4: To what extent is the use of the wilderness seen as an important factor by referrers, funders and other key stakeholders involved in such programmes?

The Scottish government have been the major funder (about fifty percent) of the Venture Trust courses over the last ten years and in 2009 became the sole funder for the Living Wild course. I felt it was important to get an insight into their understanding of why wilderness might have been used as the basis for such courses. Through my work at Venture Trust, I was able to gain an interview with Mr Kenny MacAskill, First Minister for Justice and a member of the Scottish Government.

Q1 The Scottish Government has been supportive of innovative, forward thinking alternative intervention strategies in dealing with young people’s personal and social development. Why is this?

A: It’s an attempt to break the cycle of drugs, drink and deprivation...and generations of worklessness. We offer them chances and a different world beyond that of the local bus-stop.

In this opening question, it was interesting that a change of environment was seen as offering young people a chance or a positive step forwards. This is iterated in the response to the second question and an unprompted recognition of the importance of using wilderness:

Q2 Why do these kinds of programmes work? What do they offer that other interventions don’t?

A: They offer self-worth: I believe a glass is half full and not half empty. Fifty percent don’t succeed, well fifty percent do succeed. ...Climbing a mountain. That is a really good opportunity to see a different world-perspective. Escapism and exploration. The No 42 bus: Just coming into the city centre is an expedition for some of these guys... In Scotland we don’t use the great outdoors as much as we should, even though we are surrounded by it.
The interviewee identified the idea of increased “self worth”. It was suggested that a change in the environment or “climbing a mountain” (as he puts it metaphorically) offered a “different world-perspective”.

**Q3:** How would the Scottish Government define the term “works.” What kind of results do the Scottish Government expect from them?

**A:** Jobs or readiness for work - a routine... You would need to check with Donna (a civil servant in attendance) on delivery & targets...but how do you measure against self-despair etc its intangible. As long as the programme is delivering, I am happy.

What was interesting here was that the interviewee was not measuring a programme as having “worked” in terms of offending or reoffending statistics. Naturally with a government funded programme there will always be pressure to “deliver” on employment and recidivism, but in terms of the course been based in a wilderness setting that was not seen in any way as detrimental or distracting to whatever the intended outcomes were.

I also gained an interview with Sheriff David Mackie of Alloa, who had previously referred a considerable number of young offenders to Venture Trust programmes. He also became a Chairman of the Board of Directors of Venture Trust in 2001. One advantage of this was that he was able to give both a Criminal justice perspective as well as that of a board member who understood something of the nature of the courses and programmes and direction of the organisation.

**Q2** Why do these kinds of programmes work? What do they offer that other interventions don’t?

**A:** Its personal development over outdoor activities. Then the ten day course came with “The Big Lottery Fund” and it was seen as an outstanding success and results. Young persons are lifted out of their known environment into something that is foreign, not “handheld”-it's an important safe environment in which to drop defences or masks.

Sheriff Mackie began by crediting “personal development over outdoor activities”, but he also acknowledged the wilderness as offering a different perspective. Both interviewees recognised the importance or centrality of wilderness as promoting a change in both behaviour or perspective at least in the immediate term whilst on a course. He later discussed having witnessed changes in the presentation of course participants:
Q5? If so, Can you give some examples of how the course works?

A: I have attended the start and end of a course and witnessed the suspicious hoods up, heads down and then at the end ... seen changes.

Interviewer asks: what changes?

A: A change in demeanour. Effecting change can change thinking.

Q7? In your view could the same result have been achieved in a residential setting /or “back home” in an urban setting?

A: Yes ... but wilderness does offer something extra: it opens their eyes to their own country and a life totally different to that of courses offered by (others providers).

The interviewee pointed out that the course was part of a broader intervention programme but he suggested that the courses brought something unique or “totally different” to other courses. Neither of the interviewees was able to define the precise nature of what “something extra” was. The nearest interpretation might be that they both seem to attribute change of environment as central to bringing about the impetus for change.

Q8? How would you or the courts measure the course’s effectiveness?

A: It is part of probation order...it is not done on statistical analysis but rather on a case by case basis: There are two levels: One is a completer without breach of probation an two is keeping out of trouble for a good while.

Whilst referrers were concerned with increased “self-worth” of a participant and the resultant reduced offending and increased motivation towards education or employment, my primary focus here was not to define what that the result of a change might be, but rather to point out data that suggested or at least acknowledged that there was a process or phenomenon occurring even if it were difficult to quantify.
Research Question 3: How important or integral is the wilderness as viewed by staff and organisations that use it as a programme setting?

Interviews were begun with field staff that had direct contact with the wilderness setting through their work with young people. Some interviews with this group showed an emphasis placed on personal development work as being important to bringing about change rather than the wilderness itself:

Q3: What is your role within Venture Trust?
A: Development work on the ground; working with individuals.

Q4: How does the living wild course work?
A: It is fundamentally about safe boundaries or a safe space, both in the outdoors and in their own heads. Getting them to talk...Where we do it or which activities is not important.
(Interviewee HC)

This would suggest that environment is relegated to a stage or a merely a setting for the personal development work to take place. On prompting with a question about the wilderness the response was:

Q9? How important is the “wilderness” for Living Wild/Venture Trust courses?
A: (pause) It’s what we know as practitioners. Take them away from home...beyond realms of what they know...it’s different learning...but linked back to home...It’s an alien environment. It provides a simple, uncomplicated routine... It needs reflection.

Q10? In your view could the same result have been achieved in a residential setting or back home in an urban setting?
Yes, you could use art or drama or sport but...wilderness offers the opportunity to be away for a short space of time; with a lack of distractions. It condenses the learning with intensity (e.g. consistent boundaries/safe space)
Positive experience but learning is more effective over longer period.
As a short course it is limited... and must not be seen in isolation...
(Interviewee HC)

Another member of staff described a similar perspective of the wilderness as not been central to the course, but despite this both seemed to agree that the wilderness environment at the very least offered a “lack of distractions” and a “difference to their homelife”. But
interestingly both saw wilderness as more than that too: their words they chose to describe the wilderness experience as “intensity” and a “catalyst”:

*Q9? How important is the “wilderness” for living wild/Venture Trust courses?*

*A: I don’t know if the wilderness is that important...its different to home life...its accessible...it’s a catalyst...they needing people...when camping they are out of their comfort level... they don’t have to do that in the centre or in an urban environment.*

*(Interviewee CH)*

One interviewee turned this around claiming that wilderness actually offered a “safe” environment where the “consequences aren’t as severe in wilderness” (Interviewee AB) and the learning can then be later transferred to the “real” environment of society. This offers an alternative view but the emphasis on a different perspective is still present.

When I interviewed members of the management who had responsibility for the organisation’s direction and programme development, it was interesting to note that there was a subtle, but markedly different emphasis on the importance of wilderness in the courses. Whilst some field staff saw the wilderness as “just a backdrop” or a “stage”, one member of the management gave it greater importance, suggesting it was the framework for everything else:

“*The wilderness sets the journey context...the wilderness is the framework for experiential learning, choice theory, reality therapy and pro-social modelling.”* …It is a catalytic event, which is important in itself. The challenges created by the environment are real, not contrived. In addition they are shared experiences with staff. The wilderness environment is important in itself ...we share the experience with them collaboratively.”

*(Interviewee AA)*
Another manager offered this:

\[Q8b? \text{How important is the “wilderness” for Venture Trust programme?}\]

\[A: \text{The wilderness is critical... crucial if we don’t use it we have lost what it is, that is Venture Trust. Yes there are other “stressors”, but that’s not what we do. The course only accounts for about twenty percent of the overall programme ... but it is critical beyond those figurative numbers. ...the outdoors is the main stressor...but there is more to it than that...the outdoors doesn’t care... wilderness is impersonal: you can’t blame the staff. Human beings complain about reason, fairness, order and logic but the wilderness offers weather, rain, midges etc. It doesn’t matter how you feel, it’s what you do about it. That is real life as well. ...they don’t want to change for changes sake-they want to feel better-to do that you have to make changes or do something differently. Wilderness is the stage or catalyst for these changes.}\]

(Interviewee GG)

Finally the CEO, iterated the wilderness as “critical, core, and summarised its centrality with this:

\[I \text{ believe the closer we are to nature, the closer we are to our real selves.}\]

(Interviewee GB)

It was interesting to discover a subtle difference in the emphasis that appeared between the staff in the field, who had direct contact with the participants in the wilderness environment, and the management that were not in direct contact (although all had had significant previous experience in the field). There were various possible interpretations of this: Firstly, it was perhaps natural that those responsible for delivering a course with a personal development focus would emphasise the role of facilitation. Alternatively, those so involved in the process, might themselves not have placed as much emphasis on the wilderness environment precisely because they were so immersed within it.

Another key point to emerge from the data here was the use of the word “stressor”. This seemed to be an idea that the wilderness itself was able to create a “stress”, resulting in choices and decisions and therefore had the potential for change. Indeed the underlying message could conceivably be interpreted that wilderness was not merely a stage but a phenomenon that could effect change. Initially, I regarded these comments as anomalies but later realised that the idea of “stressor” could have a close link with “catalyst.” Both of these key findings are discussed in more detail later in the discussion chapter.
Research Question 1: Does the wilderness “work”? 

The last stage in the analysis was to review my own observations and narrative vignettes. Naturally because of my full time position in the field, I had much more data on this level. I intentionally left this stage in the data analysis process until last in order to maintain a critical distance and to remain open to other perspectives. This had the effect of focussing on the crux of my research rational as I reviewed these narrative vignettes; i.e whether the wilderness did “work” or was it just a “setting” or “stage” for the facilitation of personal and social development work. If the wilderness was shown to have an effect, then for how long did it last? If wilderness did “work”, how important was it as part of the overall course and programme.

I was keen to remain as objective as possible so I did this by selecting the only main recurring themes from the interviews and compared them with the narrative vignette that had shown similar themes.

Theme 1: Wilderness as “a different perspective”.

**Diary Observation: SG0409:** CJ was seemingly uncomfortable with first night in residential centre but at the first one-to-one meeting the next morning on Day 2 before the expedition he seemed genuinely excited by the surroundings.

**Narrative vignette (NVCJ): Incident/Moment:**

... To my surprise, his attitude had changed from a sullen, imprisoned look to one of joy and happiness at the opportunity that was before his very eyes. CJ claimed he was excited at the “freedom and space” (his own words) in comparison to the close confines of his home life with a very large family and the fact that he had never left Peterhead in his life till that point.

What was interesting about the example above, and others that appeared in the data, was the transformative nature of being in the wilderness environment in contrast to been in a residential-setting. This was a “phenomenon” that was often noted by staff particularly with young men with learning difficulties or “behavioural issues.” Indeed this is a large factor in the rationale of Venture Trust developing their courses for young offenders from a residential base to a wilderness-based journey. Certainly in this case and one below (NVAM) both the young men responded well to being outdoors and became
actively engaged. Thereafter, they seemed to be more responsive to more intensive one-to-one support work and reflection. In its most simple form, the wilderness seemed to offer a “setting” for facilitation of personal development work.

**Narrative vignette (NVAM)**

...AM also seemed to be a different character in the outdoor environment: In the residential component of the course it seemed he liked to be centre of attention, but in the wilderness AM became much more relaxed and more willing to help others. Later in our one-to-one support session he was quite reflective and willing to engage.

Some might interpret this as merely a novel experience that young people will react to because they are initially physically engaged. That did not explain the apparent willingness of participants to engage in the process of reflection. Facilitation certainly helped, but the environment seemed to enhance this process.

**Theme 2: Wilderness as “involving real choices and consequences”**.

**Narrative vignette (NVCS): A crossroads in the wilderness:**

*On the sixth morning she again had reached an impasse and decided she wanted to go home. This time the real choices were explained to her. She was offered the opportunity to walk back with a staff member the way she had come from the west. (This was the shortest distance but in her mind the least desirable). She could also walk out to the north back to base-camp with a staff member that was returning to collect supplies. Alternatively she could take a route out to the south, longer but easier terrain. Or she could continue with the group on the planned route for the day to the east and either on to a train station or if she changed her mind she could reconsider and stay.*

*It was entirely her decision and it was explained that the staff would support whichever choice she made. In the end she decided to continue on the expedition. I believe she learnt a great deal about herself from that decision. Equally if she had chosen another path there would be learning in that choice also. The choices were real and uncontrived.*

One factor in moving to a wilderness based course was the idea that participants have to make decisions and these decisions have “real” consequences. One might ask what is “real”. It could well be argued that participants face real decisions every day in the urban environment, from taking drugs and alcohol, safe sex, to attending school, or turning up for college or work. But this simple example offered an insight into what was reality at that moment, for a participant in dealing with a situation that she could not just avoid by just
refusing to move as she had previously. Of course there have been other situations where there were higher risks, but it is rare that participants really get to choose and make a “real decision”. What made this situation so different from a residential setting was that a decision had to be made by her. There was no leaving it to others and no avoiding a decision as she could not sit out there for the night in winter. In the end she claimed that her decision to stay gave her a sense of personal control.

Another example from a narrative vignette illustrates this point:

**NVRB:** Background: RB “struggles with authority” according to his probation worker in the report the staff received before the course. Certainly RB pushed the boundaries from smoking in his room on the first night to constantly trying to test staff on any instructions and safety briefs. On a fishing trip a different tack was tried, allowing him to set his own boundaries:

*Fishing excursion:* That afternoon we went out along the coastline to try and catch some fish for dinner. With swell this was having limited success and RB wanted to find his own spot to fish from on the rocks. He asked if he could go to another spot. I asked how far he intended to go round the coast. He suggested that he would go within sight, (showing knowledge not only of what he thought I was looking for, but also an appreciation of the risk involved.) I also gave him information regarding the tide and checked that he understood the implications of this. The result was that he had understood and agreed his own parameters, he had made his own risk assessment and he showed his ability to stay within those parameters when he appeared later without any prompting.

**Theme 3: Wilderness as “a catalyst”**

In its simplest form the wilderness was seen as providing the stage, or setting for a course. But what I wanted to investigate from my own observations was try to find to see if there was more to it than that: could the wilderness create the environment or atmosphere for a moment to occur, “a catalyst” for change (i.e. a phenomenon)?

**Diary observation SG0109:** “Day 3: mountain peak –mountains speaking to BG?”

**Narrative vignette (NVBG):**

*Mountain summit on the Fannichs with a 360° vista.* The moment really spoke for itself in reaching the summit. Two options or choices had been offered: continue along down the glen from there to set up camp, or continue on to the a summit. At the summit of a mountain BG without prompting reflected and began recollecting his time in prison. He recalled his time in a cell looking outside and that he had hoped that one day he would get out and enjoy nature. It seemed that the wilderness had had a profound effect on this young man at that precise moment. After some time, just taking it all in, we discussed the scene and all responded deeply and positively. BG spoke of his own time in prison and that he had hoped he would one day get out and
enjoy nature. For him I believe that “the mountains were speaking for themselves.” (see field diary SG0109).

Looking back over the year of data collection, this was one of the most profound moments amongst many others that I could recall, but having been so immersed in the event, I wondered whether it might just be my own perspective. Some months later, I discussed the work that we did with a colleague and he also identified this particular event (unprompted by me) as a pivotal moment in his own memory of the “wilderness working.” This helped confirm my own reading/analysis of the data.

NVBG: Another pivotal moment came later in the expedition during an overnight solo when participants sleep in their own bivouac sites (a basic overnight shelter); BG revealed that the forthcoming night alone was causing him some apprehension. It appeared that he was afraid of being on his own with only his thoughts for company. I agreed to camp nearby. I left him by himself, but later in the evening he said he wanted to talk and then began discussing his criminal activity that had lead to his imprisonment. The solo experience in the wilderness seemed to have been a catalyst for him beginning to see that he had to make some changes in his future life.

It could be interpreted that it was the experience of imprisonment was that had brought about the change in thinking, but as this was over a year previously it seemed unlikely. BG’s hesitation to be alone in a solo situation suggests that he himself sensed the experience would bring about a change in thinking (similar to the quote by Sheriff Mackie above that “effecting change can change thinking”).

[Update: Since the course BG made some positive decisions and embarked on a new stage in his life, which took him to South America with Raleigh International and thereafter he has began work with young offenders in his own community.]

It would be simplistic to suggest that one precise moment brought about change, but in this case it was a cathartic experience that seemed to have had a strong influence on this man’s future thinking.
Summary

This analysis has looked at the main themes that emerged from the data collection and viewed them through the lenses of the main research questions. One of the main findings to arise out of the data analysis was the different emphasis placed upon the importance of wilderness between field staff and management. It seemed that those in the field regarded personal and social development work as core to change but those further removed seemed to believe that the wilderness provided the setting for this change to take place or in some cases a catalyst for change.

Other findings were that the data on the whole supported the notion that wilderness offered a “different perspective” and therefore had the potential to “change thinking”. However there was less consensus on the idea that wilderness involved “real choices and consequences”. Whilst the data demonstrated a wide use of the word “catalyst” there was less explanation of what this might be and how this process might “work”.

Finally, although key referrers acknowledge the place of wilderness in programmes such as those offered by Venture Trust to young offenders, other variables such as the facilitation of personal and social development have to be acknowledged as been an important part of both the course and the broader overall intervention programme.

The next chapter will discuss the main findings described above in an attempt to answer the main purpose of my research inquiry as to whether or not the wilderness has an effect through the primary research question: Does the wilderness “work”? 
DISCUSSION

The main themes that emerged out of the data analysis to support the notion that wilderness “works” were of the wilderness as “a different perspective”, “involving real decisions and consequences” and finally as “a catalyst” or “a stressor”.

In this chapter these main findings were considered through my key research question: “Does the wilderness work?” It was my intention to compare what interviewees had interpreted as “working” with my own interpretation of wilderness as having “worked”. Any parallels that existed in the literature were also reviewed in relation findings from the data analysis.

Theme 1: Wilderness as “a different perspective”.

Of the three main findings, there was a consensus amongst almost all the interviewees that wilderness offered a “different perspective” and that this was generally seen as a positive opportunity. Indeed nowhere in any of the data did any of the interviewee’s ever suggest that the wilderness was a detrimental experience for any participants. The only difference was a subtle one of emphasis between those that saw the wilderness as a mere stage or “setting” and others who saw wilderness as more central to the process.

This was also the case regardless of whichever stance one took in the “mountains” or “facilitation” debate (see literature review). The idea of using the wilderness environment to bring out a different perspective and thinking was also been supported in much of the literature by Kaplan and Kaplan (1989), and proponents of the “Wilderness Therapy” milieu, such as Russell (2006), Berman-Davis and Berman (2009) as well as in Turner’s (1969) “Rites of Passage” model which emphasised the need for “separation from one’s original social pattern” (Bell, Carson & Beames, 2010., p.35).
However, one criticism has been levelled at the generally accepted idea of taking young people into the wilderness to offer “a different perspective”. This was noted by Barrett & Greenaway (1995, p.73) and by McCormack (2003):

The major criticism of the use of outdoor pursuits is that they fail to address the social setting, and therefore the most persistent and influential factor in the development of delinquent behaviour.

(p.165)

One counter-argument to this would be that the data from referrers, and funders as well as staff who work with young people believed that it was the “different perspective” offered by the wilderness that was beneficial in changing young people’s thinking. The implication seemed to be that the changed thinking could have benefit on return to their normal social environment. What is more, it would be unrealistic to suggest any style of intervention (wilderness-based or any other) can single-handedly “address the social setting”; that is up to society and that issue is beyond the scope of this research.

Theme 2: Wilderness “involving real decisions and real consequences”.

Another common theme that was found was the idea that wilderness requires participants to make “real decisions”. Outdoor education has often talked of risk-taking and “perceived risk” versus “real risk”. This is not untypical of outdoor education and programme literature (see Mortlock, 1984; Priest & Gass, 1997). Themes such as “consequential thinking” and “problem solving” also seem to be becoming an increasingly topical theme in current practice amongst social services and the probation service and with organisations such as the Venture Trust.

One might question how “real” a decision is? One possibility is that it would depend upon how much control in the participant was given to make that decision. In practice, under the inevitable constraints of “duty of care,” a wilderness-based course provided for young people, has to manage the risk and therefore a large element of the decisions. The wilderness is an environment with real risks, but that risk is to a great extent managed or controlled by the requirement to have suitably
trained and qualified outdoor professionals. What wilderness based programmes, (particularly those offered by the Venture Trust to young people), can offer, is a significant element of choice and sharing of some of the decision-making with the participants, to enable them to practice the process of been involved in making decisions. In the words of one manager from The Venture Trust:

*The wilderness sets the journey context...the wilderness is the framework for experiential learning, choice theory, reality therapy and pro-social modelling.” …It is a catalytic event, which is important in itself. The challenges created by the environment are real, not contrived. In addition they are shared experiences with staff. The wilderness environment is important in itself ...we share the experience with them collaboratively.*

(Interview WWAA)

Loynes (1998) supported the idea of shared experiences, describing development training (the predominant facilitation method used by the Venture Trust) as “a socio-centric view placing the group and its processes at the centre of the experience which is also seen as a basis for learning” (p.53). This is perhaps why wilderness journeys are seen as offering something “real” rather than something contrived.

The wilderness then, can offer both real and “perceived” risks, but then so too, can the urban environment. Barrett & Greenaway (1995) point out that for some young offenders, such as those involved in car theft and joy riding, “outdoor adventure experiences may be over-regulated and tame” (p.66). This is possible, after all, when using the wilderness as a setting, risks and decisions have to be managed and balanced with the legal requirement of “duty of care”. But the wilderness can offer a setting or “framework” for personal and social development work to take place within, to deal with issues such as “consequential thinking”. One interviewee turned this around, claiming that it actually offered a “safe” environment where the “consequences aren’t as severe in the wilderness” (Interview AB) that that can then be later transferred to the “real” environment of society.

In relation to the central research question of “does the wilderness work”, any findings were less than conclusive. It would depend upon your perspective of what is “real”: the natural environment or the urban environment. Ultimately it does not matter which side you take: both environments (wilderness and urban) can teach us
about human behaviour and ourselves. But wilderness does seem to offer a different perspective, and to present situations in which decisions can be made and space in which to consider those decisions.

**Theme 3: Wilderness as “a catalyst” or “a stressor”**

Interview data revealed the use of the word “catalyst” on numerous occasions by staff across the organisation to describe the effect of the wilderness. The other word that stood out from the data was the use of the word “stressor”. Both words had some of their origins in scientific terminology and whilst this was perhaps not the way they were intended to be used, their use implied meaning. In an attempt to try to interpret this meaning it was useful to look at some definitions:

- **catalyst** *n* 1. A substance that increases the rate of a chemical reaction without itself suffering any permanent chemical change…2. A person or thing that causes a change.*

- **stressor** *n* an event, experience, etc that causes stress.* *(source: Collins English Dictionary. 2000)*

I did not wish to get caught up in semantics, but the use of words in the data was enlightening for the central line of inquiry and my main research question (i.e *Does the wilderness “work”?*). The use of both words (“catalyst” and “stressor”) in this context seemed to attribute a change brought about or caused by the wilderness or at the very least being in the wilderness environment (it was not always possible to differentiate the two in the data).

**“catalyst”**

The concept of “rites of passage” model as discussed in the literature review earlier also suggested a specific phenomenon or moment that is referred to as “liminality” or state of transition in the overall process. Whilst I was not suggesting that the courses in this case study were designed as “rites of passage” (although for some participants they may have been), the model closely resembled and could be
related to the theme of a “catalyst”. In particular Bell, Carson & Beames (2010) identified the opportunity for solitary reflection as being “a common feature of the liminal stage” (p.36). Given time to adapt to the wilderness environment, participants on the whole, did seem to respond to time alone in it. I have seen this many times in my own professional experience and noted it in my diary observations. This was shown in the narrative vignette (NVBG) as outlined in the data analysis chapter previously. Participants often came through such an experience with much clearer plans for the future when they return home. In a case of theory influencing practice, the Venture Trust have recognised this and sequenced an opportunity for solitary time in the final stages of the Living Wild course.

“stressor”

Stress often has negative connotations, but it can also be seen as a positive effect causing change. Comments from two interviewees relating to “stressors” appeared to be a little out of the ordinary at first reading. In the data that stood out from interviewee GG it was the wilderness as the “stressor” that is credited as bringing about the change. Initially, I classified these comments as “anomalies” but later realised that the idea of “stressor” had a close link with “catalyst.”

The idea of “stressors” also seemed to correlate with some outdoor education literature dealing with comfort zones (Mortlock, 1984) and disequilibrium (Priest & Gass, 1997). Both concepts suggest that learning can take place when there is an uncertainty or challenge. These stresses are powerful forces for change and perhaps even personal growth.

Both perspectives in the data presented the wilderness as being “impersonal”. The suggestion was that wilderness offered a setting that laid bare the human tendency to blame someone or something: “You can blame the staff for many things, but you can’t blame them for the weather or particularly in Scotland the ‘midge’” (Interview WWAB). Although the literature does not use the word “stressor” it does discuss “natural conflicts” and “catalyst”: 
One theoretical rationale suggests that committing wilderness settings can engender many natural conflicts to occur; between a participant and environment, participant and participant, and participant and themselves. Where interpersonal conflicts may be counter-productive, these natural conflicts can provide a catalyst for “cognitive dissonance”, that is "an inconsistency between present perceptions and reality that results in a change of perception to reduce the frustration or disequilibrium existing with present reality."


The wilderness therapy literature also describes a similar perspective:

…the wilderness provides all participants with egalitarian consequences for behaviours. It results in natural consequences, consequences that do not involve other people. Personal experiences provide insight about how to cope with life. Youth participants receive feedback from the environment itself when they are not making informed and appropriate choices. Nagging, yelling, and punishing are avoided as the environment dictates the natural consequences in an un-biased and consistent way. The impact of wilderness therapy is bolstered by the power of the environment itself.

Hill (2007, p. 343)

Others have tried to define the process of change in various ways. Russell and Farnum (2006) described one part of the process thus:

Attention is captured by an interesting and aesthetically pleasing environment that does not necessitate a high degree of cognitive processing. Thus soft fascination allows for the release from stressors that cause mental fatigue, easing away from cognitive strain.

(p.42)

This also had similarities with the description of the experience BG on the mountain summit in the narrative vignette NVBG. This seemed to reflect Russell & Farnum’s example that it seemed to be the release from “stressors”, that was seen as the catalyst for change.
This third theme that emerged from the data was the hardest to isolate and quantify. However, this was the most pertinent and central to my rationale for researching the idea that the wilderness itself could have an influence on participants. The difference was a very subtle one of emphasis between some who saw the wilderness as only the “setting” and others who saw wilderness as more central to the process, perhaps even a “catalyst” for change.

Towards a conclusion:

Wilderness was recognised by almost all the people interviewed as offering “a different perspective” (theme 1). Much of the outdoor education literature naturally supported this idea also. Most of the data and interviewees seemed to suggest that the wilderness offered “a different perspective”.

There was less consensus on the wilderness as the environment for involving “real decisions” (theme 2). Ultimately to what extent “real decisions” young people are enabled to make on outdoor education courses and wilderness journeys will to a large extent depend on how much we enable them to share in that decision making process.

The third theme and perhaps the real crux of my research has been about the level of value that we place on the wilderness. Some see it in its simplest form as a “stage” or “setting”, others as in an abstract form as “a catalyst” or “stressor” that has the potential to effect change itself. This is a dualism that has the potential to create a polarisation of viewpoints. But like James’ balanced approach to the mountains and facilitation debate (1980), there is of course a middle-ground that accepts that the wilderness can provide one environment which in some cases can have a transformative effect which leads to change. The wilderness can be the “catalyst” for which facilitation such as personal and social development work can “work” as part of a broader intervention process with young people.
CONCLUSION

Through my full time employment with The Venture Trust, I was able to observe participants in the wilderness environment for the full duration of three weeks at a time. A year’s observations were written up in ten narrative vignettes. In conjunction with ten interviews undertaken across the organisation and with key funders and referrers, these formed the main basis of the primary data. Various perspectives and interpretations were considered on the use of the wilderness. Out of this data emergent themes were looked at through the research questions.

This research set out to answer the main research question: *Does the wilderness “work”*? The second question that to be considered was: *Does the wilderness “work” as part of an alternative intervention strategy with young offenders?* Furthermore, how important or integral was the wilderness to staff and organisations that had used it as a programme setting? Finally to what extent was the use of the wilderness seen as an important factor by referrers, funders and other key stakeholders involved in such programmes?

The research had three principal findings that emerged to support the idea of using wilderness were of wilderness as offering *a different perspective, real decision making* and wilderness as a *catalyst*.

The first general conclusion was that, at the very least, the wilderness doesn’t not work! Awkward though that double negative is, it does, I feel offer an understanding of the complexity of my basic research question and helps perhaps answer in part my initial personal rationale in the looking at phenomenon of wilderness and why I choose to use it in my work. All the interviewees seemed to accept that the wilderness did offer a “different perspective” and it most would agree that participants were rarely worse off for the experience. In this sense the data addressed common element amongst the research questions of “does it work”.

What was less conclusive was “how important” the wilderness was seen by staff within the organisation and referrers. Some that saw it only as the setting and others as “a catalyst” for change. This third and final theme of wilderness as “a catalyst” that emerged
from the data was the most subtle and hardest to quantify and yet it was the most pertinent and central in my rationale for the research: that is the idea that the wilderness itself could have an effect on participants.

Throughout the course of this study my appreciation of the complexity of this area has increased and this has had significant implications for my professional practice and in particular my most recent work with young offenders. “The mountains can still speak for themselves” James (1980)… but they are not always heard by all. Some need to be supported to be receptive to change. Ultimately a person can only change from within, each person is an individual and their circumstances and needs are individual and perhaps unique. In the final analysis other factors have to be acknowledged as been part of the overall course, and ultimately the course is part of a broader intervention programme. This was reflected in data from across the organisation and also in the literature of which perhaps the most comprehensive assessment of young people in trouble and “at risk” was by Barrett and Greenaway (1995) when they concluded that: “outdoor adventure is often only one component of prevention schemes, and its effects may be difficult to isolate from those caused by other activities and influences” (p.49).

A further study might consider a longitudinal survey to hear the perspective of participants themselves both prior to, during and following an intervention programme such as those offered by Venture Trust that use wilderness as a part of their intervention strategy. This could be undertaken at key stages such as pre-course, mid-course, and then on completion of course and thereafter at one month, six month, one year and possibly even five years later.
Endnote

Whether wilderness “works” and in itself can influence change in a person will depend on your viewpoint and this will depend upon your epistemological perspective whether that be “anthropocentric” (human focussed) or “ecocentric” (nature focussed).

The earth has music for those who listen.

Shakespeare

This writer believes that the wilderness is more than this: we are part of nature, ultimately it is where we came from and it is to where we will return. As the planet is now critically overpopulated we are in danger of ignoring it’s lessons. Overpopulation is now accepted as being at a critical stage. But the good news is that any person who is receptive to change can learn from nature whether that is in a wilderness environment or in their backgarden or local park.


Appendix: Access & Ethics:

Greg Barton CEO of the Venture Trust approved my request to undertake research study within the organisation. Furthermore he appointed George Graham (Manager of Culture) who is on the Venture Trust Management, as my internal mentor and first point of contact. George approved my request to collect participant data.

Whilst I was not intending to case study individual participants but rather use diary observations, and thereafter create vignettes that showed examples of participant interaction within the wilderness. I safeguarded anonymity and confidentiality as is the nature of the work that Venture Trust does.

An ethical declaration has been signed and submitted to the University of Edinburgh.