

# PERSPECTIVES ON OUTDOOR EDUCATION AND VARIETIES OF GEOGRAPHY

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**In this extended article, Adam provides an insight into views of outdoor education. He uses questions and perspectives to encourage us to find meaningful connections between outdoor education and geography.**

This article is informed by my varied experiences in outdoor education and from my studies in ecology, environmental science and geography. No way is it presented as a comprehensive or complete analysis of the subject, but rather as an overview of ideas about geography's relationship to outdoor education.

There are many forms of outdoor education and many kinds of geography. Both subjects are diverse in themselves as are their ranges of theoretical connections, historical relationships and educational applications. However, outdoor education does have a clear relationship to geography, especially physical geography, in terms of its origins, methods and epistemological approaches.

The dominant value systems and epistemological approaches that characterise most outdoor education enterprises are firmly rooted in scientific materialism and an anthropocentric worldview, originating from physical geography and the natural sciences. This relationship imparts a mindset that characterises many aspects of outdoor education in terms of its theoretical approaches and practical applications.

## **A geography of the past: looking outwards**

Outdoor education is associated with a set of attitudes and perspectives that reflect its connection to geography, a subject that developed in the historical context of scientific materialism, exploration and colonial discourses (Pyenson and Pyenson, 1999). Geography embodies a set of dualistic, materialistic and Eurocentric ideas about land, space, nature and culture (Cohn, 1996; Gregory, 1994). It has a value system that is anthropocentric and stresses the domination, subjugation and exploitation of nature. These ideas and

values pervade outdoor education and are often manifested in its implementation.

Doing outdoor education tends to be about teaching pupils to know the natural world through identifying, naming, classifying and describing its characteristics and components. Pupils come to know nature through naming its parts, mapping, measuring and quantifying it. They are taught scientific theories and encouraged to see nature as an external space to be understood through empirical analysis of its natural phenomena and processes. This perspective on nature reflects an underlying set of philosophical assumptions and epistemological stances that can affect the way pupils perceive and relate to the outdoors.

Outdoor education (especially outdoor pursuits) tends to emphasise that nature is a wild external space where humans have to overcome challenges and battle the elements. Nature becomes a testing ground, where aspiring youth have to prove their strength, endurance and courage in the face of external forces: to climb the peak, to hike the distance, to persevere through the extremes of heat and cold and to come out on top. We stress that natural space needs to be conquered and dominated, or explored and exploited.

In fact, many methods used in outdoor education internationally today actually seem to encourage and endorse an irreverent and exploitative attitude towards nature. Take for example pond-dipping and bug-collecting. These methods are commonly employed in outdoor education projects wherever there is a pond or a stream, a rock-pool, an area of woodland or a meadow. Pupils are given nets or bug boxes and instructed to collect (capture) living organisms from their habitat. Although there are recommendations on how to do this (e.g. 'don't hurt the animals' or, 'put them back where you found them afterwards unharmed'), generally speaking, organisms become 'collateral damage' as pupils hunt them down, scoop them up and trap them. After the dust has settled and the pupils have gone, what remains often looks like a war zone.

By providing the equipment and instructing pupils to carry out these activities we, as educators, are implicitly endorsing such behaviour and encouraging

the attitudes that underlie them. Although the didactic objective of encouraging exploration and curiosity is arguably noble, the reality of this kind of approach promotes ideas of domination over nature and exploitation of other living beings. I am not saying that the activities are 'wrong' in themselves, but that we should transcend these kind of outdoor education methods and adopt other approaches.

A generation ago, it was acceptable for aspiring young naturalists and budding scientists to search for birds' eggs and nests or capture and kill butterflies for their natural history collections. At the time, such behaviour was seen as 'normal' and these kinds of exploitative (and arguably cruel) activities were regarded as socially acceptable, but are these the kind of behaviours and attitudes we want to encourage pupils to adopt today? By directing pupils to engage in such activities as pond dipping and bug collecting, we are undoubtedly reinforcing old-fashioned ethical standards about humans' privileged place 'over nature' and our right to exploit other living beings with little regard to the consequences or ethical implications.

## **An engaged and responsible geography**

Children need wild, natural places to explore, connect and engage with (Nabhan, 1994). Such environments are the essential components in children's lives that help foster health, intellectual development and emotional balance (Louv, 2005). Outdoor education has an important role in this respect, and should provide an opportunity for pupils to access and learn safely in wild spaces (Figure 1). The approaches and methods educators use will affect the way that this is done. What worldview are we communicating with our teaching and mentoring? What message are we passing on? What stories are we telling? What meaning are we imputing? How will this affect pupils' development and well-being? These kinds of questions become important when we consider the role we play in helping determine how pupils view themselves and relate to their world.