

Of Elephant Blankets and Sieves

Designing a Professional Body for Outdoor Education

By Peter Higgins.

Introduction

In an article published recently in this Journal (Higgins, 1997a) I argued that we should consider a move towards a single professional body. The article was born from frustration at our apparent inability to meet the challenges the 'Outdoor Sector' faces as a result of the present political and economic situation in the UK, with anything like a proper unified voice. The title (Too many singers and not enough songs?) was meant to indicate my impression that, broadly speaking we have a great deal of agreement about what our aims and objectives are when we work (whether for money or not) with people in the outdoors. However, despite this agreement so many of us seem to be tugging or pushing away at our own little bit that the net result is little movement, and certainly no prospect of predicting what direction if any we will eventually move in.

For me the importance of the issue has come into greater focus since I heard the following statistics on the radio recently (Radio 4 Today Programme, November 1997):

Fairground Accidents - 1987 to 1997

- * Over 1000 accidents reported to Health and Safety Executive
- * 13 of these were fatal

The Government is now insisting that regulation and inspection are improved but there seems no likelihood of a self-funding licensing scheme comparable to the Activity Centres (Young Persons' Safety) Act. Compare this to our own sector over the same period when 9 young people died (actually under the supervision of unqualified staff or when not being supervised).

The most recent incident was Lyme Bay which was the prime factor motivating the Bill which subsequently became the Activity Centres (Young Persons' Safety) Act. This is self-funded by the outdoor sector, a precedent unique in safety legislation in the UK. I have argued previously that both the accident and the subsequent legislation may have been avoided if we had had a strong professional body which set standards for instruction and represented members' interests.

There has now been a great deal of debate in the outdoor press about this issue, much of it from individuals and bodies also frustrated with the situation. Despite my intention to avoid getting caught up in the debate I feel that some of the issues raised warrant elaboration. Whilst I do not believe that the case for a single professional body has yet been fully debated and won, there seems little point in making the case 'for' all over again. Instead I will attempt to suggest ways in which we can move the debate forward and, if we are willing, get 'there' from 'here'.

Elephant Blankets

Apparently an 'Elephant Blanket' is a very large piece of paper used in advertising agencies to allow members of a group to engage fully in the early stages of a planning process by writing down their thoughts on the matter. By invoking this concept I am suggesting that this is an important process which should be driven by as much consensus as possible within each organisation. The opinions voiced need then to be summarised and set alongside those of other organisations. One way of achieving this would be to derive some form of simple questionnaire for distribution and summarise the results in 'Horizons'. I would suggest that as much of the questionnaire as possible should be common for all interested organisations.

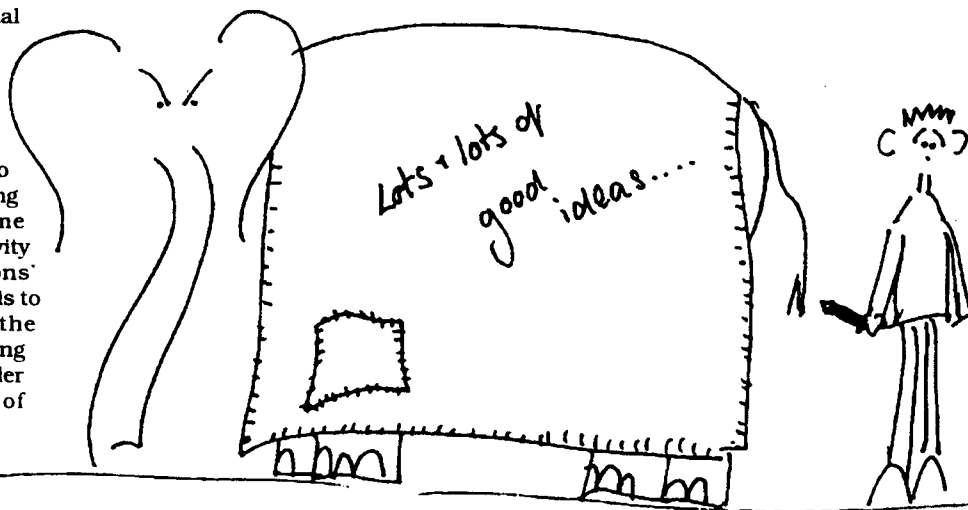


Illustration by Mary Higgins

Sieves

The sieve is a metaphor for assessing who is in and who is out. It may well be possible that with a bit of 'shaking about' a few of the organisations which initially didn't look like fitting through the holes would drop through to join the others forming the new association. The shape of some organisations may well be such that they would never fit. This should not necessarily pose a problem but there are important implications and initial choices for the formation of a professional body. These are debated later.

Responsibilities of a Professional Association

The following may be considered as a prompt list during the initial debating stage to decide what we actually want.

A. To Ensure Quality of Provision

- Establish and promote a coherent philosophy and aims (eg Higgins and Loynes, 1997)
- Set and monitor professional standards for courses
- Set standards for Individual Members (Qualifications, Code of Conduct, Training, Directory)

B. To Represent Members' Interests

- Inform and educate
- Promote status - lobby, advertise, badge (!)
- Protection and insurance
- Conditions of service

C. To Comply with Legal and Moral Responsibilities

- Safety - HSE, Activity Centres Act etc
- 'Client care'
- Sustainability / Local Agenda 21

What would I write on the Elephant Blanket ?

I have previously stated my own personal wish list for a professional organisation:

- A clear voice to represent my interests and those of any 'clients'
- A code of conduct
- A register or database of members and their qualifications
- A forum for debate on the changing nature of Outdoor Education
- Benefits such as legal protection and insurance
- Appropriate professional training
- Simplicity of communication and administration.

I recently asked a group of 20 Outdoor Education students to collectively write their views on their own 'elephant blanket'. All have some experience of working within Outdoor Education (ranging from a few months to many years) and all hope to work in the field in the future. They came up with the following more extensive list:

- A proper outdoor educational philosophy to underpin the aims of the organisation
- National recognition and respect
- NGBs - please sort them out (too many fees and validations)
- Membership database
- High standards - supported by a code of conduct
- Democratic inclusive structure
- Wide representation
- International recognition of qualifications
- Insurance scheme for members
- Proper financial basis for employment contracts
- Good internal communication and to the outside world
- Policy making (public opinion, environmental issues, mainstream education)
- Political influence
- Funding - to work it must attract a lot of members and also find sponsorship
- Strong identity and promotion of this image
- Proactive approach

I know from speaking to them that a major concern for them are the job prospects for their future careers and that they would choose to add to this list the request that any professional newsletter or magazine should give details of jobs available throughout the UK.

The views of such a group should be taken seriously by those of us currently employed in the field and in particular by any organisations which might like to recruit them as members. At present only 2 are members of any outdoor sector organisation other than NGBs, and I believe none have attended any meetings of such organisations. Although the number surveyed is small, the implications are serious if this trend is true for the rest of the UK.

What goes through the sieve?

Every individual and organisation will have a particular perspective on the present situation and the suggestion of professionalisation. Here are a few of the 'natural divides' which will need to be considered early on in the decision whether or not to proceed to a single organisation and which would have considerable bearing on what an organisation would look like. This is not meant to imply the situation needs to be 'either / or' as it could include both sides or indeed be focused more towards one end than the other.

PaidUnpaid
Education.....Recreation
Provider.....Purchaser
Individual.....Agency
Charitable.....Commercial.....Public Sector

Paid / Unpaid I have never seen this issue as one simply delineated by financial transactions. However, there is no doubt that this will be a major factor in the debate and is of great concern both to those who believe that they do a professional job and should be paid accordingly, and to those who have worked with voluntary organisations for years who believe themselves to be none the less professional in their approach.

Education / Recreation Historically our roots were in individual recreation in the outdoors and this became formalised into Outdoor Education. This may be seen as both an attempt to address the perceived needs of the time and to establish a reason for existence through established learning outcomes and practices. This was in a sense driven by a political agenda. What has changed over recent years is that it has become established practice that one may pay for a provider to deliver adventure experiences. With the decline in Local Authority funding many schools now buy their students such an experience with a commercial provider.

Provider / Purchaser The type of organisation I have sought to describe so far seems to fit best with providers as members. However, it is conceivable that purchasers of outdoor services would also benefit from the infrastructure through access to up-to-date information, databases etc.

Individual / Agency Both might well be accommodated, but perhaps with a different fee structure, privileges etc.

Charitable / Commercial / Public Sector This divide is now becoming increasingly hazy as more and more establishments seek charitable status. The rights and wrongs of this situation, the perceived lack of a level playing field (especially by those in the commercial sector) are not issues for debate within the context of this article. Perhaps the way forward is to suggest that a professional organisation might have relevance for all types of providers.

The progress of the above debate is important as it effectively establishes the framework for the **Code of Conduct**. I see this as vital for the initial credibility of the organisation and in effect sets the scene for future development.

What would a Professional Association look like?

The following may be a basis for discussion. It assumes that money would be available for the appointment of paid officers, and this issue will be discussed later. It sees up to three paid officers as focal in the provision of services to members and involvement with all aspects of the organisation. My own preference would be to encourage a democratic membership based structure and for the Board to have a relatively small part to play, primarily assisting the paid officers. Voting systems might be arranged to allow a high degree of involvement of the members.

Cautions

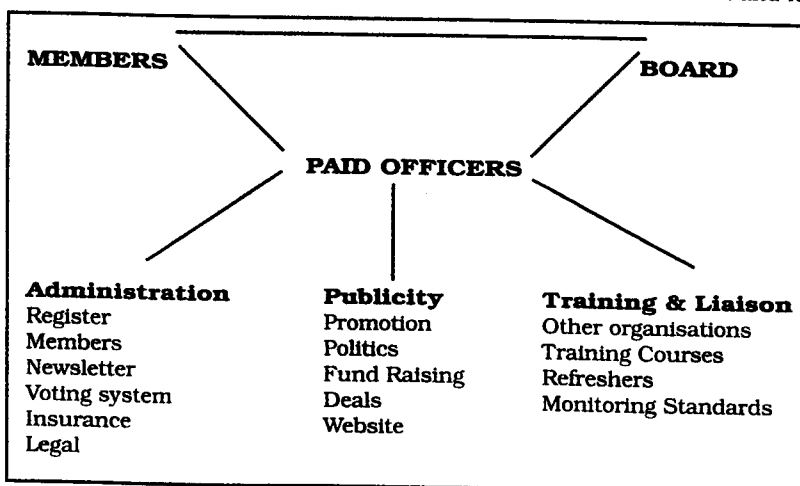
The following seem to be amongst the most likely areas where problems might arise.

- **Avoid stagnation** in the Board. If the organisation is vibrant and the task not too onerous there should be no shortage of new recruits to sustain say a 3 year maximum period of service.
- **Avoid complexity**. This is the main reason for trying to sort the situation out in the first place!
- **Work with AALA** (Adventure Activities Licensing Authority) if possible. They now have a lot of experience and information at their disposal and should be interested in our attempt to promote professional standards.
- **Work with NGBs**. This relationship may pose the most difficult issues to resolve. At present S/NVQs have made little impact, and although the NGBs were not established for the purpose of validating our practical activities this is effectively what has happened and their awards remain the common currency of practical competence. In a sense we have evolved a symbiotic relationship with them whereby each side benefits. For the time being perhaps we should concentrate on issues of professionalism and see how our relationship with the NGBs can be simplified (eg combined membership fees etc) and developed (eg register of members etc).
- **Set high standards** and don't reduce them to be too inclusive. There will be voices arguing that everyone should be included - this will be a fundamental test of adherence to a code of conduct. There might also be room for grades of membership.
- **Image counts** - Name and Logo must be professional

Image

I have never been keen on the idea that image is of over-riding importance. However, realistically it clearly is, especially if one is dealing with individuals representing organisations who do care about such things. I do not wish to be too damning and do not wish to offend, however I do wonder how I would respond if I was a Government Minister faced with a letter with an NAOE logo or written by an organisation called SCOETR (pronounced 'scooter')! (Scottish Council for Outdoor Education, Training and Recreation). There is an old saying, which I reluctantly quote (as I have never followed it!) which advises that 'you should dress for the job you want, not the job you have'. The thought that one might be judged on appearances is counter to much of our shared philosophy as outdoor educators, nonetheless it seems realistic to present a comprehensive professional image as well as demonstrate professionalism in depth.

Why bother? Well I could argue that this is important to reassure those we work with and I believe it to be true. However, I am much more concerned that we present the best image possible to those who have influence in our destiny. It should be a key function of any single professional body that it works to reassert the values of Outdoor Education and Outdoor Recreation and to turn the financial and legislative tide.



An Umbrella Organisation?

Recently the NAOE Newsletter addressed the issue of a single professional organisation and asked Mary Dodge to design a cartoon on the theme of 'an umbrella organisation'. The intention is clear: namely that all the existing bodies should consider coming together to form a single one. This might imply that all bodies continue to exist, or perhaps that all should merge into one. My own view is that we should move towards a single organisation but that the metaphor of an umbrella is worth developing.



I believe that umbrellas should.....

Be easy to use
Protect the user
Be shared with others
Not poke others in the eye
Have a 'designer' label
Be pretty colours!

This may seem a little 'twee' but I feel that our organisation should be similar. Namely that it should be useful, look good and be used with awareness of others.

Concluding Comments

I may be accused of losing sight of the 'romance and idealism' which has characterised our field over so many years. I wish to restate that this is not my intention nor do I believe that this ethic is necessarily lost if we become more professional. However, the world has changed, whether we like it or not. If previous multiple fatalities in the outdoors had not had dramatic implication for us, Lyme Bay certainly has. So have substantial budget cuts in Local Educational Authority expenditure. I believe we must somehow respond if Outdoor Education provision is to develop, or even continue to exist. I offer a few more thoughts.

The Baby or the Bathwater? I am well aware that the furtherance of this debate requires that all of us consider our own positions and those of the organisations to which we belong. A great deal of tradition has give rise to the ways in which we have organised ourselves and there are genuine concerns that we don't 'throw out the baby with the bathwater'. However, I believe that the present situation is unsatisfactory and our lack of a single voice both fails to encourage outdoor providers to become engaged in the debate and feel part of a profession, and is also unable to act to protect or develop what remains of outdoor provision in the UK.

Image and Substance: It seems quite possible that as a result of attempting to establish a professional body we become all image and no substance. This is a concern I share with Loynes (1996) who describes the shift towards commercialism and 'adventure in a bun'. However, this is not a reason to reject a professional body as I would suggest that if Loynes' argument is valid, then such a body with a well defined philosophy, code of conduct etc should be precisely the organisation to address such issues. Furthermore, such considerations start to open up the really

important advantages of such a body. I believe that we will never be truly professional until we are prepared to take a long hard look at what we do and insist on high standards of delivery, 'client care', understanding and application of educational and developmental principles etc. In other words we need to find ways of assessing whether we meet professional standards. These are very difficult issues to face and even harder to resolve, but the other path seems far less attractive. A professional body should work on these issues and perhaps develop a good working relationship with the inspectors of AALA to help deliver good advice to providers. Monitoring, sponsoring and integrating research should also be a key role as in the long run this is vital for the future success of the subject area.

The Academic and the Technical: At least one correspondent has interpreted the case for a professional organisation as a call for more academic qualification. This implication had never occurred to me as I had focused on a willingness to work within the NGBs being a condition of membership. I am well aware of the lack of NGB qualifications for much of what is done in the outdoor sector but I don't think this means the affirmation would not be a worthwhile one. Furthermore, I have now given the 'academic training' argument some thought and am inclined to conclude that if we agree a philosophy and aims: establish a link between the learning outcomes we purport to deliver for those in our care and what we actually do; and adopt a practice of looking openly and honestly at the programmes we run and the success we achieve, then perhaps we should insist on professional training and assessment of these qualities too. I can think of no quality more characteristic of a profession than an agreement on the underlying philosophy. Despite attempts by a number of authors (eg Higgins and Loynes, 1997) and organisations (eg NAOE) to promote such a debate and encourage consensus we still seem to be a long way short of this.

Relationships with NGBs: Aspects of a professional relationship with those with whom we work are not generally included in NGB training and assessment courses, and yet so much of what we do requires an understanding of the breadth of opportunities available in learning out-of-doors and of ways in which we can encourage this (Higgins, 1997b). The process is sophisticated and a professional association should not rely on the NGBs to provide it. The implication is that we should either do this ourselves (through an in-house training scheme) or perhaps 'validate' other courses. I suggest these options with some reluctance as we are already bewildered by the range of qualifications on offer. However, perhaps one of the first jobs of a professional body should be to attempt (with the co-operation of the NGBs) to sort this out. The fundamental question seems to be 'what training and qualifications do we need to do the job?'. Most of us do not need high level NGB awards but these are usually the ones we seek as they are a recognised 'currency'. Training and qualification in other facets of our work seems less attractive, perhaps because it may not (on the face of it) seem to be much to do with walking, canoeing, climbing etc. For example Cooper (1997) has made an attempt to match a variety of outdoor activities with the sorts of learning outcomes (in PSD terms) we might expect to encourage in those we work with. Awareness of such possibilities should be implicit in any training for the profession, but there are of course many other dimensions too. The truth is that we need to develop a wide range of such skills. Perhaps a professional association should take the lead in addressing what we might need and how it is provided.

A Voice in Education Policy Development? According to Halls (1997) one of the main reasons for the collapse of Outdoor Education provision in Strathclyde Region was that Local Authorities are not statutorily obliged to provide but are merely 'permitted to spend public funds on it'. Where has our voice been in promoting statutory provision, or indeed in pushing for the inclusion of Outdoor Education during the development of new curricula. For example, according to one Local Authority Outdoor Education teacher (Smith, pers com) there were no Outdoor Education representatives involved in the development of the Scottish '5 to 14' curriculum. Whilst this focus on education might not be of immediate interest to all, it should be borne in

mind that much of the business that comes to the commercial and charitable sectors is the result of Local Authority or school initiated courses.

Reaching the Profession: In the year 1996-97 NAOE membership was 779 (all categories including individuals, group members etc) and was 'continuing to decline' (NAOE Annual Report). I do not have figures for all the other advisory groups such as Heads of Centres, Advisory Panels etc but I am sure none of them reach anywhere near these dizzy heights! Set this against the figure recently estimated during a careful survey by SPRITO (Sport and Recreation Industry Training Organisation) of 50,000 in paid employment in Outdoor Centres and perhaps as many as around 100,000 in total (including these together with unpaid workers and small scale private operators) in the outdoor sector in the UK (SPRITO, unpublished data). This begs an obvious question..... 'why are more people not involved?' There may be a number of reasons but it is clearly pointless to aim for a single professional body unless we are able to provide something which makes it almost unthinkable to not be a member. We need to collect the membership fees to appoint the staff to provide the services which attract the members!

How do we deal with people of all sorts joining this organisation? One way may be to establish several grades of membership for say paid and unpaid members. There may other considerations too based on the degree of benefits and involvement required. As I said earlier though, I believe it to be vital that all those who join sign up to the code of conduct, work within agreed qualifications structures (NGBs), understand and apply the principles of education outdoors etc. This should not be compromised or we won't have a professional organisation, we'll have another (moribund) one.

Same Dance, Different Tune: If the spectre of us organising ourselves to form a single body seems improbable, I would cite the unlikely example of the formation of 'Scottish Traditions of Dance Trust'! Until 5 years ago there were a number of organisations (about 10) in Scotland which had an interest in these forms of dance. Communications were poor between them and knowledge of these traditions was dying out at an alarming rate. Several individuals worked hard to bring the organisations together and the result is now formal support from the Arts Council, around 1000 members, 3 paid officials (development officers) and 3 paid assistants following a successful bid for lottery funds (£250,000 grant). However, by far the most important point

is that well focused effort has led to the preservation of an important cultural tradition which was fast dying out. I am sure a number of readers are smiling at the example cited (though I could have picked a number of others), which I have chosen precisely because it has parallels. Scottish traditional dance conveys a certain image: would probably be thought of as of marginal interest outside of the field: has not been successful at promoting its image: is certainly not a core academic subject and has been in serious decline over recent years. Sounds a bit like Outdoor Education to me.

I also recently heard through the 'grapevine' of the British Outdoor Professionals Association! I do not know how professional or representative they are. No-one I have spoken to in our field has heard of them and yet to someone not 'in the know' they sound just as creditable a voice for our profession as NAOE, AHOEC etc etc. I am not sure I can think of any more eloquent case for a single professional body.

Responding to Opportunities: The Government have recently announced a £2 million scheme in Scotland to encourage Secondary Schools to appoint 'sports coordinators' for out-of-schools sports activities (see Times Education Supplement, February 13, 1998, p5). Also in Scotland there is a new curriculum development (for students in their last year of secondary school) called 'Higher Still'. How can we be sure our profession can respond to opportunities such as these and other UK wide initiatives when any energy we have continues to be dissipated in so many directions?

Working Together - Our Specialism! My final comment is a wail of despair at the following conundrum which has puzzled me for some time. Ken Ogilvie (1997) recently made a similar point which he referred to as an 'irony' and is I think worth developing. When we get backed into a corner and are asked to justify what we do the most common form of response is to say that we encourage personal and social development in the individuals and groups we work with. If pushed further we will explain this by saying it is about feelings of self-worth, considering the needs of others and learning how to work together in a community or team. Why is it then that we seem to be so reluctant to develop as a community ourselves?

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Biographical Note

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