

A critical analysis of microadventure as an enticing alternative to traditional outdoor adventure during the Covid-19 pandemic and post-pandemic conditions.

Coined in 2011 by adventurer and author Alastair Humphreys, microadventures are defined as a “shorter, simpler, cheaper, more local, more accessible version of what you deem to be an adventure. It’s something that you can squeeze in around the margins of real life” (Paddy O’Connell, 2023). Unlike traditional outdoor adventure which is typically seen as long-distance journeys to remote, wild areas that are ‘off the beaten track’, microadventures redefine outdoor adventure, whilst retaining its essence, “fun, exciting, challenging, refreshing and rewarding” (Humphreys, 2024).

In their 2020 paper, Mackenzie and Goodnow present microadventures as “an enticing alternative for both current and post-pandemic conditions”. At their time of writing, in April 2020, many countries around the world had already entered national lockdown, with 32 out of 50 US States entering lockdown restrictions by the end of March 2020 (Higham, 2020), with the implementation of a set of specific conditions in response to the pandemic, which brought societal changes overnight, setting in motion unprecedented shifts in lifestyle, work, travel and social interactions (Hosseinzadeh et. al., 2022). This essay aims to address the specific pandemic conditions influencing the narrative within their paper, and assess their impact on outdoor adventure both in the short-term (during the pandemic), and long-term (post-pandemic), considering the current outdoor adventure landscape and shifting perspectives towards ethics and sustainability.

Unarguably, the greatest disruption to the outdoor adventure industry and adventurers during the pandemic were the imposed travel restrictions which affected nine-in-ten people worldwide (Connor, 2020). With many adventurers both amateur and professional, facing disruptions to their travel plans and expeditions through flight cancellations, border closures and prohibited non-essential travel, adventurers had to adapt to their change of circumstances, which, as stated by Mackenzie and Goodnow (2020) “forced many to embrace ‘hyperlocal’ approaches to adventure”. Referred to as a “forced experiment of the locavism idea” by Hollenhorst (2021), he more broadly observes the shift to local tourism born out of necessity during this time. This shift was reflected through the increased commentary of the microadventure concept within outdoor adventure creative media, with a rise in podcasts celebrating everyday exploration, for example, Alastair Humphrey’s ‘Living Adventurously’, promoting sustainable journeys closer to home, Melissa Harrison’s ‘The Stubborn Light of Things’ and YouTube channels such as Beau Miles’ ‘the backyard adventurer’ which emerged during this time. Furthermore, it was reflected in the increased sales of camping equipment and bikes within the UK (Butler, 2020; BBC, 2020). To me, it is apparent that, with the elimination of individual autonomy and freedoms, the appeal of microadventures, and their necessity for those seeking their ‘adventure fix’ were not so much the ‘enticing alternative’ presented by Mackenzie and Goodnow (2020), but the only viable option presented to adventurers during this time. Nevertheless, microadventures were able to fill a thirst for adventure during the pandemic and provided adventurers with an opportunity to experience the challenge, fun, escapism, learning experiences and excitement of bigger adventures (Humphreys, 2014).

Mackenzie and Goodnow (2020) not only acknowledge the growing trend towards microadventures during the pandemic, but go a step further, identifying an opportunity to “reimagine adventure” beyond the pandemic. Mackenzie and Goodnow (2020) state that in a post-pandemic world, people may not just seek microadventures as a necessity, but that they may be the preferred option as people reconsider the value and ethics of traditional adventure travel and “reprioritise how they spend their time, money, psychic energy and efforts”. They present a compelling argument which references the social, economic and environmental limitations of traditional adventure travel, and conversely, explore the many benefits of microadventure, which they claim to facilitate a “return to the core of what adventure is really about”.

Since writing their paper, travel restrictions have been lifted, with international tourism on track to reach pre-pandemic levels this year (UN Tourism, 2024). However, Mackenzie and Goodnow's insights remain relevant, as the pandemic has reshaped adventure preferences and behaviours, leading to a more significant push towards sustainable and responsible tourism, with travellers becoming increasingly likely to favour destinations and operators that showcase environmentally-conscious practices (Travel Daily News, 2023). In this context, I agree that microadventures continue to present an enticing option for those seeking sustainable and environmentally-conscious experiences in local, accessible destinations. As a general awareness of environmental issues, particularly in regard to carbon emissions in the aviation industry continue to grow, microadventures, by their human-powered nature, align with the need and a desire for sustainable travel options that minimise the environmental impact, offering a solution rather than the current greenwashing issues present within the traditional adventure travel industry.

However, one aspect of outdoor adventure that Mackenzie and Goodnow (2020) do not make reference to in their paper is the devastating impact of the pandemic on outdoor adventure instructors and providers, with restrictions on group activity and overnight residencies which, according to Mountain Training (2020) risked the permanent loss of important, formative educational experiences for schools, children and communities. In their syllabus, Mountain Training have a section on access, conservation, and environment with an aim to foster a “deeper appreciation of the natural world and the importance of conservation and sustainable recreation... local culture, heritage and language” (Lowland Leader, 2024). Outdoor educators are skilled professionals, knowledgeable in local sites; the loss of these educational experiences, or their dilution through online learning, may have contributed to a gap in understanding of, and appreciation of, sites significant for nature and culture. Whilst the pandemic marked a shift towards greater mass engagement with outdoor activity, with 46% of people responding to the People and Nature Survey by Natural England in July 2020 saying they were spending more time outside during the pandemic than before, there was also a series of negative implications, as noted by Mackenzie and Goodnow (2020) themselves in the overcrowding of National Parks, alongside issues with litter and illegal camping (Liverpool, 2021; Pidd, 2020). I would argue that when done well, outdoor practitioners play a significant role in environmental education by promoting sustainable practices, creating environmentally

conscious and responsible global citizens, alongside personal growth, something that may not come intrinsically from microadventure alone.

Mackenzie and Goodnow (2020) refer to traditional adventure travel as resource intensive and for the most part, undertaken by wealthy Western clients. In contrast, the inclusive nature of microadventures, means that they can be undertaken by anyone and at any time, overcoming the hurdles to traditional adventure; access, time and money. A 2023 newspaper article states that “Urban parents admit rising costs has stopped them taking kids on trips outside their area” (Lewis, 2023), suggesting that microadventures have a broader appeal in the post-pandemic cost of living crisis. Whilst I acknowledge that microadventures offer a convenient low cost way to satisfy the innate human desire for adventure particularly considering the cost of living crisis, I think it is important to note that time constraints, financial considerations and competing priorities could still pose barriers to participation. Amid the pandemic, social disparities regarding access to green spaces were highlighted more prominently than ever before, which indicates to me that the quality of microadventure experiences will vary significantly depending upon where a person lives, for example, for those living in inner cities, compared to those living within the countryside (Bailey, 2021). In circumstances where individuals are most disadvantaged with equality of access, it is difficult to see how microadventures can provide such an enticing alternative to traditional forms of adventure travel.

I disagree with the notion that microadventures serve as a direct alternative to traditional adventure travel. While microadventures can offer more accessible and meaningful experiences close to home, they represent a distinct experience rather than a comprehensive substitute for traditional adventure travel. I also wish to emphasise that had the statement been made solely in regards to sustainable travel and environmental factors, I would agree with the sentiment. However, the transformative nature of extended journeys to remote environments, with their immersion in unfamiliar cultures, landscapes, and challenges, are less likely to be replicated in microadventures alone. As such, I believe it's crucial to acknowledge the inherent differences between the two forms of adventure.

In conclusion, while there are undeniable merits to the assertion that microadventures represent an enticing alternative for both pandemic and post-pandemic circumstances, there are a number of complexities. The pandemic, with its absence of autonomy and freedom, certainly amplified both the appeal, and the necessity of microadventures for those seeking adventure. Throughout the pandemic, and beyond, microadventures have demonstrated that they can offer a more sustainable and affordable method of adventure, embedding a deeper connection and sense of place on a localised scale. However, the reintroduction of choice has revealed that the appetite for traditional adventure travel remains as strong as ever. I believe that this too has its merits, particularly for practitioners and providers within the outdoor adventure industry who help to educate and develop participants in growing an appreciation for the environment, as well as facilitate transformative experiences. While I appreciate the merits of microadventures presented by Mackenzie and Goodnow (2020), I maintain that a balanced approach is necessary, one that acknowledges the unique benefits of both microadventures and traditional

adventure travel. This approach would better accommodate diverse preferences and circumstances within the outdoor adventure landscape.

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