

Discuss the value of outdoor adventure (OA) programmes in a post-modern society:

Today, we live in a constantly unstable and fluid society often referred to as ‘postmodernity’ (Beames *et al.*, 2019). The complexity of society is taxing to navigate for most of us, with the question of our personal value becoming a common quandary. The Great Outdoors is not immune to this issue, with a prominent desire in our postmodern society to consume nature and chase the myth of ‘wilderness’ that stems from our culture (Beck, 1995; Cronon, 1995; as cited in Dickson *et al.*, 2005). This essay will explore the value of Adventure Programmes in our present society.

The Venture Trust offers programmes that support people with criminal backgrounds, addiction, homelessness and other hardships (Venture Trust, 2023a). The trust is based in Scotland and works to rehabilitate individuals through outdoor learning, they believe that time in the outdoors offers challenges that help in the reflection of behaviour and attitude, which contributes to more positive approaches to situations and fundamental life skills (Venture Trust, 2023a). Their programmes run for nine months and includes five and ten day journeys across the Scottish Highlands, concluding this, participants should be able to enter employment or education and maintain a stable position in their community (Venture Trust, 2023b). This programme is critical in re-introducing offenders to society and improving their beliefs and quality of life. Giving ex-convicts the opportunity to rehabilitate demonstrates the value of this programme, its sympathy for societal hardships and how it supports individuals when they choose to change.

The most recent event to impact society is Coronavirus (COVID-19), announced as a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation (Ndiaye *et al.*, 2020), with 6.9 million deaths being recorded from December 2019 (World Health Organisation, 2023).

“COVID-19 changed the world, and the outdoor adventure and experiential education (OAEE) fields were not immune.” (Leonard *et al.*, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic outdoor adventure (OA) programmes struggled with many organisations reporting they had to reduce staffing or close altogether (Leonard *et al.*, 2022), as programmes rely on face-to-face interaction the risk became unjustifiable to continue. The Venture Trust, like other charities, were heavily

affected and had to cease in-person interaction. This was detrimental to the individuals who relied on their services, causing more stress and disruption to their already uncertain lives.

Venture Trust (2020) quickly adapted and formed the 'Be Connected' scheme, this involved online coaching with specialists that helped 393 people improve factors relating to their needs, including well-being and IT literacy; this was successful with 97% of participants. Additionally, the trust attained funding from the Response, Recovery and Resilience Fund which provided grants to participants to help with employment difficulties during COVID-19 (Venture Trust, 2020). The ability of this charity to adjust its programme, and continue to successfully support those who needed them, displays the quality of the programme and the passion of those that run it. As a result of this scheme, individuals with varying backgrounds could continue to improve their health and further their education during a challenging time.

Recently, the Welsh Government proposed a bill that makes Outdoor Education residentials, a minimum of a week's programme, available to all young people during a period in their school years (Senedd, 2023a). The legislation holds the local authority responsible for providing young people with opportunity to experience an outdoor residential and requires local authorities to provide funding for these activities (Senedd, 2023a). This legislation presents valuable opportunities for young people to experience the outdoors and spend a week exploring and learning about their natural environments. During the consultation of the bill, the Welsh ministers had to assemble multiple opinions to debate this legislation. Cardiff University responded to the bill stating that outdoor residential learning, with evidence from literature, enhances physical, mental and emotional health while additionally developing social skills (Senedd, 2023b). The university explains that these experiences encourage pedagogical perspectives that build knowledge for learners and educators and can draft approaches to solving current issues, such as the climate crisis, just from adventuring in an outdoor environment (ibid). As an institution that provides outdoor education the opinion provided by the university should be well informed. The actuality that the Welsh Government is processing this bill demonstrates they believe outdoor adventure is valuable to the development of young people, and the importance of broadening perspectives by learning in a natural, experiential environment is worth making a law about.

Despite these positives, the consultation highlighted the main barriers that demonstrate inequalities in outdoor adventure programmes. Out of 176, 85% of all the respondents stated that cost was the biggest hurdle for providing adventure programmes (Rowland, 2023). With the majority of respondents believing that affording these activities is a main issue, there is an inference that these programmes are not available to those who struggle financially. Breivik (2010) suggests there is a common theme that adventure is available to anyone anywhere if you can pay, this reflects the opinions from the consultation, families with small disposable income may not have the funds to attend these programmes. The reason for this is explained by Beames *et al.*, (2019) that with the evolution of equipment, it is difficult to always have the best gear on the market and very expensive to keep up with the latest kit. For example, a centre where I worked at as an instructor would buy new paddleboards every year. This was to eliminate the potential risk generated from wear and tear, which ensured customer safety, however, this was costly and required the prices of courses to be higher to meet the economic demands of the company. Programmes need to have good quality equipment to provide safe, enjoyable experiences but must invest substantially in order to achieve this. Local Authorities funding residentials as part of the legislation is an innovative approach that promotes inclusivity for young people of all backgrounds and means that cost should not be the barrier stopping an outdoor adventure programme experience.

In our current society, it is evident that fear is a potent force that separates children from the benefits of nature and hinders their freedom (Louv, 2013). Louv's (2013, p86) unique insight links this to a "fear of traffic, of crime, of stranger-danger and of nature itself", we can infer from this that parents are afraid of postmodern society, the outdoors and the rising dangers of our culture. The same fear amalgamates with Outdoor Adventure Programmes where individuals perceive that Adventurous activities are more dangerous than they are, Barton (2007, p2) simplifies this as "misapprehension of risk". This fear is reflected in Mortlock's (1984) four stages of adventure. These stages simplify different types of experiences and how they affect a person, the first three stages are within an individual's comfort zone, but he says that the last stage, misadventure, is the point where panic and fear emerge with the activity being outside of personal capabilities. Mortlock (1984) describes misadventure as a state of mind, and it is possible that individuals will unconsciously place themselves in this category of terror. Linking to Barton's (2007) opinion, it could be deduced that our culture leads to this state of

misadventure and the mindset that certain activities are more hazardous than reality. Although Mortlock's (1984) book is nearly four decades old, his work is still relevant in our current society, and in increasing frequency, this culture of fear and misapprehension seems to be reflected across adventure programmes.

Reed and Smith (2021) argue that young people being exposed to fear is positive and allows them to learn from fearful experiences. Mortlock (1984) explains that experiencing fear and misadventure can be a valuable lesson in developing resilience and determination in times of uncertainty. Additionally, Dodd and Lester (2021) suggest that adventurous play and fear can help children cope with anxiety and allow them to have a better understanding of their emotions. Utilising these perspectives, we can start to understand that fear can be constructive towards development and confidence. I experienced this development with young people in my role as an instructor, they would start the week's programme terrified of the water and the activities, however, by the last day, they would be eager to get onto the water, they would have new friends and their confidence would peak. We can describe fear as a learning experience whereby fear is crucial.

Charities such as Outward Bound International are more conscious of facilitating environmental learning, with sustainability encompassing their programmes (Outward Bound International, 2023). Fang *et al.*, (2017) quotes "Experiences gained through interactions with the environment can have a significant impact on a person's perception of the environment" A personal example of this is when I taught kayaking courses, I would often take groups of out on the river Adur where large volumes of litter would float in the undergrowth, I would gather as much as I could fit on my craft, it would surprise my group with the volume collected, generally adults were more shocked. Adventure programmes promote the protection of our natural environments, with instructors conserving working environments. Gilbertson *et al.*, (2022) explains environmental education changes attitudes and forms an appreciation of the natural world.

In summary, adventure programmes have an instrumental role in several aspects of our postmodern society. With the introduction of outdoor education residencies in the Welsh

curriculum and programmes that support ex-convicts and unemployed individuals rejoining society, we can review these programmes' value across educational, economic and wellbeing factors. Although the evolution of our society inaugurates a mindset of fearfulness for nature and the outdoors, programmes, such as Outward Bound International, encourage resilience while tackling ignorance of our society by teaching preservation and sustainability.

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