

IS OUTDOOR EDUCATION ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION ?

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Introduction

Is outdoor education environmental education? Should outdoor education and environmental education be linked? Are they overlapping philosophies that draw on each other, or are they disciplines in their own right? Or, does outdoor education alienate participants from the natural environment by promoting a humankind against nature ethic? While many practitioners will acknowledge that in theory outdoor education should endorse and incorporate an environmental component, current research suggests otherwise. Unfortunately, this practice is often overlooked in programme design. Research findings also suggest that the use of natural settings for some programmes do not contribute to programme success. It appears that personal and activity focused objectives are more important.

So then, what is the relationship between outdoor education and environmental education? And, how can outdoor educators incorporate environmental education into their programmes? The aim of this paper is to provide an answer to these questions. This is achieved by reviewing current literature and by discussing the results of a survey (conducted in November 1994) of a sample proportion of outdoor educators from three outdoor associations in Queensland, Australia (the Outdoor Educators' Association of Queensland (OEAQ), the Rockclimbing Instructors Association of Queensland (RIAQ), and the Queensland Camping Association (QCA)).

The Nature of Outdoor Education

The term *outdoor education* has been defined and used in many ways (Priest 1988a). It is a

general term that is frequently applied to programmes or activities that can be, and usually are, conducted in the out-of-doors. Outdoor education is often synonymous with environmental education and outdoor recreation (Priest 1988a).

The term *outdoor education* has also been used to describe a variety of subjective learning experiences which includes personal and social development programmes for clients as widely diverse as 'youth at risk' and corporate managers (see McRae 1990; Priest 1988b; Ford 1981; Hammerman & Hammerman 1973). However, Nichols (1982:1-3) identifies and describes six essential characteristics of outdoor education:

- i. it occurs outside in the out-of-doors;
- ii. it has its participants directly involved in the activity;
- iii. it involves the interpretation of original objects;
- iv. it defines relationships rather than reciting individual, apparently isolated facts;
- v. it involves as many senses as possible; and
- vi. it invites participation because the activity is perceived as being interesting, challenging or even fun.

Thus, outdoor education will mean different things to many people depending on the nature of its application and the context in which the outdoors is used.

While many survey participants acknowledged that outdoor education encompasses the six essential characteristics described by Nichols, much debate centred on the concept that outdoor education occurs outside in the 'out-of-doors'. In fact, 56 percent of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this notion (Figure 1). Only 31 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that outdoor education can only be done in the out-of-doors.

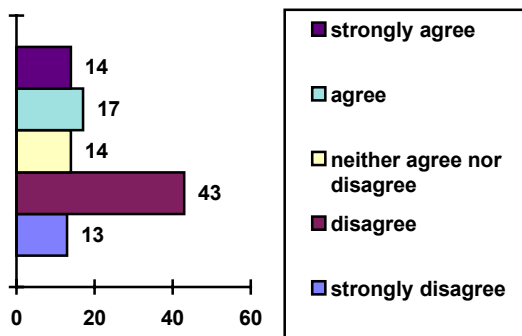


Figure 1: Response to statement that outdoor education can only be done in the out-of-doors

Much of the planning of an outdoor education programme and some of the instruction, such as learning how to use a map and compass prior to an expedition can be completed 'indoors'. However, the actual *doing* of the programme is conducted 'outdoors'. This is because outdoor education implies an interaction between the participant and the outdoor environment (Priest 1986). If a programme is not conducted in the 'out-of-doors' then it cannot be termed outdoor education in light of current assumptions. However, disagreement with this statement may stem from the individual's perception on what constitutes the 'out-of-doors'. For example, one respondent disagreed with this statement on the basis that while she conducted outdoor education programmes for large groups on school ovals and in developed parks, this kept such groups out of wilderness areas. Thus, she stated, 'the programme was not being

conducted in the out-of-doors'. For this person, the 'out-of-doors' may imply significant degree of *naturalness*.

Admittedly, one person's reason for disagreeing with this statement does not explain why so many respondents opposed this concept. The nature of outdoor education is clearly defined in the literature. Or is it? Survey results show that many practitioners disagree that outdoor education can only be conducted in the 'out-of-doors'. Therefore, the 'out-of-doors' may need further investigation. Investigation may well focus on what constitutes the 'out-of-doors'. And the level of naturalness that is required.

Overlapping Philosophies or Separate Methods of Instruction?

According to Ford (1981:18), outdoor education aims to:

produce environmentally conscious citizens that develop lifelong knowledge, skills and attitudes for using, understanding and appreciating natural resources and for developing a sense of stewardship for the land.

This philosophy of outdoor education is not unlike the aims of environmental education that were established by the Tbilisi Declaration. The Tbilisi Declaration recommended that environmental education should prepare individuals for life through the understanding and knowledge of our human society and the natural environment (UNESCO-UNEP 1978).

Data analysis confirmed that a link between outdoor education and environmental education should exist. Eighty-three percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that outdoor education and environmental education should be inter-related (Figure 2).

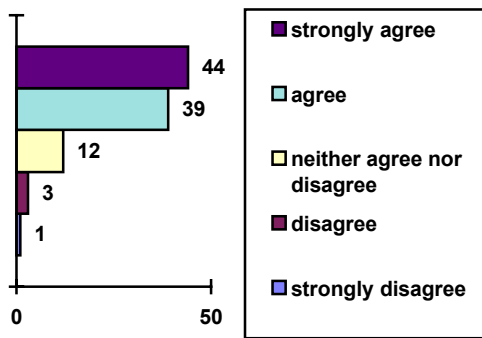


Figure 2: Response to statement that outdoor education and environmental education should be inter-related

Many respondents also provided additional comment on the association between outdoor education and environmental education. For example, one respondent commented that outdoor education and environmental education should be inextricably linked because, while it was important for participants to experience natural areas, it was equally important to preserve the natural areas in which these experiences so often occur.

While it is evident that respondents believed outdoor education and environmental education should be linked, do these two areas of education overlap and draw on each other? Generally, outdoor education programmes may have a range of objectives. These objectives may focus on academic, social, or physical outcomes or any combination of these aims depending upon programme goals. Environmental education programmes may also have a similar range of objectives. Except, an outdoor education programme does not have to teach participants about the environment or about environmental concepts. In fact, 55 percent of respondents were in agreement with this assumption (Figure 3). However, this admission by respondents strongly contrasts with their view that the two disciplines should be interrelated.

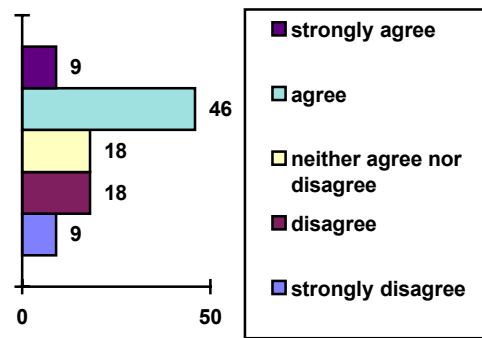


Figure 3: Response to statement that outdoor education does not always teach participants about the environment

Only 27 percent of respondents opposed this statement by indicating that outdoor education should teach participants about the environment. This suggests that, at least, a small group of outdoor educators incorporate environmental education practices in their outdoor education programmes. The other 18 percent of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the context of the statement. Although the majority of respondents felt that outdoor education did not always teach participants about the environment they were strongly against the suggestion that outdoor education promoted the concept of humans against nature. Eighty-eight percent of respondents opposed this concept (Figure 4). However, 2 percent of respondents felt such was the case while a further 9 percent were undecided on this matter.

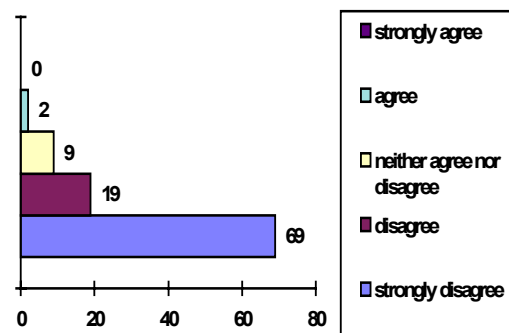


Figure 4: Response to statement that outdoor education promotes the concept of *man* against nature

Not so clear were respondents' viewpoints on whether outdoor education places perceived benefits ahead of environmental well-being. Although 42 percent of respondents opposed this point of view, 28 percent either agreed or strongly agreed that this in fact was occurring (Figure 5). Interestingly, nearly a third of the participants (30%) could not decide whether outdoor education placed perceived benefits ahead of environmental well-being or not.

Positive programme outcomes and environmental well-being should go hand-in-hand. As the use of inappropriate settings may lead to the occurrence of negative social and physical impacts.

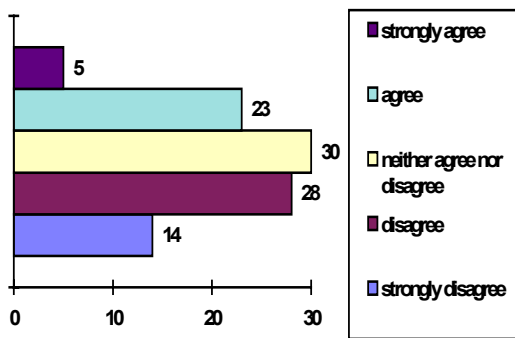


Figure 5: Response to statement that outdoor education places perceived benefits ahead of environmental well-being

In natural settings these impacts may affect other users, vegetation, soil, water and wildlife (Batt 1990). While the majority of respondents were uncertain or disagreed with the notion that outdoor education placed perceived benefits ahead of environmental well-being they admitted that outdoor education sometimes uses inappropriate settings in an attempt to achieve programme objectives. Fifty-four percent of respondents thought that this occurred (Figure 6). Only 15 percent of respondents opposed this statement. The remaining 31 percent neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement.

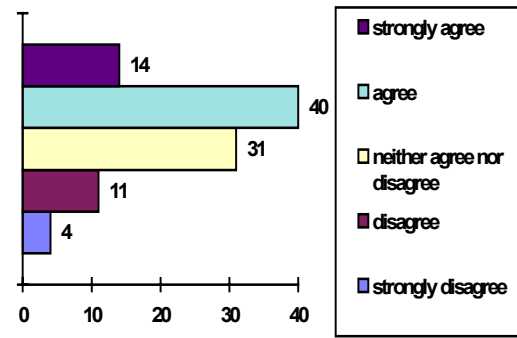


Figure 6: Response to statement that outdoor education sometimes uses inappropriate settings in an attempt to achieve programme objectives

Outdoor educators have a moral responsibility in protecting the environments in which they use (Parkin & Bauchop 1997). This responsibility extends to the maintenance of the setting quality for continued outdoor education use. However, the use of an inappropriate setting may also arise from outdoor educators lack of knowledge of suitable venues or because of circumstances outside of their control. For example, one respondent commented on the fact that many outdoor educators, including himself, will lower their standard of instruction, environmental ethic and choice of setting to appease external forces, especially if these outside pressures affected his ability to earn a living.

It is also acknowledge that it is unlikely that participants will develop an environmental ethic during a single short-term trip or camping programme in a natural setting or wilderness area (McRae 1986; Simpson 1985). However, outdoor educators need to be committed to protecting natural environments and to the implementation of sound outdoor practices (McRae 1990). This may include outdoor educators directing their programmes to more appropriate settings. This will minimise the occurrence of undesirable ecological impacts during programme conduct. It may also lessen

ethical dilemmas experienced by outdoor educators in earning a living. It is evident from these results that while in theory many outdoor educators believe that outdoor education and environmental education should be linked, this in fact does not often occur. This raises the question, what is the relationship between outdoor education and environmental education? Many practitioners may argue that outdoor education and environmental education are separate disciplines or disciplines of a sequential nature. However, they are neither. They are methods for achieving goals (Oliver 1990). This is because outdoor education and environmental education are two methods of a process that aim to facilitate change in the individual through learning (Figure 7).

attitudes, and problem solving abilities compatible with society's current view of the world around us (Cooper 1991; Hammerman & Hammerman 1985).

It is through the outdoors and the relationship between people, the environment, and their activities that our values are developed (Yaffey 1993). Our values of fulfilment, morality, and self-responsibility are best provided through meaningful activity, experience and knowledge in the outdoors. This is because the out-of-doors is an unpolluted source of values that is free of human needs and desires (Yaffey 1993). However, unlike environmental education these values are not necessarily focused on the natural environment. An outdoor education programme may seek to develop values relating to group work, leadership, or self esteem.

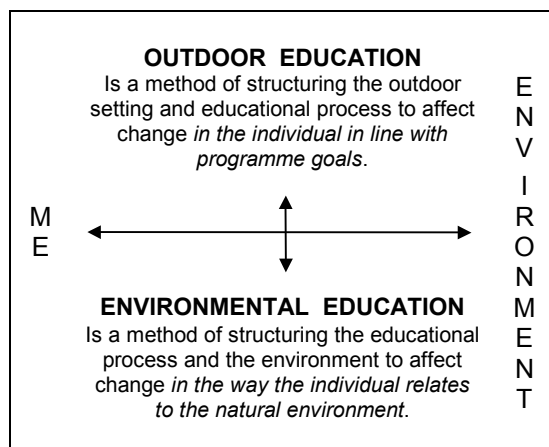


Figure 7: **The relationship between outdoor education and environmental education methodologies** (source: after Oliver 1990:25)

Whilst it can be seen that both outdoor education and environmental education aim to facilitate change in the individual, outdoor education lacks the focus of environmental education. However as a process, outdoor education offers more than the traditional lecture approach to learning, where the flow of information is unidirectional and controlled by the instructor. The learning process is experiential as it helps develop feelings, skills,

Conclusion

While respondents were adamant that outdoor education does not promote a *man* against nature philosophy, opinions were equally divided on whether outdoor education places perceived benefits ahead of environmental well-being. However, this was in contrast to their belief that outdoor education sometimes uses inappropriate settings in an attempt to achieve programme objectives. Yet, many outdoor educators prefer to take their clients to settings that display a degree of naturalness. Therefore, these settings may or may not be the most appropriate location for their programme of instruction.

The ability of the outdoor educator to give participants a rewarding and satisfying experience while minimising ecological impacts will be determined by programme objectives and the programme setting. By conducting programmes in appropriate settings and through the promotion of an environmental ethic, practitioners will significantly contribute to the development of the knowledge, skills and attitudes considered desirable for environmental

consciousness. It is through the outdoors that participants (and our) values, knowledge and experience can be developed. However, skills are not enough, nor are good attitudes without implementation.

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