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RANDALL WILLIAMS, PETER HIGGINS, BARBARA HUMBERSTONE  
AND CHRIS LOYNES

# OUTDOOR EDUCATION IN BRITAIN

## A brief history

Britain has a tradition of exploration, particularly so through its seafaring. Initially the UK's aristocracy developed a thirst for recreational adventuring. During the Romantic period, much text and poetry was made about the beauty of the mountains and the significance of wandering through the countryside. These were largely as a counter to the considerable industrialisation that was occurring. The first Western ascent of Everest was attempted in 1923 by two English men, Mallory and Erving.

The enclosures of the land in the 18th century by the gentry removed much of the right to access to the countryside from the masses. However, in the 1920's, 1930's and 1940's the civil protest movements of the working classes challenged these limits through mass trespasses which gained greater access. The development of the Youth Hostel Associations in 1930 provided affordable accommodation for greater numbers of young people to hike in the countryside. The voluntary sector has had a significant influence on providing access to the countryside and adventurous experiences to many young people. The Scout movement was instigated by Baden Powell in 1908 when he brought together boys from Eton with working class boys from Portsmouth to the first scout camp on Brownsea Island, Poole Harbour. The Duke of Edinburgh's Award founded in 1956 gave to ordinary young people the opportunities for challenge that had only be available to the upper classes through residential schools such as Gordonston, in Scotland.

Gordonston School with the Moray Sea School was founded in 1934 by Kurt Hahn, the originator of the Salem School in Germany in 1920, following his escape to the UK from the Nazis. He then founded the first Outward Bound centre at Aberdovey in Wales in 1940 (Parker and Meldrum, 1973). Outdoor education, much influenced by Hahn, continued to develop. There was a growth of residential centres, some independent charities like Brathay Hall, initiated in 1946, together with a huge development of local authority provision initiated by Whitehall in Derbyshire in 1950. Hahn was certainly one of the founders of outdoor adventure education, but several British proponents have also made their mark on its philosophy and practice. Notably the works of Colin Mortlock (1983) and the lesser known Harold

Drasdo (1972) have clearly had a significant effect on thinking in the UK.

In the 1970's outdoor education was probably at its peak in terms of educational popularity, support and provision. Since then however restrictions on funding and changes in educational philosophy at governmental level have had significant effects in the late 1980's and 1990's. Despite this there is great diversity in provision. Not only were outdoor education experiences made available through statutory, voluntary and charity provision but also the commercial sector developed to provide for the increasing interest in outdoor activities from the general public in the form of recreational and family holidays with an emphasis on outdoor activities.

The 1970's also saw the birth of outdoor management training which grew in popularity throughout the succeeding decades. This approach combining the outdoor experiences with group work in an experiential education framework became known as development training. As an approach it had a significant influence on outdoor youth work especially with so called disadvantaged groups (cf Hopkins and Putnam 1993). The same ideas are currently providing an underpinning for early piloting of therapeutic applications of the outdoors.

## Major influences

The roots of outdoor education as a distinct subject area in the formal and informal education sectors are spread both deep and wide. It is probably true to say that at various stages in its development its proponents have been functional, reactive, opportunist and occasionally proactive. Most of the developments in the UK have taken place in response to events of national or legislative significance and even with the benefit of hindsight it is difficult to discern a pattern or clear direction. Perhaps because of its inter- and multi-disciplinary approach it is difficult to place developments against a time line.

The many significant events and initiatives in the UK between the early 19th Century and early 1970's are considered in some detail by Parker and Meldrum (1973). To summarise, the most significant of these themes are:

- the impact of legislation relating to protection of the countryside, (eg National Parks, Forestry Commis-

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sion, Protection of Wildlife etc) holiday provision for employees;

- increasing public awareness of exploration through expeditions to the Arctic, Antarctic and the greater ranges (especially the successful ascent of Everest in 1953); the development of environmental studies in education through a number of significant reports and education acts, a number of which make direct reference to the educational importance of direct contact with the natural world;
- the development of outdoor activities in education which had its origin in physical education provision in the 19th Century, but subsequently became the more directed 'character development' promoted by amongst others Kurt Hahn (the founder of the Outward Bound movement);
- the 'progressive' education movement which grew in influence throughout the 20th Century until the 1970s, and its reliance on experiential educational techniques;
- the growth in interest in outdoor activities which show dramatic increases from the 1950s onwards.

The overall consequence of this mixture of influences was significant in that forms of outdoor and environmental education were considered to be a 'good thing' and legislation which allowed or promoted this form of provision was brought forward (eg 1944 Education Act).

### Recent Trends

In the early 1970s, degree courses were established at a number of colleges and universities in the UK (see Parker and Meldrum, 1973). The main institutions offering such courses were Charlotte Mason College (Cumbria), I M Marsh College (Liverpool), Moray House College (Edinburgh) and University College of North Wales, Bangor. Additionally many colleges (eg Loughborough) incorporated outdoor education as an integral part of their physical education teacher training courses, though this provision is now very limited. In recent years many other Further and Higher Education institutions have entered the field, offering a wide range of levels of education and training courses in aspects of outdoor education.

During the 1960s it was fashionable for education authorities to establish their own provision and many models were devised. However one major consequence was the development of residential outdoor education centres and many local authorities had their own by the late 1960's. Outdoor education probably found its most substantive educational justification throughout this period in the theory of experiential education. This 'student centred' approach argues that the learning potential of direct experience is more substantial than other approaches to education. Its significant advocates stretch

from Aristotle in ancient Greece to, amongst many others, Dewey and Freire in the 20th Century.

Formal outdoor education provision has seen something of a decline in the UK since the 1970's and there may be many reasons for this. Amongst these perhaps the most significant are reduced central funding to local education authorities and a lack of a firm foothold in the academic curricula of schools. Whether the lack of favour for a direct experiential approach to education is the result of a change in educational dogma, or the change in dogma a result of an expedient approach to reduced funding is difficult to discern. Nonetheless the tension between a traditional academic approach and an experiential approach exists at all levels of outdoor education provision, and a lack of funding for the smaller group sizes required is a common problem. The Education Reform Act of 1988 clearly had a significant effect on local authority provision for outdoor education. It both reduced funding for local authority residential centres and with the instigation of a National Curriculum did not initially specifically include outdoor education (cf Humberstone 1992). Later however outdoor education was included as a part of the physical education curriculum in the form of outdoor and adventurous activities mandatory for 8-11 year olds. This was made optional in 1998.

Underpinning adventurous activities has been the explicit requirement that those people teaching in the outdoor should hold qualifications awarded through the National Governing Body (NGB) award schemes. The schemes are concerned with such activities as mountaineering, climbing, canoeing, sailing, orienteering and caving etc. Many of these schemes have highlighted the under-representation of women and minority groups as leaders/teachers in the various activities (cf Sharpe 1998; Skinner 1992). Attempts to address these imbalances have been made by many of the NGB and by national membership bodies such as Association for Outdoor Learning (AfOL) formally the National Association for Outdoor Education (NAOE) (cf Willis and Russell 1995).

Outdoor education in the UK is both wide in its provision and broad and deep in its philosophical perspectives (cf Higgins and Loynes 1997). It has been influenced by external economic and social forces but it has been and is significantly shaped by many individuals and groups who are committed to the benefits outdoor education appears to provide for a diversity of people and perhaps society.

\* This is an amended version of the Presentation by Randall Williams at the European Congress in Edinburgh. This paper combines it with some of perspectives presented in the 'Outdoor Education and Experiential Learning in UK' (1999).

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*Correspondence to:*  
*Randall Williams*  
*Bowles Outdoor Centre*  
*Eridge Green*  
*Tunbridge Wells*  
*TN3 9LW*

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