Outdoor Education for Sustainability: Making Connections

By Peter Higgins

Abstract

This paper seeks to provide some practical ideas for exploring the concepts of connection and consequence in ‘education for sustainability’ in the outdoors. An ‘elemental’ approach is taken to illustrate particular themes.

Introduction

‘If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.’ (Thoreau, 1854).

In a previous article (Higgins, 1996) I argued the case for devising outdoor education programmes which are orientated towards developing an understanding of the consequences of individual actions on the environment. This is an attempt to put some foundations under these ‘castles in the air’.

Whilst an academic appreciation of environmental issues is now a common facet of school and college life for many young people, there appears to be little attempt to provide students with the opportunity to develop their experience first hand. This is primarily the result of tight curricular and financial demands rather than an intentional omission.

In two recent articles, Cooper (1991, 1994) has also argued that we have a role to play in education ‘for’ the environment as well as ‘in’ the environment (outdoor pursuits) and ‘about’ the environment (field studies). He has suggested (Cooper, 1991) that we do not, at present, make use of the substantial opportunities to do this that present themselves in the outdoors.

The powerful impact and holistic nature of such opportunities is described in an anecdotal, but nonetheless substantial fashion in articles by Cooper (1994) and myself (Higgins, 1994). Cooper reminds us that despite the fact that these experiences are difficult to measure this does not make them any the less real.

A number of programmes have been devised to increase awareness of Earth and life processes by, amongst others, Cornell (1989) and van Matre (1972, 1995). These have, in the main, concentrated on biological processes, energy flow and nutrient cycles. Their use as integrated programmes and in some cases as ‘pick and mix’ exercises is now well established, with both authors enjoying a worldwide following.

In Scandinavia the use of the outdoors is inextricably connected with an appreciation of the natural world. The importance of ‘outdoor nature life’ (Fritluftsliv*) in Norway is well reported by Tellnes (1992, 1993). He summarises a way of living as ‘a rich life by simple means, and on nature’s own terms’... ‘we do not want our rich outdoor life to reduce the quality of nature’ (Tellnes, 1993). Sadly (at least it is to me) this approach is not common.

The term ‘sustainability’ use nowada... exploitation however the... lifestyle and... Definitions proliferate, and the... ‘sustainable’ and... ‘development’ are... indiscriminately... interchangeably. The United Nations’ definition as development which ‘meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (Brundtland Report, 1987), seems to offer both balance and workability.

However, I find the linkage of ‘sustainable’ and ‘development’ in common usage to be at best disconcerting and at worst misleading and cynical. Even the use of the term ‘sustainable’ should be approached with caution. It does imply the ‘use of a resource’ and the maintenance of this use. Implicit is that this is what the resource is for and it therefore becomes valued in this way rather than having an inherent value itself.

It therefore seems important to place value on (and as ‘teachers’ to encourage this in others) diversity in general and biodiversity in particular. Much effort is being invested in educating to value all forms of life and the ecosystems these form part of (eg Cornell, 1989 and Van Matre, 1972, 1995). Less effort is applied on behalf of physical landforms, biogeographic zones, climatic variability etc. All of these are forms of diversity which we might reflect upon and value.

may be making the case to move from... sustainability through diversity... diversity to an aesthetic and spiritual appreciation and love of environment. Perhaps it goes the other way, but we still have work to do.

Briefly summarised I believe Tellnes (1993) is arguing for love and respect of the environment. These are of course two of the three themes (love of self, others and environment) Mortlock (1984) develops in “The Adventure Alternative”. I would agree wholeheartedly and in this article I seek to extend this approach by putting forward a selection of thoughts on practical ways of approaching what appears to Cooper (1994) and myself (Higgins, 1996) to be a vital issue.

* The concept of Fritluftsliv is essentially Norwegian. The term implies ‘feeling at home in nature’ (Repp 1996) and is very familiar to most people in Scandinavia. The majority of whom also take part in some form of activity such as skiing or orienteering. For further elaboration of the concept and what it can offer Outdoor Education see Repp 1996 and Tellnes 1992. REPP, G. (1996) Outdoor Adventure Education and Fritluftsliv seen from a Sociology of Knowledge Perspective. JAEOL 13:2. p 63-66. TELLINES, A. (1992) Fritluftsliv - Traditional Norwegian Outdoor life. JAEOL 9:2. 16-18.
An 'Elemental' Outdoor Education Experience?

'Students should not play life or study it meekly, while the community supports them, but earnestly live it from beginning to end. Which would have advanced most at the end of the month - the boy who has made his own jackknife from the ore he has dug or smelled, reading as much as would be necessary for this - or the boy who had attended the lectures on metallurgy at the institute and in the meanwhile, had received a Rodgers penknife from his father? ' – Thoreau, 1854.

Central to the theme I wish to explore here is the notion that there should be decisions to be made and there should be consequences arising from these decisions and the subsequent actions taken. Through this process we are striving for emotional learning and the development of maturity to relate the experiences to life in modern society. Connections between the outdoor education experience and the home, school, and society in general are essential if we hope for an enhanced global awareness.

Life for any animal is all about survival and reproduction. It is, on the whole, a struggle, as it was for our forebears and still is for many native peoples and those in the South and Third World. I am not suggesting that we devote too much of our outdoor education programme to the issue of reproduction although there is in my view a strong case for making it a focal point of the school curriculum. I am not arguing for 'survival exercises' but I believe that besides the fun element so central to good education there must be aspects of the programme which involve effort.

One of my reasons for adopting an 'elemental' theme is that I believe that for many young people the outdoor education experience can satisfy a need for a form of 'rite of passage'. There is little opportunity for the transition from childhood to adulthood to be acknowledged and valued in our society. There is little scope for the expansion of this theme in this article, however it is worth noting that in traditional/tribal societies adolescence rites were often 'elemental' in form. The value of approaching the outdoor experience in this way is emphasised by Maddern (1990, 1991) and Hodgkin (1981).

There is strong evidence to suggest that affective education is a powerful motivational force in the development of environmental awareness and willingness to act for the environment (Shellcross, in press). There is great scope for the enhancement of such experiences in the outdoors and I would argue that this should be both implicit and explicit in our courses. On the whole, outdoor educational experiences tend to have a practical dimension, and I regard this as a strength. The practical, emotional, spiritual and theoretical are not mutually exclusive. Outdoor educators often feel most comfortable when they are involved in something practical, and I believe this is a sensible place to start.

The time scale is an important issue too. Not everything done should be for short term benefit nor even of benefit to the students themselves.

So we are looking for practical aspects to outdoor education experiences which have short and long term consequences and benefits, and which have an environmental dimension. If the course is a short one, decisions about exactly what to undertake may be initially beyond the scope of the group, but there should be an element of decision making which is perhaps best applied to how this is done. These decisions should matter for the individual, the group and for unknown people in the future.

However we go about this we must clearly be cautious to avoid physical or emotional harm to those in our care. Nonetheless, the learner must be involved and there must be something at stake. Fear and risk are real parts of life and to devise a programme which avoids them completely is simply compounding the feeling of disconnection.

To give some basis to the theoretical arguments presented earlier (Higgins, 1996) I have chosen some of the 'elements' as themes. I have taken a personal and fairly broad view of what constitutes an 'element' and added in a few other themes for good measure. I am sure someone somewhere will have already developed programmes to embrace some or all of these.

Earth: One obvious example is tree planting. There is great interest in schools in the UK concerning destruction of tropical rainforests, and yet few young people are aware that in Britain we have less than 6% of our native post-glacial forests remaining (Ratcliffe, 1984). This supports the commonly held notion that environmental problems exist 'somewhere else'. This is far from the truth as the environmental consequences of rainforest destruction are exacerbated by the fact that most of our forests are already gone. Those that remain in the boreal regions of the northern hemisphere are being cut down at a rate faster than that of the tropical rainforests and yet few are aware of this (Suzuki, 1994).

Projects can be undertaken at a local, community or national level. Examples of locations range from school grounds projects to the proposed Millennium Forest for Scotland.

There are a wide range of jobs to be done in any tree planting project and many lessons to be learnt in doing them. Almost all aspects of the process offer lessons on my stated theme. Tree planting itself is seasonal, species and site dependent (why is this?), seed collection and germination is likewise (why is this?), the leaves of some species are better for the soil (why is this?), young trees must be protected from browsing animals (why and how?), plant and animal communities change as the trees grow (why is this?). There are endless learning aspects to the contributions trees make to the environment.

To a large extent I have concentrated on the academic aspects of the learning outcomes of such a programme, however, the process of digging a hole to plant a living thing in will be new to most, and this experience is not to be underestimated. Tools have to be used and physical work has to be done. The seedling is vulnerable and will need protection from browsing animals such as rabbits, sheep and deer. The work of previous students will be evident and will be vital for the project’s success. The benefits to the community are primarily long term and the students may well not see the full fruits of their labours.

This is not supposed to be an exhaustive argument, but programmes of this type are well tested and I do like the idea that planting trees is one positive environmental activity we can undertake whereas we can never put back the coal and oil we have taken from the Earth.
Fire: In one form or another we need ‘fire’ for warmth and cooking and outdoor education can provide people with an opportunity to have and learn from this experience. The power of a fire in social and spiritual context is self-evident. It’s value in gathering a group together, engendering a feeling of wellbeing and addressing Jung’s ‘collective unconscious’ (see Phipps, 1985 and Higgins, 1996) is of great value. Within the UK such a suggestion is likely to find less support than in many other countries where this is common practice. For many outdoor educators worldwide this has long been an essential part of the outdoor experience.

The connections between the two I suggest planting in the section above, and the dead wood used for a fire are obvious but rarely explored. I can think of few experiences more educative than aging a piece of wood and then comparing how long it takes to burn with how long it took to grow. Similar points can be made with regard to the fossil fuels used for camp stoves, especially if there is a peat bog nearby to further illustrate the point.

There are many restrictions on and concerns surrounding the making of fires in the countryside nowadays. Some of these concerns are for very valid reasons such as fire risk and environmental harm. Well and good, then in these cases there are positive outcomes to the debate about why it is not possible to make a fire. In some circumstances these are not major concerns, and I would suggest that we consider reviving this lost art. If this is done with due care, the materials are collected from a wide area, impact is minimised and the ecological importance of dead timber is made a point for debate, there is much to be said for a fire. The use of driftwood provides one resolution of the issue as it often has less biological significance than dead forest timber. Furthermore a fire below the high water mark causes less damage than one made in a vegetated area. Lest I should be accused of advocating environmental vandalism I would urge that practicalities and damage limitation strategies should be researched and implemented before this approach is adopted. Care of the environment must come first.

I have seen many examples in a number of countries where much harm has been done by those who do not know how to build a fire in a fashion which minimises the impact and repair the site afterwards. Through the process suggested above we have the opportunity to encourage what in many cases would be a decision not to build a fire, and only when appropriate to build one whilst taking a moderate and responsible approach.

Safety is voiced as a major reason for not making a fire and in some organisations it is against written policy. I am unaware of any injury resulting from building a fire on an outdoor education course and consequently feel that such policies should be reviewed in the light of the potential educational value.

Stoves are invariably used for cooking when students go on camps. In my view these are potentially far more hazardous to students than open fires, but we still seem quite content to use them. Although briefings tend to focus entirely on the safety aspects, important points about the fuel sources are there to be made.

Water: We take so much for granted when we turn on the tap! This only becomes apparent when there is a problem. Recently the UK has experienced several periods of unusual weather. It is arguable whether or not these are the result of man induced climatic change (one of the very issues I am hoping to explore through such programmes) or natural variation. However, these have resulted in water shortages due to drought, frost and then burst pipes. It is quite clear from the comments made by some private citizens and even politicians that it has escaped their notice that we need the rain to fall from the sky before we can drink it! Now how do we translate this into an experience for our students? We have an advantage in that most young people have never taken water out of a stream to drink it. There are clearly useful interpretive jobs to do in making these connections. If water has to be fetched, carried, purified or boiled then so much the better. The ideal situation for this is clearly a camp of some sort.

The issue of the disposal of human waste should not be avoided either. There are a number of practical hygiene and environmental concerns, especially on a camp, but the biological and ecological lessons are of perhaps greater importance. The link between sewage treatment and water supply for many cities cited on major rivers always makes for interesting conversation! Despite my background as a freshwater biologist I could not claim to know all the pros and cons of human waste disposal in the countryside and I cannot resist referring the reader to a book which gives as much detail as anyone could wish for (Meyer, 1994).

Air: The connections here are perhaps best if they are biological ones. The oxygen we require in the air we breathe is of course the result of plant activity. The same plant activity that produces the growth of the trees or the fossil fuels we use in our ‘fires’. Without oxygen in the air our fires and stoves won’t burn either. Where else are we likely to make these connections better than in the countryside?

Movements of air masses, driven by differential warming on a global level, which carry moisture from place to place are the cause of our weather. Mountains provide an ideal situation to view and experience the amplified effects of these air movements.

Weather: Without the connections between the air, land and water we would of course have no weather! The trees I suggested planting earlier also have their own involvement through dependency and influence. Without at least some direct experience of the moods of the weather, outdoor education ceases to be ‘outdoor’. In Britain we have ideal opportunities to experience the consequences of various wind directions and their brush with the sea and land. The subsequent effect on the landscape provides further scope for exploration.

However, this is not the whole story. I have little sympathy with the notion of ‘poor’ or ‘bad’ weather. It is more honest to contemplate our poor choice of clothing, activity or attitude. Severe weather, directly experienced can generate a true sense of awe and wonder. For many, sunshine and a warm breeze lift the spirit. So much depends on attitude and a positive approach to the weather opens the way to valuable aesthetic and spiritual experiences. (See also ‘Water’ above).

Shelter: This is a basic need for all mammals, and that is of course what we are. Not only is it instructive to have to take responsibility for one’s own shelter, it is for many young people a novel and exciting experience. A camp may range from the building of a shelter from locally available materials, to tents or even a bothy.
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Whilst it is possible in certain situations to use local materials without causing long term harm, this is often not the case. This can be turned to advantage in debates on why local materials cannot be used. The whole of this issue must clearly be dealt with in a sensitive fashion, but the benefits of taking such an approach may well be substantial.

The use of a tent or a tarpaulin to make a shelter to provide warmth and relative comfort is perhaps the closest experience most young people can expect. However, due to staffing implications this is becoming a rarity in many British outdoor education programmes now. This is in my view, a loss.

Food: Eating meat is environmentally expensive as it takes far more land to feed a carnivore than it does a vegetarian. This simple truth should be reflected in the diets offered to young people on residential experiences. By this I am not suggesting that the diet should be entirely vegetarian, but rather that there should be choices and the consequences of these choices should be apparent. For example, a menu could show the land use equivalent for different types of meal. So, the overall area of land required to make one meal might be noted as being ten times that of another on offer. The issue could be elaborated by mention of the origins of the foodstuffs and the distance travelled to get to the dinner plate. Yes, I would like to see the amount of meat we eat reduced but that is not for me to dictate. What I feel is appropriate is to help inform they choices we and our students make. A change in attitude might be signalled by referring to menu choices as ‘vegetarian’ and ‘carnivore’ rather than the current practice which suggests that we have normal meals (or people) and vegetarians!

The current trend is away from school and centre kitchens preparing food from fresh produce and towards pre-cooked and frozen meals. With the passing of this I believe we are losing a most valuable aspect of education. One more link with reality is severed. Ideally, young people should have the chance to take part in the preparation of at least part of their own food and preferably that of others. An outdoor experience where this is still an aspect is to me providing an important connection to the land. There seems value in making visits to farms for example, to help reinforce the idea that a burger starts its life as part of a cow.

I like the idea of students finding at least something to add to a camp meal which has come directly from the land. This could range from perhaps some wild mushrooms or herbs to making a financial agreement with a local farmer to pull enough carrots to add to the meal.

I have said nothing of the issue of healthy eating, however when opportunities arise connections might be made. An environmental dimension may well be applied to this too in comparing the diets of humans and other mammals.

Darkness: More and more people now live in cities and as a consequence fewer people ever experience darkness out of doors. The lights in empty car parks outside supermarkets burn brightly all night long, well after all the cars and their drivers have headed home. Whenever possible students should have a night time outdoor experience and the opportunity to set it into context regarding the supply of electricity which provides city light and which we so take for granted.

The night sky has been the source of wonder and inspiration since man evolved a questioning consciousness. Many young people question their place in the universe when exposed to such stimuli. One of my most memorable outdoor education experiences is that of lying on my back in an open canoe on a Scottish loch, staring up at black moonless, starlit night sky. The students I was with, all instinctively adopted the same position. There was no breeze and so the canoes stayed just where they were put. The silence was pensive and respectful and only punctuated by whispered questions, the like of which a classroom teacher rarely hears.

Silence/ Solo: Noise of all sorts is a function of modern life. Many people now live in households where the television is only switched off when the last person goes to bed. To be truly silent, even for just a few minutes would be a completely new experience for most young people. The idea of using a solo experience to increase awareness of self and the environment, and to stimulate creativity is not new. The Outward Bound ‘solo’ is traditionally a substantial experience which is almost a survival exercise for which shelters may or may not be provided. The preference of ‘Earth educators’ is to make this a short and focussed period with tasks such as making a ‘sound map’ or a poem describing feelings. (See Cornell (1987) and Van Matre (1972) for some descriptions of suitable exercises).

Environment / Nature: An exploration of some aspect of the local environment and the organisms which inhabit the area is one of the most powerful and stimulating experiences a young person can have in the outdoors. We are simply one of the organisms which inhabit the Earth. Although we are the one with the well developed sense of the aesthetic and the spiritual I referred to earlier (Higgins, 1996); we are also the one which has the greatest impact. A sense of our place amongst all the other organisms is a vital aspect of education and we are well placed to contribute to this process.

I would argue for some focus on the themes of ‘the diversity of life’; photosynthesis; and the cycling of nutrients. For example, consideration of the carbon cycle would involve the air we breathe, the trees we planted on the land, the fire we burnt (or fuel we used), the food we ate and our human waste. The link with fossil fuels and transport is one obvious extension. (A most eloquent, readable and beautiful description of the carbon cycle is to be found in The Periodic Table by Primo Levi, 1989).

Some form of biological study, well directed, can offer new insights to the diversity of life. Sampling of aquatic habitats with pond nets (and returning all organisms) is a favoured approach as this can allow students a glimpse into a completely new world. This is a theme which can and should be developed with regard to drinking water and waste disposal. I would however caution against the damage which can result as a consequence of repeated sampling at the same site.

I do not intend to give further examples here but rather to refer the reader to the work of Van Matre, (1972, 1995) and Cornell, (1989). There are a number of other texts which may be appropriate to certain circumstances. My main reason for raising the issue is to suggest that despite the fact that some would argue that all we need are a few barrels and planks, direct experience of the ‘natural world’ is part of our business.

Time: The ‘fourth dimension’ is perhaps best appreciated during those periods we spend alone. Moore (1987) writing on the importance of considering time as a vital in
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dimension to all planning for conservation explains the issue eloquently...when one sits in a field in the countryside one can observe plants and animals simply as individual objects, but when one relates them to time, a wonderful evolutionary journey is revealed. One cannot escape the conclusion that their futures matter.’ Some encouragement for young people to consider the world around them in this light during their ‘solos’ would surely reap benefits.

At various points in the text I give examples of the way in which a sense of time might be encouraged. The immensity of astronomical or geological time, the social and environmental history of the landscape all provide excellent storytelling material as well as insight into beautiful aspects of science and society.

I’ve touched on storytelling here, and there are often none better at this than those retired folk who have a story to tell of their life and the land. Whilst not all outdoor educators will have one to hand, I make the suggestion that some involvement in this way may offer some sense of time and be of benefit to all concerned.

Journey: An appropriate journey can incorporate a great many of the themes suggested here. One that involves at least part of the conceptualisation on the part of the students will be particularly valuable and the elements of planning, decision making, challenge and effort. The developmental case is well made by March and Wattchow (1991) and Hodgkin (1991) amongst others. To Drengson (1980) ‘wilderness travel can be seen as an art which unifies the many goals of outdoor education...and can teach us important lessons about daily life’. However, journeys can provide an environmental dimension too. Choice of forms of transport on the basis of environmental cost may be a good starting point. Questions such as ‘do we need a vehicle to drop us off or can we do without it?’; ‘are we likely to do long term damage by walking over this vegetation?’ may be addressed.

The examples given in this section are perhaps best seen in an essentially British context. Outdoor education in the UK has it’s basis in outdoor activities and this emphasis remains to this day. I see nothing wrong with this as one approach, though clearly I believe in and am arguing for other dimensions. I am aware that in other countries (particularly in Scandinavia) this broader approach is already taken and there is much to be gained from taking a look at the wider view.

A Practical Approach to Consequence?

Fundamental to the education process is that choices must be made. Furthermore, those who make the choices should see and preferably directly experience the consequences of their actions. They should also reflect on the choices made and have the opportunity to make different ones and see the outcomes. In most aspects of our lives there is virtually no form of environmental feedback. Terms used in product advertising such as ‘Green’, ‘Environment’, Dolphin or Ozone Friendly’ are at best ill informed and at worst cynical.

We need to find educational approaches which will model long term consequences and give feedback in the short term. A tall order. The model suggested in Figure 1 may be of use as a basis for devising appropriate activities.

If the student or group assess the outcomes of their actions as negative or damaging they should return to select another choice. When they meet with success there should be the option to move on to choices with increased levels of complexity and longer term consequences.

I am currently developing an approach which is based on the use of ‘carbon credits’ or ‘green credits’. In almost all the processes we depend on, carbon dioxide is produced. The most obvious of these is our respiration, which depends for it’s fuel source on plants (net users of carbon dioxide) and animals (net producers of carbon dioxide). Almost all forms of farming through to industrial production depend heavily on the use of fossil fuels. The issue is complex —and this is not intended as a definitive explanation, however there are some basic rules to guide us:

   i) carbon dioxide is a naturally cycled gas;
   ii) photosynthesis in plants and algae is the mechanism by which carbon dioxide is fixed in organic material and energy stored;
   iii) burning wood or fossil fuels releases large amounts of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere;
   iv) this is leading to concern as carbon dioxide is implicated in global warming;
   v) pollution of one form or another results from almost all production processes: to repair the damage there would be a cost in terms of carbon dioxide production.

The use of a ‘carbon tax’ has been an issue for debate amongst economists and environmentalists for some while (Turner et al, 1994). Whilst there are flaws this approach and difficulty has been experienced in achieving any degree of agreement in establishing appropriate values for such taxation (Barrett, 1991), it does have merit in establishing a link between action and consequence and in being intuitively reasonable; at least to those with an environmental conscience.

A connection may seem fairly obvious when one looks at the carbon cost of driving a car as the inclination is to relate it directly to fuel production. However, this is not at all the case as one has, for example, to look at the ‘carbon cost’ of making and disposing of the car and spread these over it’s lifetime (Table 1, is overleaf). There are also further costs associated with this (road building etc) and so perhaps the best way of approaching this example is through a carbon cost per mile.

The issue of whether one chooses to eat more or less meat can be calculated in the same sort of way. The practice of calculating environmental costs in this way is undoubtedly difficult, however the intention is to arrive at a rough relative cost of a number of day to day and outdoor activities.

My suggestion is that students could be allocated a number of ‘carbon credits’ at the beginning of a day or a week and a number of options for their activities. Some of these would use up their credits quickly (eg a trip in the minibus to a site where they used plastic kayaks); others might gain them some credits (eg helping with a tree planting programme). Food preferences, choices between a bath and a shower and a host of other variables would come into play. I hasten to add that the idea is not to exclude in favour of tree planting or even eating meat! Rather that some responsibility and decision making is handed over to the individual and the group. I see some benefit
Table 1

Some of the Environmental Costs Associated with the Use of a Family Car*

Raw Materials:
Extraction produces 25,000 kg waste materials and 422 million cubic metres polluted air.

Transport of Materials:
Produces 12 litres crude oil in the oceans and 425 million cubic metres polluted air.

Building the Car:
Produces 1,500 kg waste and 75 million cubic metres polluted air.

Driving the Car:
(10 Years) Produces 44.3 tonnes carbon dioxide, 4.8 tonnes sulphur dioxide, 46.8 kg nitrogen dioxide, 325 kg carbon monoxide, 36 kg hydrocarbons, 1,106 million cubic metres polluted air plus 18.4 kg particles from road surfaces, tyres and brakes.

Scrapping:
Produces 102 million cubic metres polluted air.

Subsidy:
Currently in the UK a car is subsidised by £2,400 of public money per year.

*(Catalytic Converter, 13,000 km per year for 10 years, 10 litres lead free petrol per 100 km)
(Source: Education Guardian, 30 June 1993 and RSPB Student Newsletter, Spring 1995; quoting figures from the Heidelberg Institute, Germany)

having some decisions which are purely individual (perhaps food and showers) whilst others are group ones. There are practical difficulties but these should not be insurmountable.

Van Matre (1995) offers a self-assessment questionnaire to allow the user to examine their lifestyle in terms of both negative and positive environmental impacts and generate a “living more lightly profile”. An approach such as this could be used to effect as a follow up exercise to integrate the residential or outdoor experience with the students normal home lifestyle.

Good Practice in Experiential Outdoor Education

The following thoughts are intended only as an aide memoir lest we forget that aspects of the outdoor education experience can elevate it to the special and powerful. It is not designed to be exhaustive or prescriptive.

Appealing to the Whole Student: This connection and consequence stuff is all very serious and I am concerned that at the end of the programme we must at least have not put our students off. Now this may seem like a very modest aim but I am convinced that in some circumstances we may well do more harm than good. In order to ensure that this is not the case the relationship between the facilitator and the learner must be a good one. Rogers (1979) suggests that it is important for the facilitator to be a real person with feelings, thoughts and attitudes, and that he or she should have a caring trust and respect for the learner. I know that this is not always easy to achieve, but it is vital we show them we care ourselves if we wish to appeal to all learning aspects of the young person’s nature. Outdoor educators should demonstrate their feelings for people, for the landscape and biological and physical diversity. I appreciate these relationships on both an affective and cognitive basis and I learn in this way too. How can it make any sense to expect the learner to achieve their potential if they are simply applying themselves to the experience in a solely physical or cognitive way?

Evaluate and Make Decisions: If the learner’s experience is what matters then it makes sense to encourage him or her to develop this experience personally, and to evaluate it. Decision making is an integral element as is the issue of how the experience relates to others.

Tailoring the Experience: One of the greatest advantages we have as outdoor educators is that we often have the luxury of working with a small group and have enough control and flexibility to constantly adjust the students experience. Whilst we may devise a programme that appears to suit, in practice adjustments can and should be made when appropriate.

Don’t Forget the Fun: We should endeavour to help young people to recreate as well as re-create. The experience must on the whole be enjoyable otherwise the students become disengaged and there can be little prospect of making progress with the issue of ‘re-creating’. In fact the use of the word ‘enjoyment’ feels a little watery; what I mean is that the student should have the chance to play, that there should be fun. Today’s young person seems expected to become an adult earlier than ever. I believe young people have a right to enjoy their childhood and I see play as truly recreational. Along the way there should be room for an exploration of connection and consequence, and this should be properly drawn out in review and reflection. However, this should not feel too much like ‘school’ or the point will surely be lost. Adventure experiences which are undertaken for their own sake are essential if the outdoors is to offer inspiration. Furthermore if one is developing a programme which has specific developmental or educational goals (such as that I suggest here) it should still be possible to incorporate adventure.

Start Where the Learner is Now: An appreciation of the initial level of understanding is vital if the learner is not to feel intimidated or under-estimated. There is usually an expectation that the teacher should know more than the student does. However, time spent in order to find out through proper enquiry what the student does know and understand is never wasted.
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Conclusion

In light of the scale of the problem, there is a tendency to do nothing at all, or, perhaps worse, to experience the disillusionment which results from setting ourselves a task which is too big or too difficult.

However, despite the degree to which most of us are disconnected from the natural world and the consequences of our actions, there is hope. Many people now take the trouble to recycle bottles, cans and paper. Leaded petrol is taxed more heavily than unleaded (although this is more a consequence of the direct impact on human health than general environmental concerns). Although many consumers feel they are being heavily taxed on fuels the price in no way reflects the true environmental costs. We are constantly being reminded of the benefits of free market forces. However, all energy production and consumption is subsidised and environmental costs of extraction through to use are ignored. Tickell (1996) argues that of course we should tax what is bad for the planet and the polluter should pay. The important next step is to ensure that the income received is actually used to repair the damage. To achieve this acceptance a new morality is needed and this implies an environmental dimension to decision making.

Achieving this acceptance will not be easy, but we can make a start by educating for an understanding of connection and consequence.

What outdoor educators do is worthwhile and by developing themes such as those I have sought to illustrate I believe we can make a valid contribution. The slogan ‘Think Globally, Act Locally’ is none the less valid for the wear and tear it has experienced over the past few years.

We should give young people the opportunity to experience and act on their environment and set this in a global context.

Tickell (1996) defines sustainability as ‘durable change for the better, while protecting the Earth we inherit and the Earth we bequeath’. This should set all our actions, whether they be as consumers or as educators into context for ourselves and the young people we work with who will undoubtedly face tomorrow the problems we generate today. There can be no more worthy task for any educator than developing awareness of these issues, encouraging respect for the environment and responsibility for actions.

I cannot expect to devise the range of programmes required, nor is my originality a match for the talents of those who may read this. What I have endeavoured to do is pose a question that it might stimulate thought and action. There is pressing need for both.

At the beginning of my companion article on this theme I quoted van der Post (1978): ‘The human heart, as history proves, I believe, can endure anything except a state of meaninglessness. Without meaning, it dies like a fish without water on the sands of a wasteland beach’. I have the deepest respect for Laurens van der Post and am in accord with his view that we seek meaning in our experiences. As outdoor educators we should not overestimate our influence on young people, however we do have influence and we can endeavour to make the outdoor education experience a meaningful one. This at least is something, and may serve as a basis for the young person to think and reflect on other aspects of their individual and societal life.

Encouragement: In some ways our job seems to me to be a simple one. On the whole we have young people in a setting they can enjoy and provided we can put them at their ease and avoid threatening them, they will be inclined to learn from their experiences. The further vital contribution we can make is to encourage them. A simple thing, but in fact the most highly motivating of influences. However, it seems pertinent to warn against the hazards of being too helpful. They do, of course, have to sort things out for themselves whenever possible.

Help Make the Connections: I believe that a whole programme or just some aspects of it can be run in the conventional form of a residential with a theme, or on say a one day a week basis within a school. There are advantages to both but however it is done there are great advantages in developing ways of making connections between their own experience and that they see in the school or outdoor centre. It is vital that an effort is made to extend the theme to encompass the home first and subsequently the greater picture of the global perspective.

The Role of Role Model: Unless the students have a good model to match their performance against (ie examples of good environmental practice in the establishment and staff) the connections are very hard to make with any degree of conviction. Evidence suggests (Titman, 1995) that young people are very alert to the discrepancy between the behaviour and words of ‘authority’ figures, and that this is a crucial factor in their disinclination to alter their attitudes. If we intend to take on a programme of this type we must take it seriously. If we want it to work, our actions must reflect positive attitudes. Outdoor Educators (yes this means me and you!) need to bring environmental principles into practice at the school or centre. This means contemplating our behaviour and policies on issues as wide ranging as energy use reduction and avoiding damage at frequently used activity or field studies sites.

Lead Us Not into Temptation: We enjoy our work, especially when we ‘succeed’. It is all too easy to spoil the experiential education process by letting our own “egos” interfere with our judgment and become the focus rather than the facilitator. (I know - I’ve done it!). By leaving our ‘ego’ at home we become free to guide the experience and have the greater joy of watching the outcome unfold.
A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO CONSEQUENCE

Figure 1 - A model used to derive appropriate activities to explore the concepts of connection & consequence in outdoor education.
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