

# Outdoor learning, environment and sustainability

---

**Geoff Cooper**

Chair of the Adventure and  
Environmental Awareness Group  
Cumbria

---

## Beyond Environmental Education

The term 'environmental education' was introduced in the 1960's in Britain but its development can be traced to earlier environmental thinking in natural science, rural studies, fieldwork, countryside conservation and urban studies. It is commonly accepted that environmental education should include opportunities for learning *about*, learning *in* or *through* and learning *for* the environment. Most definitions now consider it as a process of learning that raises *awareness*, develops *understanding and skills*, clarifies *attitudes and values* and crucially leads to *action* for the environment.

I have argued for some time that outdoor learning is a powerful means of promoting environmental education (see for example, Cooper, 1994). For decades many outdoor and environmental organisations tried, with limited success, to gain recognition for environmental education in the formal school curriculum. Its acceptance has suffered further from the introduction of the National Curriculum, the decline of topic-based work and the concentration on literacy and numeracy.

## Sustainable development: a broader concept

The term *sustainable development* has become increasingly important as a concept since the United Nations Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, when governments throughout the world drew up priorities for action on environment and development. Education for Sustainable Development has received government support in Britain for a number of years and it is now a cross-

curriculum dimension in schools in England, Wales and Scotland.

There have been many attempts to define sustainable development. An early definition and one often quoted is: "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs" (Brundtland Report, 1987). More recent definitions have stressed the importance of improving the quality of our lives without harming the ecosystems we depend upon.

Sustainable development is not just about conserving environments and maintaining biodiversity. It is also about the relationships between people on the planet and the term *global dimension* (England) or *global citizenship* (Wales) has been added to encompass the bigger picture of the world we live in and help schools make connections between the natural, social, economic and political domains. This area of learning includes understanding the arguments for sharing resources more equitably and for improving the quality of our lives in terms of access to health care, education, justice, work, leisure and democracy. It is about caring for people from all sections of society and countries of the world. It is concerned with both present and future generations. It implies the need for an ethic based on co-operation rather than competition, quality of life rather than standard of living and community rather than individual interest. I believe outdoor educators can play a key role in presenting this ethic and in challenging some of the excesses of our consumer society.

Education for sustainable development is therefore a broader concept than environmental education and includes aspects of personal and social education, citizenship, economic understanding, global awareness and ethical considerations.

## What we can offer through Outdoor Learning

Whilst it is fairly obvious how outdoor learning

can contribute to environmental education, the links with sustainable development and global awareness are less apparent. Nevertheless, I believe outdoor learning can play a critical role in this process. The outdoors is an extremely powerful focus for learning through direct experience using the hand, heart and head. It places young people in real situations and it encourages them to take responsibility and reflect on their actions. Motivation and learning come easy when you need to keep your boat afloat, cook a meal or build a shelter. This experiential approach has long been recognised as a powerful means of learning, especially when it is processed through a learning cycle of 'plan, do and review.'

The outdoors allows for different learning styles. It offers possibilities to all types of learners, including those with visual, auditory or kinaesthetic learning preferences. Young people who underachieve in more formal situations such as classrooms can often benefit from the flexibility of outdoor learning methods. These encourage motivation, confidence and more positive attitudes to learning which are fundamental to education for sustainable development.

Outdoor education is not restricted by subject boundaries but can adopt an interdisciplinary approach making use of knowledge from the arts and sciences. It lends itself to systemic thinking where the understanding of interrelationships becomes more important than the analysis of one part of the system. So, for example, through the outdoors it is possible to appreciate the intricate links in a food web or how land use patterns have emerged through the interplay of geology, vegetation and human activities rather than taking the more usual, 'bookish' linear analysis that looks at the structure of an animal or the chemical composition of a rock. This way of thinking is particularly important to education for sustainable development with its emphasis on connections; how we relate to other species on the planet and how we interact as local, national and global communities.

Outdoor learning, whether through adventurous activities, fieldwork, nature study or conservation work, lends itself to issue-based approaches or philosophical enquiry which help to focus



Learning team work

systemic thinking, allowing us to keep a big picture framework. To take an example, we can pose the question: "What is the future of our uplands in Britain?" or more contentiously, "Should we leave the uplands to re-wild?" These simple questions raise a host of issues and debating points. Do we want our uplands to provide more food or trees for fuel? Or do we want them for conservation and biodiversity? If the latter is the case are we happy for heather moorland to be managed for grouse shooting? Should our uplands be managed as a carbon sink or for renewable energy in the form of wind farms? And what about the wonderful opportunities the mountains and moorlands give us for recreation and outdoor education and the mental and physical benefits that follow? These are simple questions but they lead to complex choices and repercussions. They take us into the realm of considering our society's existing values and determining the values we need to adopt for more sustainable lifestyles.

I believe that our work in outdoor education is about values and that we should look for opportunities to question our beliefs and help young people clarify their own attitudes and values. If we ignore this then we lose sight of the big picture and the potential for outdoor education to contribute to more sustainable living.

### Core Values

Values can be considered as underlying beliefs and principles that shape our attitudes and behaviour. The dominant value system in Western countries is based largely on social position as indicated by external appearance and material





Viewing landscapes

© Geoff Cooper

possessions.

There are, however, higher 'core' values recognised by many different cultures throughout the world that form the basis for a more peaceful and fulfilling life. The key point is that these same values underpin the concept of sustainability.

Writers from the time of the ancient philosophers have considered the importance of higher values in guiding our lives. Plato, for example, argued that the three deepest values were goodness, truth and beauty and that by adopting these values people can transcend self-interest. In Buddhist teachings nature and people are inseparable, so that a decline in ethics leads to a deterioration in the environment. Other writers suggest that we can learn from direct experience of nature. David Orr (1994), for example, believes that the earth can teach us essential values such as silence, humility, holiness, connectedness, courtesy, celebration, giving, restoration, obligation and wildness. Similarly, in his recent book, "Spirit of Adventure", Colin Mortlock (2009) identifies five pillars of wisdom from nature. He goes on to define a set of virtues and values and presents these as a creed for individuals and organisations to adopt.

Writings such as these provide a valuable structure or guidance for us to explore our own beliefs and principles. They show alternatives to a value system based on consumerism, greed and selfishness. Although some outdoor leaders may enjoy the conformity of an ideology or code of values, others will be more comfortable in providing opportunities for young people to reflect on and clarify their own values.

## Contribution of outdoor leaders

Outdoor leaders have several advantages when

working with young people. They often work with small, well-motivated groups in informal situations. Unlike classroom teachers they do not face the constraints of the formal curriculum, exams, timetables or the bell. They have novelty, enthusiasm and work in interesting and challenging environments. As a result their actions can be influential and inspiring.

Outdoor leaders have for many years recognised the value of their work in personal and social development. These skills are fundamental and form the basis of good citizenship. However, there may be an even more important area of work concerned with encouraging young people to explore their own values. This may lead to commitment in changing personal and social behaviour towards more sustainable lifestyles.

It should be possible for leaders to address many core values through their work but clearly some may be easier to explore in outdoor education. I would like to suggest a few examples:

### 1. Reconnection

The outdoors provides opportunities to experience freedom, happiness and humility through contacts with the natural world. We can respond to the elements – wind, water, rock, sky – and the natural rhythms and begin to appreciate the interdependency of life on the planet. This may help to rebuild our connections with the earth; we can see ourselves *as part of* nature rather than *apart* from it. For some this could be the key to gaining commitment for the environment.

### 2. Co-operation

Learning in schools is often based on competition. This may be appropriate to train a top class athlete or a university professor but it is totally inadequate for educating for community living in a rapidly changing society. Teamwork and co-operation can be developed in many ways in the outdoors, for example through problem-solving activities, group fieldwork and expeditions. Trust and empathy can result from living and working together in a small group. Such values are transferable and of fundamental importance to sustainable living.

### 3. Responsibility

Outdoor education often places young people in situations where they have to take responsibility for their own actions.

They may experience real situations where failure to act responsibly will have unfortunate consequences for themselves and others in their group. Peter Higgins (2006) has argued that taking responsibility is a more worthwhile aim for outdoor learning than developing self-esteem. In Western countries, we all need to take more responsibility for our lifestyles if we wish to sustain the earth's resources and distribute them more fairly.

#### 4. Tolerance

Being in the outdoors we confront real issues. For example there may be land use conflicts such as the need to protect an ancient woodland threatened by a new road or the impact of a wind farm on a small community weighed against the benefits of renewable energy. Through investigation, critical thinking and role-play we can begin to explore the complexities of such issues, appreciate the underlying social, economic and political pressures and make our own judgements. Exploring real issues helps to clarify our own values and may lead to more tolerant attitudes to other points of view.

#### 5. Simplicity

In a classic article in 1996, Chris Loynes argued that outdoor adventure is being packaged and commercialised and this process dissociates people from their experience of community and place. There is, however, the opportunity in the outdoors to experience a simpler, healthier and less commercialised existence. Wild or quiet places can provide an antidote to a screen culture that emphasises speed, glamour and glitz. The outdoors allows us to step outside of our everyday existence. There is time to reflect, to put our lives into perspective, to consider our values. Outdoor leaders are in a position to address the differences between needs and wants. They can introduce young people to the idea of 'quality of life' as opposed to the quantity of income and material possessions. This concept may be a key mechanism with which to discuss and challenge values.

#### 6. Reflection

Experiences in the outdoors provide many opportunities for reflection. In a society based on constant noise and action there is a fundamental need to have time and space for reflection. This is vital to our mental and physical health and allows us to develop our sense of values. Reflection is relevant to all aspects of our lives and constant reviewing

© Geoff Cooper



and planning helps us to cope with change.

These are just a few examples of how outdoor leaders can help young people address their own values and encourage appropriate attitudes for sustainability. It should be stressed, that when it comes to influencing others' attitudes and values; our actions as leaders and how we demonstrate our own values may be as important, if not more important than the activities themselves. In a follow-up article I will discuss how existing outdoor learning programmes and projects address this bigger picture by contributing to environmental education, sustainable development and global understanding.

#### References—

1. Cooper, G. (1994) *The Role of Outdoor Education in Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Leadership, **11** (2).
2. World Commission for Environment and Development (1987) *Our Common Future*, The Brundtland Report. Oxford: University Press.
3. Orr, D. (1994) *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment and the Human Prospect*. Washington DC: Island Press.
4. Mortlock, C. (2009) *The Spirit of Adventure*. Kendal: Outdoor Integrity Publishing Ltd.
5. Higgins, P. (2006) *Learning Outdoors for Our Future*. Paper given at Association of Heads of Outdoor Education Centres Conference, Donegal.
6. Loynes, C. (1996) *Adventure in a Bun*. Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Leadership, **13** (2).

Geoff Cooper is author of *Outdoors with Young People—A leader's guide to outdoor activities, the environment and sustainability*

Copyright of Environmental Education is the property of National Association for Environmental Education and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.