

Blue Exercise  
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# Green Exercise

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Linking nature, health and well-being

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## Chapter 12

# Wilderness and youth at risk

## Approaches for positive behaviour change through the outdoors

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### Introduction

Much has been written about the value of wilderness and wild places in the healing of vulnerable young people, with some key work occurring in South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and the USA. Writers from Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold and Paul Schneider have long written about the unique qualities that wilderness engenders, such as simplicity and neutrality, enabling humans to re-evaluate, learn, reflect and self-heal. We live in a complex modern world, where young people from all classes and walks of life can find themselves struggling with identity, belonging, and self-management. In affluent countries, as many as one in ten young people suffer from mental ill-health, with young people in lone parent families and families with lower levels of academic achievement being more likely to suffer from mental ill-health (Chief Medical Officer, 2013; Pretty et al., 2015). In addition, youth crime and anti-social behaviour is a continuing problem. In the UK, 12 per cent of all crime is committed by young people aged 10–17 years, with young men being responsible for more than 80 per cent (Ministry of Justice, 2015). An increasing number of young people are also excluded from school. In 2013–2014 nearly 5000 young people were permanently excluded from school and 269,480 for a fixed period; largely as a result of continued disruptive behaviour (Department for Education, 2015).

Wilderness Therapy, *a programme which takes place in a wilderness or remote outdoor environment*, is increasingly used to provide a context for a range of health and development interventions and to tackle youth crime and anti-social behaviour (Wilson and Lipsey, 2000; Connor, 2009). The restorative properties of the wilderness foster personal, social and emotional growth (Davis-Berman and Berman, 1994; Russell, 2001b, 2006a; Norton and Watt, 2014), including significant changes in self-esteem, self-efficacy, confidence, behaviour and decision-making (Cason and Gills, 1993; Hattie et al., 1997; Hans, 2000; Russell, 2006b; Asfeldt and Hvenegaard, 2014; Hoag et al., 2014; Paquette et al., 2014). However, in order for these interventions to have long-term impact, they must lie in sound practice (Russell, 2001). In this chapter we draw on The Wilderness Foundation's *TurnAround* youth at risk programme, which has been running for five years.

## The TurnAround Programme

### *Client group and programme aims*

The aim of the TurnAround programme is to engage vulnerable young people to make positive changes in their lives through engagement in nature-based activities. The young people who take part in the programme are typically aged 15–21 years from East England and London and referred from Leaving and After Care Teams, Youth Offending teams, schools and social workers. The majority of the young people have complex needs, are at risk, have had a series of life experiences at a young age which ring out with conflict, poverty of hope and experience, drugs and alcohol abuse, neglect, rejection, lack of safety and love, minimal boundaries, violence and poor aspiration. The programme, therefore, uses the power of nature as a catalyst for change and as a therapeutic place whereby young people can reflect on their life choices and their current destructive pathways (Peacock et al., 2008; Barton et al., 2010; Wood et al., 2012c, 2013b). Throughout the programme young people are engaged in nature-based activities and personal development sessions, such as camping, sailing and open fire cooking in addition to numerous social activities. All these offer a range of skill development opportunities including leadership, planning and organization, social skills, communication and team-work skills. The young people also take part in two wilderness trails which top and tail the experience in locations such as Scotland and Wales. These trails typically last between five and seven days and involve activities such as hiking, wild swimming, and nature watching and canoeing. Participants experience total immersion in nature, whereby they engage in basic living with no facilities, such as electricity or access to mobile phones. The youth are also allocated a mentor whom they regularly meet throughout the programme to discuss employment, education and life after the programme. The overall objectives of the TurnAround programme are to:

- i break down the physical and emotional barriers which inhibit social competence;
- ii improve self-esteem, self-confidence, emotional regulation, communication and problem-solving abilities;
- iii instil a sense of accountability to the self and others;
- iv build trust and team-working skills;
- v educate people to make positive life choices;
- vi generate employment and training opportunities and/or further education prospects.

### *Circle of Courage*

The structure of TurnAround is based upon the philosophy and methodology of 'The Circle of Courage' (Brendtro et al., 2005). This Native American Indian rite of passage is modelled on four key elements which are required to ensure individuals have a healthy transition from adolescence to adulthood (Peacock

et al., 2007). The model is especially relevant for adolescents experiencing emotional and behavioural problems and has been applied widely in schools, treatment settings and youth development circles. The following four key elements of the circle represent essential growth needs.

- i **A sense of belonging:** this is the core value on which the other three elements are based. Humans have a primal need to feel valued and important and belonging to a social group and community plays an influential role in the development of self.
- ii **Skills and mastery:** mastering their environment involves developing cognitive, physical, social and spiritual competence, which assists personal growth. Striving to achieve personal goals teaches self-control and responsibility which leads to social recognition and inner satisfaction.
- iii **Independence:** refers to developing independence through decision-making, problem-solving, goal-setting, self-discipline and taking personal responsibility for successes and failures.
- iv **Generosity:** this factor recognizes the importance of being generous and unselfish, being able to give cherished items to others and making a positive contribution to other people's lives.

A lack of strength in any of these areas is associated with emotional and behavioural difficulties. Thus it is essential that each adolescent progresses through the four phases of the circle to ensure they are a confident and happy adult with a prosocial approach to life. Each element and activity throughout the TurnAround programme, therefore, relates to this circle of courage.

### *Nature-led consequence and leader characteristics*

The understanding that nature-led consequence is a powerful tool also lies at the heart of the work of TurnAround.

One example of this was a wilderness journey on the Isle of Mull, at the start of the winter. Long, dark nights were accompanied by the wildness in nature that winter weather brings. On the first night – groups carrying separate equipment missed each other at a meeting point, and night started to close in. The situation called for an adaptation and coping process as bits of tent were missing, key cooking items were with the other group, and food and drink were unmatched in terms of what would have been a regular meal. To start with, when the situation became apparent to the young people, an initial reaction of anger and tantrums were evoked. Backpacks were kicked down the mountain, swearing, and real frustration and discomfort were evident.

The team leader waited until the initial storming process had played itself out, and then discussed the actions we could take as a group. Stay on the hillside and

Silence again as we mull the conversation and it hangs in the air. Slowly we murmur and mumble thoughts and responses and then gradually one by one drift off to sleep or reflection. As a leader – there is a sense of real relief and joy that the wildness is working and is enabling people to evaluate, reflect and consider new ways of being... good messages to try to fall asleep to.

The young people pull close to each other. Sitting in their sleeping bags doing hair, grooming, chatting, sharing, laughing. The guides do their own thing. We watch and enjoy the spectacle and appreciate the easiness so far. We laugh at small things, we enjoy their foibles, funny ways and commentary. We feel tribal again – separate yet together – we have each other – and our group is on its own with no outside impacts.

### **Behaviour change models**

Throughout the TurnAround programme other theoretical frameworks for behaviour change are also incorporated where appropriate, including Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) and cognitive behaviour models. Favourite NLP sayings become familiar to the group over the course of the programme – such as 'If you do what you have always done, you will get what you have always done. What can you do differently that would give you a different outcome that serves you better?'.

Work around the cognitive behaviour models of thoughts, feeling and actions, help the group and individuals to understand their own behaviour processes, triggers and responses. They find these models and learnings helpful as often they will express that they don't understand 'what comes over them' when there is an emotional outburst. With the adage of knowledge is power, these tools of understanding their own behaviour drivers empowers change from within, and returns an element of control to the young person where this is often missing. Other approaches used in the programme have been drawn from Transactional Analysis, mindfulness, and Gestalt Therapy but these have been more dependent on the particular training of resident therapists, than endemic to the programme format.

What is, however, embedded in our therapeutic approach is Rogers' (1951) person-centred approach, using reflective language, rapport-building, empathetic responses, and enabling the youth to find their own solutions, as far as possible and is safe in their adventure. This offers satisfaction and ownership of their own outcomes, which is very empowering, builds personal responsibility, and reduces patronage from the adult team to the youth.

Other considerations of theory that are important, include the ecology element of the 'back home' existence of the group in juxtaposition to their current wilderness experience – leaving wide gaps of potential dissonance which the staff work on particularly towards the end of the wilderness journey, and the programme, to address, discuss and seek coping strategies for their group for their return to a world that effectively has stayed the same. They are the ones who

have changed and just the knowledge of this can be extremely unsettling and disruptive if not channelled carefully. This element of the facilitation process requires the leadership team to be aware of, and empathetic towards, the often very large differences in their own home lives to those of the young people.

A breakdown of positive behaviour change often occurs at this point in the journey, as the fear and uncertainty of returning home becomes real once again. Where we can often return back to our own homes with a meal and warmth, hopefully family, the young person can often return to a room on their own, no food, no family support and financial hardship.

The end days of the wilderness journeys and the programme as a whole are, therefore, focused on transitioning exercises, reflective conversations and using any tools that help to embed the learning into deeper recesses of the core, where they can be reused and recycled for coping in the future. In addition, preparation of those at home to receive the rather dusty, smelly and changed youth back into their home environment is also provided. Coping tools are offered in terms of the questions asked, how to show interest but not be 'too eager', to allow space for tiredness and some withdrawal.

From being disruptive, disengaged and highly reactive in our norming and storming first days, X started to relax and draw benefit from the incredible beauty and awe inspiring environment we were trekking through. He was able to work within the team and 'wilderness family', making real contributions in our group discussions that showed his own inner wisdom and strengths. After our five days out we spent two days in a residential setting making sense of all we had experienced and what the young people felt that they had learned and how they could apply these back home. X was emotional about returning home, anxious that he and his mother would return to their normal conflictual relationship patterns and how all would be lost in his mind.

He wrote his mother an emotional letter of commitment to attempt to start fresh on return and to create a new, potentially good start to their relationship. On return we met his mother in the car park. His face reddened and fell with disappointment as her first words to him were 'You had better have changed, otherwise you are on the street'. There was no welcome home, no interest in his growth, just the repeat of her own defence mechanisms, which lost much of the ground he had covered, and dashed his hopes. For her, nothing had changed, but for him it had been very significant. As staff we could have wept – particularly as we had taken the time to brief all the adults/parents who would be looking after them on return, but also had to understand why and what caused her extreme reaction.

Wilderness journey leaders need to be cognisant of the deeper psychological issues running within their young people and to be adaptive with these processes at play. Not only does the nature-based experience expose more feeling,

sensations, emotion, thought, but it can also bring out painful, previously repressed issues. For example, recent work on what is known as Restorative Therapy, shows the inner turbulence of youth who have grown up with a lack of love and trust.

In all behaviour change analysis, which is what we ultimately aim for in all therapy, including wilderness therapy, much of our behaviours are driven from an internal, unconscious process which in turn is linked to our neural pathways and habitual reactions. Changing these pathways, which are generally, fight or flight reactions, is the challenge we deal with. What is interesting is that in this approach, anger, shame, disgust for example are seen as secondary emotions, with the primary emotion being a sense of being unloved or a lack of trustworthiness which links to safety. To break this cycle four steps that can change the unconscious driver and the neural default can be put in place – to say what one feels, to say what you normally do, say the truth, and make a different behavioural choice. All these four elements break patterns and behaviours that are unconsciously led.

Recognizing the powerful impact of these two key drivers, means that if we can ensure that the environment we create on wilderness journeys is as loving as possible, and are determined to be trustworthy as far as we can, then the fight or flight reactivity is reduced. In addition, our focus on group and individual reflection and sharing can help this process and in many instances make use of all four tools for changing neural patterns. Just the juxtaposing of normal life with the wilderness experience opens up different parts of the brain by challenging convention and habit, but mixed with these elements in mind can be even more powerful in supporting change.

### Thinking more metaphorically

A regular, transformative and effective tool regularly used within the TurnAround Programme is the use of metaphor, drawing on experiences in wild nature that can reflect a range of life issues. We know that metaphor can be a gentle, depersonalizing mechanism of making sense of deeply personal issues and enables perspectives and understanding that more directive language can fail in. Metaphor also stimulates unconscious processes to come to the fore as they are deemed as non-threatening, and can also be seen to enable different neurological processes to work, drawing on the more creative parts of the brain. For those who spend time outdoors, nature presents myriad opportunities like these and young people can be encouraged to start to think more metaphorically when on wilderness journeys, thus freeing them up and allowing hidden emotion and content to rise to the surface where in safe hands it can be processed and accessed.

After climbing and abseiling in the bright Pyrenean sun, we made time for solo. Each of us found a quiet place to sit and reflect for around half an hour. The snow glistened off the far side of the valley and the vultures swooped

back and forth over our heads. After some time, X came back down from where she had been sitting and shared with me that a butterfly had flown around her and then come down to sit on her hand. It stayed with her like that for some time. We reflected that she had drawn a butterfly card on our first weekend camp some time ago, which had descriptions of butterflies being a symbol of change and metamorphosis. The significance of her butterfly visit enabled us to talk about her own process of change, what was happening in her own life, and where she felt she was heading. From time to time through the programme she continued to have butterflies fly over her head, settle on her, and be around her – which was really moving for her, and beautiful to see.

### Using tension and disequilibrium to facilitate change

Handley (2005) talks about the need for tension and disequilibrium as a means of creating change. Attitudes he writes, 'can only be redirected through an experience of disequilibrium, positive decision making and feedback. New possibilities are created as situations are faced where old perspectives no longer apply. ...it facilitates seeing and doing things differently. The TurnAround programme's wilderness experience is the vehicle for this to occur'.

There is no time pressure today and the group seem resistant to kayak or do much else. There is a need to go with the flow but also to keep focus that we are here to grow and stretch. Fine balance between the two agendas. Part of the experience too is to relax and soften 'life' – to ease the stresses and pressures that so many of these young people live with each day...it is like a metaphor of clay. Too dry and it crumbles as you work with it, soft and moist it is something that can be worked with – to create new forms and to take new shape. We forget sometimes that play is actually learning and growth and something we forget in a structured world.

The morning brings unexpected outcomes. I sit with x and talk – she shares pain and shame spontaneously – there is no pressure for it to be resolved – but in its sharing is a start of its re-evaluation and we are able to work together on seeing some things in a new perspective. As children when things happen to us it is so important to understand that the adults need to take responsibility – not them. Each new wave brings in fresh water on the tide, each new life experience for her, brings new insights.

She almost symbolically throws away elements of her own 'shut down' by choosing to swim in shorts and a strappy top for the first time – perhaps freeing herself of her personal shame and self-deprecation and being liberated and able to enjoy what the world has to offer. And most importantly herself.

Throughout the TurnAround Programme we choose places and ways to work that have disequilibrium naturally within them. The carrying of a heavy pack, the paddling of a canoe or kayak through difficult waters, the needing to dig

holes to go to the toilet, the lack of seating other than on the ground, sleeping on thin mats, sometimes the cold, the effort of collecting water, midges, other animals, all add to this process. This is where the magic of the change process lies and the coping mechanisms that take place reduce the normal blockages and habitual behaviours and veneers, and the new mindfulness within the experience can allow the individual to see themselves in a new light. Responsibility lies with each individual in how the programme progresses.

By changing perspectives and attitudes, so do behaviours and actions, and the leaders need to respond and flex quickly to capture the moments, reinforce the learning through praise, feedback and reflections, and to use the group to continue to reward and support these new actions in each other. One of the key pieces of work in TurnAround is to enable the group to do much of the work for itself and its individual young people. In a well-functioning group, there can be far more power in the feedback of youth to youth, than in leader to youth. This evaluation of an individual's progress is critically important. The ability to talk in the group is fostered from the start and is a safety mechanism for individuals and the group itself. Through the group, we establish 'proper ways to manage anger, share emotions, and process interpersonal issues that are modelled in a safe and neutral environment'.

After we pack up camp and move down to the kayaks for breakfast and tea – we take time for a solo period of about 15 minutes with silence and then feedback. The silence brings comments like 'peaceful', 'relaxed', 'calm' from the group – they get a real sense of this from the exercise which is great.

We then ask them to feed back to each other the strengths they see in each other and what they think others have achieved. We are all moved by what comes out.

Examples like 'she has curbed her anger so well through the week – a major growth point and such a team player', 'x has broken free from her self-consciousness and allowed herself to be free', 'x has been a vital part of the group and shared and engaged with everyone even though his autism is a problem for him', and 'Y has picked himself up when he is negative and moved himself to try things and enjoy them'.

### The value of simplicity and connection to nature

Simplicity is another key element to the transformational nature of the wilderness therapy trails used within TurnAround. This relates to what we take, what we need, how we eat, how we sleep and how we live in general. This paring down, the leaving behind of props to hide behind such as mobile phones and watches, creates a very unique time together. Socializing, talking together, cooking, cleaning, preparing kit become the focus for the day, rather than withdrawing behind screens or TV, and losing out on the human interactions we enjoy in the wild. It also reminds us of how little we need to meet our needs and the lack of 'stuff' is liberating and freeing.

Arrival at the base on our first day is hot and stressful. We had little sleep the night before departing – all having to get up at 3am for the airport shuttle.

In the hot, sun filled room in a strange country, with little sleep, we now have to make sense of our new world. We meet our guides and have to work out communal kit, food, essentials, personal things and somehow it all must fit in a bag like a pillow case or smaller.

Most leave behind watches, phones and electronic items into safe keeping for the rest of the journey (as they will get wet), but also most of our clothes go and along with that, our sense of control.

A miracle is when we finally complete packing the kayaks, have distributed kit to hot and tired people, have a practice air kayaking experience on the beach and a safety briefing, and get into kayaks, and our paddles finally bite into the turquoise clear water.

By working in beautiful and awe-inspiring places, having intimate contact with the wild and living simply, participants develop a different relationship with the earth and nature, as well as themselves. We work as a facilitation team to plan the wilderness journeys to be in harmony with nature, rather than to be so raw that nature is a continual enemy, thus helping to find a bonding, archetypal, ancient connection to the land, which in many of us is lost in today's busy, urbanized world. The connection to nature lies deeply embedded in our cellular structure and quickly can come to the fore in the right circumstances. All contact with nature can evoke change, but this takes us back to the primitive within us, a less programmed individual, closer to emotion and feeling, the senses, life force and spirit. The embedded practice of Leave no Trace ethics underpins our commitment to the protection and value of the natural world, but also breeds in the group a sense of respect and responsibility to the outdoors, all of which are transferable to relationships with humans. We feel this is an important mirroring process of value for life.

### Evaluating the TurnAround programme outcomes

Over the last five years, the University of Essex has conducted an independent evaluation of the TurnAround programme outcomes. A mixed methods approach has assessed participant changes in a variety of key parameters such as self-esteem, wellbeing, connection to nature, behavioural strengths and difficulties, hope and hopefulness and mindfulness. The team developed a composite questionnaire incorporating internationally standardized questionnaires alongside qualitative narrative in order to capture the key outcomes of the programme. The questionnaires were distributed at set time points throughout the programme to analyse changes in participants' scores over time. Whilst each yearly programme has often assessed slightly different outcomes, self-esteem has consistently been assessed over the five phases of the programme. Self-esteem exhibits an inverse relationship with depression and anxiety (Orth et al., 2009), is a risk factor for mental ill-health (Xavier and Mandal, 2005; Griffiths et al., 2010) and has been linked with anti-

social behaviour and behavioural difficulties (Moksnes et al., 2010). It is also a key aspect of psychological functioning during adolescence (Moksnes et al., 2010) and predicts life satisfaction during adulthood (Boden et al., 2008). Thus, changes in self-esteem during adolescence are of great importance.

### Quantitative analysis findings

Evaluation of the impact of the TurnAround programme has consistently shown significant improvements in self-esteem, mood, behaviour, wellbeing, connection to nature and hopefulness (Peacock et al., 2008; Barton et al., 2010; Wood et al., 2012c, 2013b). Furthermore, when data for all five years of the programme are combined, analysis reveals significant improvements in self-esteem from the start to the end of the TurnAround programme (Figure 12.1).

Further analysis of self-esteem also suggests that the initial wilderness trail is of great importance. Not only does the trail result in significant improvements in self-esteem, but participants' self-esteem never returns to its baseline values, despite fluctuations over the course of the programme (Figure 12.2). Thus, the TurnAround programme seems to result in a long-term shift in participants' threshold of self-esteem which has significant consequences for future behavioural choices.

### Qualitative analysis findings

In addition to the quantitative data derived from the questionnaires, there is a large body of qualitative data supporting the beneficial outcomes of the TurnAround programme, as demonstrated throughout this chapter. Many positive outcomes on wilderness journeys are those that happen in a moment. We often talk about having to live in the moment, and enjoy brief successes as and when they occur. The fact that some of the key behaviour shifts are quick and flighty does not, however, mean that they are insignificant. Each and every one is the start of a new journey of discovery.

Without us being able to shout a warning X took a run and dived into the water. She came up sobbing and we realised that she had scraped her stomach on a sharp bit of rock under the surface. Unable to swim back she allowed N (one of our male facilitation team) to help her from the water, to comfort her and ensure she was safe. This allowing a man to be so close to her was one of the most significant moments on her journey. She can now also feel that there are people to rescue her when she is in need and pain, and more importantly that men can look after her without needing anything in return.

There are too many personal examples of this kind of outcome from the experiential nature of the work. The classic outcomes are universally understood – the health and wellbeing from eating good food, exercise, no drugs and alcohol, early up and early to bed patterns, sense of physical and emotional

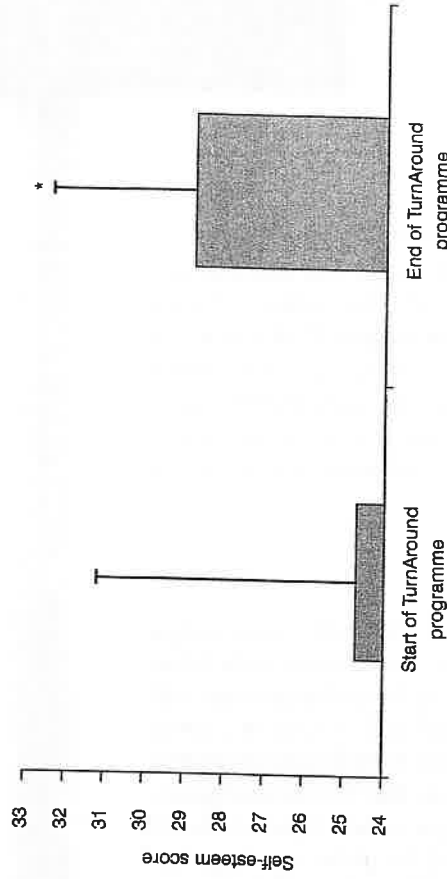


Figure 12.1 Amalgamated changes in self-esteem for the TurnAround Programme (\*indicates a significant improvement in self-esteem  $p < 0.01$ )

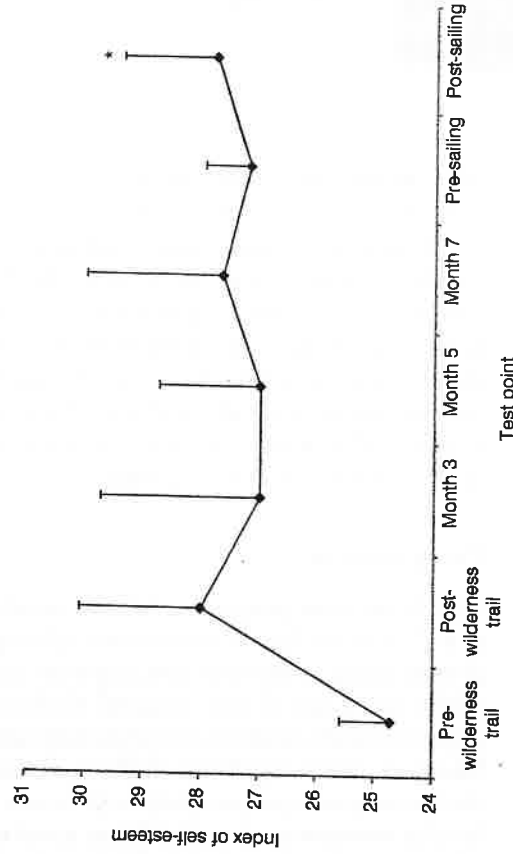


Figure 12.2 Changes in self-esteem over the duration of the TurnAround project (\*indicates significantly different from pre-wilderness trail,  $p < 0.05$ )

accomplishments that are never to be taken away or lost, new skills both socially and individually, evidenced self-esteem growth and personal concept, new attitudes and perspectives, more love to give out and a willingness to receive, positive thinking and a sense of belonging are but some. Other outcomes that need further research relate to the evidence of shifts in neural pathways and the changing of deeper unconscious patterns and beliefs.

A human approach to this work seems to make the difference. Those extra miles driven late at night to get someone home, the consistency of trust and love,

the sharing of the experiences together in pain and joy, the soft murmurs as a blood red sun sets and we are all moved by the beauty that lies within our reach if we seek to see it, are the keys to the door for personal progress. Perhaps too it is just the knowledge that you are worth being loved, cared for, and can be trusted and that you can belong in a group, or as part of Gaia, that really matters. For so many people out there who will never have these feelings or experiences, we seek to share widely what we do and to create a respect for wilderness therapy in the health arena so it is more accessible.

### Conclusions

The TurnAround programme has successfully enabled vulnerable young people to make positive lifestyle changes through engagement in wilderness trails. Many of these young people were suffering from issues such as low self-esteem and self-confidence, a lack of trust, drug and alcohol abuse and were in need of a strong support network. In addition to promoting improvements in wellbeing, self-esteem, behaviour, nature experience and hope of meeting goals, the TurnAround project also helped participants to make new friends, develop a variety of new skills and develop communication, confidence, social skills and the ability to adapt their behaviour and make positive changes in their lives. Throughout their time on the project participants learnt to communicate with others and developed a sense of achievement from successfully engaging in a variety of activities. The findings of this programme indicate that wilderness programmes may be a successful tool for addressing the growing number of young people at 'risk' of crime and anti-social behaviour and should, therefore, be considered as an alternative option to strategies such as discipline, deterrence, surveillance or imprisonment.