

CONCERNING GENDER

Barriers and pathways to success



Women are under-represented, particularly in leadership positions, in the Outdoor sector – FACT! I know this from over 20 years of my own anecdotal sector experience working for companies in the UK, France and Australia. It is also confirmed in research and studies such as the one published by Land and Wave in 2018 which found that approximately 25-35% of staff in the sector are female (depending on role, type of contract, etc; for further information see the data details to the bottom left).

I think it's also fair to say that approximately half of the students that I have worked with over the years, including on programs, courses and The Duke of Edinburgh's Award were girls. However, when I looked around at my colleagues at work, the proportion who were women was always much lower than men.

This got me thinking – why is there such a drop off from ratios of student participation to choosing the Outdoors as a job and career? As a sector, we like to think we are fairly 'woke'; we are open and inclusive, with values, ethics and spiritualism at the heart of what we do. And although not a legal requirement in the UK, Outdoor companies generally all have policies on equality and diversity.

So, at face value there appears to be equality of opportunity but not equality of outcome in terms of gender ratios. There's clearly more to this. It's not that people who aren't men can't do the job. I've been lucky enough to know and work with many women and non-binary colleagues whose work I admire; rocks, who I was happy and reassured to see on my team sheet, leaders who excelled. I wanted to reach out to ask for their thoughts and experience around gender in order to highlight any issues.

I also asked the contributors (see who's who on page 36) to give a little information about their career thus far to provide context and hopefully demonstrate that despite some issues there are still some great industry and career opportunities available to women and non-binary people. The contributors came from around the world and were mixed in age and experience.

Personal observations about gender

I first asked the participants what their personal observations were around gender in such a male-dominated industry. All had experienced problems relating to sexism and equity, some from the get-go. For example, Christy's first experience of the Outdoors came

WHAT'S THE DATA?

As part of their gender diversity research, Land and Wave surveyed 52 organisations and 260 people working for organisations with three or more employees, and contacted organisations, governing bodies and quality assurance schemes.

To see the findings in full go to:
www.landandwave.co.uk/blog/gender-diversity-in-the-outdoor-industry

WHO'S WHO?



Dr Clare Dallat
Northern Ireland

I got into the Outdoors in Northern Ireland as a child during the Troubles before moving to the US to run programs there. Then I went to Australia as the first female Risk Manager for The Outdoor Education Group at the young age of 24. Now I run my own global risk and safety management consulting business which aims to dance in the space between research and practice.



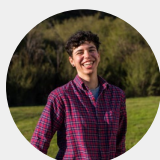
Brittney Dane
USA

I studied psychology and then worked in the adolescent mental health sphere before moving into the Outdoors. A backpacking trip in Yosemite changed everything for me, so I got a guiding job with a wilderness therapy company in Utah. I then transitioned into Outdoor Education in Australia. Now I'm guiding backpacking and front-country hiking trips with adults in southern Utah and California.



Grace Hookway
New Zealand

I gained a degree in Outdoor Education in New Zealand in 2017, then went to Australia to work as a Field Instructor mostly on backpacking programs. I've guided on several international expeditions and been working for The National Outdoor Leadership School since 2017. I'm now studying nursing at university, while COVID-19 continues to affect work opportunities and hope to link nursing and the Outdoors in the future.



Cassidy Leigh
USA

I have approximately 9.5 years of experience as an Outdoor professional in roles such as Guide, Instructor, Co-ordinator and Team Leader.

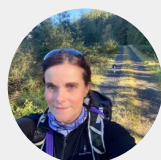
Most of my work has been in the USA and Australia working hikes/ alpine trips, canoeing, white-water, and rock climbing, as well as expedition leading for students.



Tanika Brown
New Zealand

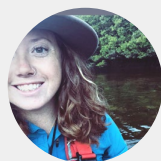
I studied Outdoor Adventure Tourism in New Zealand for two years then worked part-time (summer) as a high-ropes instructor.

Then I moved to Australia and spent two-and-a-half years as an Outdoor Educator for the Outdoor Education Group, and then had a year at Outward Bound New Zealand.



Christy Miles
England

After working as an accountant, I wanted a job that fitted with my values and I was passionate about, so I did a degree in Outdoor and Environmental Education (2002) and have been working in the Outdoors ever since. I've worked as an Instructor and Trainer at various Outdoor courses and am currently setting up my own venture, Way of the Wild, helping to reconnect others to the Outdoor environment.



Georgia Potts
England

After my degree in Outdoor Adventure Leadership I worked at a bushcraft/ survival company as an Activities Instructor in France and Italy, and as a Senior Instructor in Hong Kong and China. Then I have spent the past four years working as a Group Leader, Team Mentor and now as a Program Co-ordinator at the Outdoor Education Group in Australia, leading and co-ordinating expeditions.



Becky Harth
Australia

I have always lived a life outdoors, but started working in the field when I finished my degree; panicked at the thought of spending another year sitting indoors either working or studying. I got an internship at an Environmental Education camp in the USA, planning to spend a year or so working out what to do next in the 'real world' and I am still working in Outdoor Education 10 years later mostly in risk, quality and curriculum design.



Sarah Chapman
Wales

I started by studying Outdoor pursuits in high school and college, followed by a trainee position at Tirabad Outdoor Centre. Then I worked for 11 years in Wales as an Outdoor Instructor/ Educator. In 2010 I moved to Switzerland to work for Aiglon College as the Senior Expeditioner and acting Department Head of Outdoor Ed for 10 years. Now in the UK, I work as a freelance instructor and am a full-time mum.

through Girl-Guiding as a child when she noticed that the activities on offer to her (such as baking and sewing) were far less adventurous than the Boy Scouts (who were offered pioneering and paddling). Although that was some time ago, inappropriate comments such as,

“I'm not being taught by a woman”

are still regularly heard by Christy, and Brittney finds that food and clean-up questions are mostly directed to her while technical and logistical questions are directed to her male colleagues.

However, for Brittney, the most blatant issue around gender is that women typically have to prove themselves more than their male counterparts and Tanika agreed:

REFLECTING ON RIGHTS?

Head over to page 21 to read the about the impact of inclusivity on young leaders



“... especially men that are older than me — I really struggle to gain their respect, compared to how they treat my male co-instructor.”

Becky concurred, quoting,

“Whatever women do they must do twice as well as men to be thought half as good.”

This discrimination sometimes even comes from staffing departments noted three contributors — with more challenging roles allocated to equally skilled male staff over female staff until they have proven themselves.

On a positive note, Georgia felt that the lack of women in the industry actually opened up some opportunities for her. For example, she gained a placement on a desirable expedition as they needed a female for gender ratios and there were no other female staff available. However, Christy was constantly told,

“You will easily get a job - they need a female for the ratios on a centre, and there aren't that many of you about.”

This seemingly innocent observation was repeated again and again, year after year to her, which led her to think,

“What about getting a job because of my experience, not just because of the ratios!?”

Trying to understand why there is such a lack of females in the industry is a complex issue, but the general feeling from the contributors points to lack of confidence and lack of role models for

females, particularly in leadership positions. As Brittney points out,

“Girls are told not to hike alone. Hell, we're taught not to walk down the street alone. Why would someone who doesn't feel confident walking down their street feel empowered to be the responsible party for a group in the wilderness?”

Christy noticed that all of the centres where she worked had male managers and most senior staff too. So Tanika is right to ask,

“How is a male-dominated industry showing our younger female clients/students that this could be an industry for them too if they don't see strong female role models in it?”

What needs to change?

Despite a lifetime developing her technical skills, it is still intimidating every time Becky puts her hand up to back herself and her skills in male-dominated spaces.

When asked how to address some of the issues mentioned, the participants thought the solutions needed to come from many quarters — men, women, organisations, education, the media and society as a whole. As Clare puts it,

“We need to change the structures that make finding a way as a woman into this sector difficult.”

Brittney summed up some of the societal changes that are needed with,

“When parents are bringing their little girls hiking, along with the boys, that will be change. When girls are encouraged to climb trees and play in mud. When we tell girls they're strong, smart, and capable before we tell them they're pretty.”

In terms of organisational efforts towards women's recruitment and retainment, Sarah thought that examples of good practice were,

“... few and far between”

and Christy agreed. However, it wasn't all bad for Clare who went into detail about her observations around good practice:

“The best I've seen is where there has been a lot of work at clarity of alignment between what organisations say and what they do. [We need] organisations where there has been a lot of options for women to be visible, and for all to better understand the barriers experienced. Organisations where men can honestly say they don't have the answers but they're willing to listen and try things differently. Organisations where I don't hear, 'yeah, but no good women applied!' Finally, organisations that are research-informed; whether that's around inviting a women to perhaps respond first in a meeting (likely that more women will share), or whether it's having women be involved in the design of work uniforms so it actually fits their bodies!”

GET A GENDER GLOSSARY

Fumble, a sex education charity, has some good accessible articles, as well as a handy gender and sexuality glossary.

Start with these two articles:

www.fumble.org.uk/what-is-my-gender-identity
www.fumble.org.uk/sexuality-and-gender-glossary

There was only one organisation mentioned in a positive light. Grace held NOLS (The National Outdoor Leadership School) up as great example after seeing how they function as an organisation and offering her personal support and opportunity:

“They recently appointed a woman CEO and actively work to support diversity, not just of women, in their staffing and also hiring choices...The field staffing office works hard to create equal opportunity and for that I was given really great work and training opportunities.”

There were several other things that were mentioned that organisations should take note of. For Cassidy,

“... ensuring the workplace is a women safe space with legitimate safety and harassment policies in place”

was a great start point. And women-only programs, expeditions, mentoring and training were all thought to be very powerful to participants. As Christy put it,

“As a woman ‘if she can, I can too’ is for many so much more powerful than ‘if he can, I can’.”

Inspiring the next generation

Finally, I asked the participants what they would say to inspire the next generation of female and non-binary Outdoor practitioners. Being the legends that they are, they didn’t let me down.

Brittney said,

“Build each other up! When you feel like you have to prove yourself to your clients, to your co-guides, and to management, fight the urge to be competitive with the ladies too. We have a long history of women tearing other women down. Instead, find support in the women around you.”

Grace described,

“It is a truly rewarding lifestyle choice with a lot of really good people who are honest and willing to do the work to be better people and support the journey of betterment for others. I have had more so than not a positive career experience in the Outdoors.”

Cassidy shared,

“Get out there and do the things that you find passion in. Don’t worry who’s around and find some people that aren’t men that inspire you! Chances are, they were in your shoes once and want to help build up a strong and more balanced community.”

Tanika said,

“Wahine toa (female athletes/ heroines) know that we can do the job just as good as any man can, despite the things being hard doesn’t mean we can’t do the things too. Don’t let people’s opinions or comments make you lose confidence — use that as your drive to go out and strive. That is why I am here now, I’ve had people doubt me cause I’m a young female, I’ve had clients ask to change instructors because they wanted a male, but I’ve gone and smashed being an instructor anyways.”





Christy shared,

“Keep following your dreams and goals. It is not a boy's club, you do belong, and you have just as much to bring to the table as your male colleagues. Some people won't believe in you, others will actively try and stop you. There will be setbacks and knocks but every time you overcome them you will be stronger than before.”

Georgia mentioned,

“Have belief in yourself — you can excel in an Outdoor career despite it being an under-represented industry. It all starts with confidence! Always help other women grow and thrive, so we can help lift each other up and achieve our goals.”

Becky said,

“Women have quietly been doing incredible things in the outdoors for many generations, without fanfare or recognition, just because they wanted to. Seek them out, learn about them or meet them and be inspired to continue your own journey.”

Sarah shared,

“Be who you are! Do not be afraid to cry, try and achieve. Females have so many positive attributes that young people can benefit from. Dig deep for your confidence and support others.”

Clare thought,

“I'd say that our profession genuinely values you and wants you to succeed. I'd ask what can I do to support you.”

After writing this article, it seems clear that women and non-binary people still face many challenges that you'd really hope they wouldn't have to in 2021. This no doubt contributes to the drop-off in numbers from participation as a student to entering the Outdoors as a career, and even fewer in leadership positions.

Although I believe that most people reading this article will think they are fairly gender aware and inclusive, I've realised that there's more that I and we all need to do. Hopefully this article is a step in the right direction; raising awareness, stimulating some conversations and provoking some action where it's needed. As Dr. Clare Dallat suggested: as leaders in the Outdoors, we should all be asking, “What can I do to support you?” ■

IMAGES

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AUTHOR

Calvin Healey, Program Manager

Calvin began career in the Outdoor Industry as an instructor for PGL in 1998 and has over 20 years' experience in a variety of roles and organisations, most recently returning to the UK from his role as a program manager for The Outdoor Education Group in Australia.