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We're making progress... but where have all the youth workers gone?

There had many reasons to pause and reflect in the last quarter. The reasons include a clear endorsement of a more joined up sector from the HSE, a very encouraging and stimulating sector wide conference and the passing of Roger Orgill, a key influencer of the shape the Institute for Outdoor Learning is today. All this and more has prompted me to revisit our common purpose as Outdoor Learning practitioners or put another way, to reflect on why we are striving to ensure what we all do is better understood, is more impactful and better valued?

Before you drop this piece as another call for you to commit to more New Year 'good intentions', I'd like to be clear that this is a recognition and celebration of progress. Recognition that, despite the impact of austerity on local authority resources, rising obesity, single use plastics and increasingly urban and technology driven lifestyles, enabling more people to have better physical and mental health through the outdoors has never been a bigger societal issue. We should be encouraged by the increasing profile and significance of outdoor learning, encapsulated by the investment in Nature Friendly Schools by Department for Education and the commitment to Education for Sustainability by Education Scotland. We should be equally heartened that those at a national level looking to our sector to help meet societal challenges are perceiving a more cohesive and co-ordinator approach.

Before we pop open the prosecco, pour the spring water or make another brew, it is important to look closely at what recent surveys are saying about the profile of those who are regularly accessing and benefiting from being in nature. On top of the increasing wealth of evidence about the benefits of engaging with nature, recent reports from Sport England and the All Party Parliamentary Group on Youth Affairs add some important insights. It will probably come as no surprise that the Active Lives Children & Young People survey found a strong correlation between low levels of activity and low levels of family affluence. There was also a similar correlation between ethnicity, with girls from ethnic minority backgrounds being more likely to be less active.

As a sector we have a wealth of provision and opportunities for schools to commission outdoor learning or deliver it themselves. Once you move outside of school led activity the picture is much more mixed. This is reflected in Sport England's report which clearly shows that at a secondary school age daily activity levels are significantly lower outside of school. This becomes

a wider issue when it is considered alongside the APPG Youthwork Enquiry report in which the YMCA is quoted

"Many young people are now missing out on opportunities outside the school setting to engage in positive activities that support their learning and development, opportunities previous generations took for granted."

YMCA quote from APPG Youthwork Enquiry¹

Whilst there are some great youth organisations such as the Scouts, Guides, Cadets and others engaging young people with outdoor activities and the natural environment, the 65% cut in local authority spend on youth services since 2010/11 has inevitably had a massive impact. NCS has enabled some in the sector to reach and benefit more 15 and 16-year-olds, though issue of largely diminished support for outdoor activities for young people from their local communities remains.

I believe the challenge for the Outdoor Learning sector is reaching those young people of a secondary school age identified by Sport England, the Youthwork Enquiry and a recent YMCA report. This will require a different model to that which is employed with schools and NCS. It will probably require a degree of volunteering and some investment. If we accept there is a commitment to end austerity, think that the rise in anti-social behaviour in some communities will eventually attract public funding and believe that the inequality of access to activities needs changing, now may be the time for action.

2019 is the UK government's Year of Green Action. When this is combined with the relatively recent research into the health and wellbeing benefits of volunteering then an even greater case is built for focusing on the models we use to engage with young people outside of school. If you have significant expertise in this area then look out for opportunities to influence the development and funding of such models in 2019.

To get update with the latest sector discussions, resources and vision for the future read the UK Outdoor Learning Conference supplement.

References

- (1) All-Party Parliamentary Group for Youth Affairs' inquiry into Youth Work. (October 2018). <https://nva.org.uk/appg-report-2018/>

