

Beauty and solitude

Majesty and beauty

Fragile and breakable

Hell on Earth - or Glimpses of Heaven?

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What is your view on pubs and night clubs serving alcohol at all hours? There are arguments both ways on the pros and cons, but the images we see on our TV screens of city centres when the night clubs spew out their contents (I choose my words carefully!) at 2, 4 or 6am are far from 'healthy'.

How did you feel about HIV-infected needles deliberately being placed in soft seating in trains or cinemas?

What do you think of school bullies; drug dealers hanging around primary school gates; happy slapping videos 'just for a larf'?

None of us relish these thoughts I am sure, but what have these scenarios got to do with outdoor education, or recreation even?

I can already hear the turning pages of Horizons magazine in outdoor centres, university departments and libraries all round the country, wherever Horizons is read ... 'whoever is writing this was having a bad day. I'll read something a bit more outdoorsy ... and a bit less depressing'.

In fact the writer is not having a bad day at all ... other than the challenge of trying to get his thoughts in order and get this article down on

the page. Knowing that an article was due I found myself thinking, why do we take people into the outdoors?

Why do so many people devote their lives to it?

What is so great about the outdoors that we cannot find closer to home? And for many of our clients, that means the city.

This is of course not to say that all urban environments are bad – far from it. Having lived and worked at The Clubhouse, a youth centre right in the heart of London, bordering the London boroughs of Westminster and Camden, I can testify to wonderful things happening in the city. Often it is the news coverage that gives our cities a bad name, and that can even help to perpetuate the problems that do obtain there. The problem for our media producers is the 'Good News is No News' syndrome.

Good news is usually not exciting enough to be newsworthy. It often involves consistent and faithful hard work. Low profile acts of service like the busy mother who still makes time to pick up the pension of an ageing neighbour, or the regular volunteer who brings encouragement in his local hospital or youth club ... stories that are multiplied in our towns and cities across the land.

The simple, dependable act of just being there never brings the reporters running, hotly pursued by their film crews, and thank goodness for that!

And the outdoor enthusiast can also bring great encouragement to those who might not otherwise experience the benefits of getting to know our world better, away from the challenges, and protection, of the city. Many have seen the therapeutic benefits of a spell in the hills as an alternative provision for a group of pupils who do not excel in the classroom, or a dysfunctional team of middle managers from the most respected blue chip company!

There is something real and uncompromisingly solid about the outdoors. It will not yield, even to the most powerful people in society, it blesses and punishes all alike. Yet we can learn to survive better and be more comfortable in it as we learn the crafts that are so often neglected in the everyday life of our towns and cities.

This can bring real satisfaction and comfort, whether it is the art of navigating accurately when the cloud comes down and wipes out the view, which brings the obvious comfort of a safe and sure journey home to fish and chips, a power shower or a hot bath, or the ability to start a fire without firelighters or a litre of diesel, which warms us before we retire to our tents at the end of a long day on the Hill.

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There is a great equality about the outdoors which city life does not afford; and that is one of its great attractions, and one of its greatest disciplines.

I was speaking recently at a conference on 'sports ministry'—how best to encourage our young people through sport. My particular brief was to raise awareness of the outdoors as a

tool that is readily available as an encouragement or training environment for the sporty and the non-sporty alike.

I asked the audience to look at a number of pictures of the outdoors, to come with me, if you like, out of that lecture hall and into the hills, or to the coast for part of the day. I asked them what lessons or benefits we could take from each of the scenarios.

Here are just a few of the pictures we looked at and some of the thoughts that came back from those that were present:

Beauty and solitude:

"Helps us put life in perspective"; "Get our thoughts in order"; "Feel closer to nature and part of it"; "Get some space"; "Take in the beauty of the place and be refreshed".



Majesty and beauty:

"Perspective again – I am not the be all and end all"; "wow, that is fantastic"; "however great man's power we cannot recreate a mountain, even a modest English one!"

Fragile and breakable:

"We need to look after the fragile or it will break"; "the delicate can be so beautiful but it needs to be looked after"; "the closer you look at nature, the clearer the perfection of it becomes – right down to the order inside an atom, as compared with man's 'creations'."



What a playground:

"It is so good to get out there and be part of it all; to be surrounded by the aromas, feel the soft marshy grass under boot and the wind on my face"; "cook tea up there in that fantastic setting; "get home safely – what a sense of achievement"; "I have a contribution to make!"

Power of the sea:

"Power of the natural vs the apparent power of man: comparing a ship caught on a rocky lee shore, with the power of wind and waves that hold it there"; "the beauty of a yacht under full sail requires discipline and clear direction and setting a clear course, where driftwood just blows and drifts wherever, and never really gets under way..."



I was really encouraged by some of those thoughts and it reminded me of what perhaps I already knew. Taking groups out there can make such a difference in their lives and it is such a privilege to be able to do that.

It also reminded me that each year that goes by is another year spent and I need to make each one count – to make the opportunities to share this beautiful world with young people and others who will most benefit from that kind of encouragement – and show them why it is so important to look after it, and how they can do that, both in their home environments and when they are out in the wilder places.

As A.E. Housman reminds us:

*Loveliest of trees the Cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough,
and...[]
...of my threescore years and ten,
Twenty will not come again...
And since to look at things in bloom,
Fifty springs is little room,
About the woodlands I will go,
To see the Cherry hung with snow*

The article is called Hell on Earth or a glimpse of Heaven. I think we tarried long enough on the former at the top of this article, so before we close, some thoughts on the latter.

It may be that you do not believe in a Creator, and believe that this all came together by chance. If that is you then that is some faith you have, I find that too hard to comprehend. They say it is more likely that a gibbon with an Apple computer could come up with the complete works of Shakespeare, or the Oxford English Dictionary – in alphabetical order! For me there has to be a Creator behind all this, and I find the wonder of it all truly amazing.

How awesome the boundless provision of this world is for those that don't have a faith, or believe in a Creator, and how awesome the boundless provision of this amazing world for those that do.

Who knows what heaven will really be like, I certainly can't claim to, although I did get to marry the only Gibraltar girl in the school; but sometimes, when I am watching the deep green mirror-like beauty of a stand of Silver Birches reflected in the undisturbed river in front of my canoe; or I look up at a red kite soaring over the Brecon Beacons, (or even above the

M40 between Oxford and High Wycombe); when I feel the wind and rain on my face as I push up a steepening path in Langdale, or feel the warmth of the rock on a south facing climb in Pembrokeshire; when a seal breaks the surface half a mile out to sea, on the approach to Skomer Island, or a pair of Ospreys circle against a clear blue sky above a grade 1V rapid in British Columbia, ... or when that dear frail lady from our church calls and asks if she can baby-sit to give my wife and me an evening out, I sometimes I wonder if what is best in all these things are glimpses of the beauty, the joy and the perfection of the world to come.

I can't say that is true, but who can say it isn't? There are however few who would argue that there is a timeless beauty in the created (or accidental, depending on your point of view) natural world.

As a friend reminded me recently, when we were running some training on the upper Wye in mid-Wales...

We surf the river for five, ten, maybe even 25 minutes but we must then move on to complete the journey. It is amazing to think that that same wave is still there. In fact it was there before I ever got into a boat, and will still be there when I am too old to think about surfing anything, even the net.

That wave was there, created by the same eternal flow and the solid uncompromising rock, when Henry VIIIth was crowned King of all England, and when King Harold got it in the eye at Hastings.

That is how boundless and generous, how powerful is this world around us.

It might all have been a fantastic accident, or it might be awesome creation, but either way it does us good to get out there and enjoy, to learn and to follow our dreams. And it is even better to share it sometimes with those who might never otherwise have discovered that beauty for themselves. ■

Author notes

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He is Executive Director of Adventure Plus, an Oxfordshire based Charitable provider of Adventure Activities for 5,000 children and young people each year, operating mainly across Southern England. He is also a member of the Adventure Activities Industry Advisory Committee.

Photographs:

All submitted by the author, except Lighthouse from IOL library. 'Fragile' by Fiona Exon, and 'Power of the Sea' by Peter Barnes.

TAKE THE SURVEY

Complete the Natural Capital research survey in response to the ONS call for sector data:

www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/NatCap19

Measuring place

In the last issue of *Horizons* I commented on the request by the UK's Office for National Statistics (ONS) for more data on the Outdoor Learning sector. The ask, part of a drive to place a value on natural capital ecosystem services, highlights the lack of data held on activity in our sector and the value placed on that activity.

For those of you who missed it, here's the link to the survey intended as a starting point for collecting data which can be used by the ONS, whilst seeking to reflect the range of activity in our sector: www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/NatCap19

I anticipate that this will evolve in the coming years with increasing participation from providers of Outdoor Learning across the UK. If you wish to

WHAT IS NATURAL CAPITAL?

The World Forum on Natural Capital says: "Natural capital can be defined as the world's stocks of natural assets which include geology, soil, air, water and all living things..."

Working against nature by overexploiting natural capital can be catastrophic not just in terms of biodiversity loss, but also catastrophic for humans, as ecosystem productivity and resilience decline over time and some regions become more prone to extreme events such as floods and droughts."

Read more here:
<https://naturalcapitalforum.com/about/>

influence the structure and content of this rolling survey, please contact the IOL team at institute@outdoor-learning.org

An important part of the survey is reference to the habitat in which Outdoor Learning activity is taking place. Whilst considering the content of this 'Perspectives', I received a book as a Christmas present that explores our relationship with place. It reminded me of the need to balance development through adventure, with the meaning gained from looking more closely at the places we are already a part of.

Technology and innovations enable us all to view, visit and otherwise experience a vastly increased range of places in comparison to what was possible only a couple of generations ago. We can take virtual fieldtrips, climb ice indoors and watch osprey chicks hatch in real time. When this accessibility is allied to a constantly expanding range of traditional and innovative new adventurous activities to try out, I believe opportunities are being squeezed for us to truly reflect on the places we are engaging with.

What are the potential implications of this? Is a thirst for the 'new and exciting' having a negative influence on the perceived value of the role place plays in Outdoor Learning?

Of course this is nothing new! It is no coincidence that Ken Ogilvie's seminal work on the history of outdoor learning, *Roots and wings*, carries that name. There has long been a tension between the benefits of stretching for the new and paying attention to the reality of the place

in which any outdoor experience is acquired.

It is therefore important that we understand the breadth of the places in which planned and purposeful outdoor activity is being delivered.

I suggest that as a profession we need to maintain a balance and to understand our roles in how that is achieved.

It is appropriate that, as the Institute issues a climate change position statement we are reminded of our code of professional conduct (see page 8). I suggest that it is also important in our response to climate change that we consider how we are measuring our approach; I encourage you to consider how you are recording the different habitats you use, how you share that data to help us all understand what role we play in developing a sustainable relationship with place... and to complete the survey ■

AUTHOR

Andy Robinson
IOL CEO