

Too Many Singers and Not Enough Songs ? Towards Professionalism in Outdoor Education

By Peter Higgins

Introduction

A visitor from another world, listening at the door of a meeting of any of the organisations which have a claim to represent the views and interests of Outdoor Educators in the UK might be excused for thinking that we had more representative organisations than members. As professionals working in the field, and members of a number of these organisations I have to say that I am frequently bewildered myself. Imagine then the difficulty Outdoor Educators face when explaining the situation to with politicians (both local and national) and representatives of Local Education Authorities, Local Enterprise Councils, Tourist Boards and the like. Add to this the difficulty we often encounter when asked what outdoor education is, and it is perhaps little wonder that others don't seem to understand us or our 'message'.

The complexity of the situation recently became apparent when S/NVQs were being developed and the Sport and Recreation Lead Body attempted to consult with a body representative of the views of outdoor education, and then during the drafting of legislation following the Lyme Bay canoeing fatalities, when the Health and Safety Executive attempted to consult. The HSE have encountered great difficulty in drawing up a list of providers, as have the newly appointed Adventure Activity Licensing Authority.

The situation in Scotland is both simplified and made more complex by the fact that a number of the organisations have a Scottish incarnation as well as a UK one. The complexity arises from the increased range of bodies, but as the outdoor education community is smaller there is perhaps a better communication network.

I have recently collated a list of most of the organisations relevant to our work. Here is a list of some names and acronyms which is by no means exhaustive. Just ask yourself if you knew what the acronyms meant, the function of the organisation and what benefits and responsibilities (where appropriate) are implicit in membership. For clarity I have arranged these in sub groups. (If you want a summary of some of the information relating to each see 'Who Speaks for Outdoor Education?' (Higgins and Michie, 1997).)

Advisory Panels

Outdoor Education Advisers' Panel (OEAP)
Scottish Advisory Panel for Outdoor Education (SAPOE)
Association of Heads of Outdoor Education Centres (AHOEC)
AHOEC (Scotland)
Activity Centre Advisory Committee (ACAC)

Organisations with their Origins in Vocational Qualifications (VQs)

Council for Outdoor Education, Training and Recreation
Institute for Outdoor Careers and Qualifications
Scottish Council for Education, Training and Recreation (SCOETR)
UK Liaison Group

National Legislative Organisations

Adventure Activities Licensing Authority (AALA)
Tourism Quality Services (TQS Ltd)
Health and Safety Executive (HSE)
Adventure Activities Industry Advisory Committee (AAIAC)

(None of these bodies would claim to speak for outdoor education, and their function is essentially regulatory.)

Organisations with Individual Membership

National Association for Outdoor Education (NAOE)
NAOE (Scotland)

Other Organisations

British Activity Holidays Association (BAHA)
Scottish Activity Holidays Association (SAHA)
Foundation for Outdoor Adventure

National Governing Bodies

Lots and lots! Sometimes NGB's have an organisation for every part of the UK (eg BCU, SCA, WCA, CANI all represent canoeists) etc.

In case there is any suspicion that I am being critical of these organisations, let me reassure the reader that this is not the intention. I am a member of many of these organisations and bodies and am satisfied with my involvement. So what am I on about then?

What Do I Want ?

Put very simply the answer is 'a professional organisation'. What then are the components of a professional organisation? These are subjective and everyone would want different things. However, I can offer my own 'wish list' which would include:

*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

These deserve some elaboration but I will avoid too much detail as I wish primarily to raise the issue of principle for debate.

professional association would attempt to negotiate with the NGB's to establish at least some 'generic revalidation' courses. I have in mind themes such as 'our responsibilities and the legal framework', 'environmental issues and education', 'promoting skill acquisition', 'encouraging social and personal development' etc. Just imagine what is to be gained from a range of people of different disciplines coming together to cover such topics. I don't even think there would be many 'jobs for the boys' lost as there would still be a need for NGB revalidations, and anyone with something worth contributing would have more work in these generic revalidations. I believe that such provision would be worthwhile and would simplify our lives.

Simplicity

If any organisation or individuals take these suggestions seriously I believe they should ask the question 'would this measure/change simplify rather than complicate the overall situation?' If the answer is 'no' then don't do it unless there is a very good reason.

In this discussion I have made frequent use of the term 'Professionalism'. What do I mean by it? I have debated this elsewhere (Higgins and Sherrington, 1997) and so will avoid elaboration here other than to suggest that it may help the reader to reflect on instances when he/she has been exposed to a lack of professionalism. This certainly helps me to clarify the term and its implications, and we have used this approach in working with the staff of organisations who were devising their own codes of conduct.

How will I get my 'New' Organisation ?

Will it be evolution or revolution? I suspect that it will be neither. I cannot imagine those involved in the committees of many existing organisations voting to merge with others unless the membership dropped to an unsustainable level. Similarly I cannot foresee a rash of takeover bids. I'm not even sure this is desirable.

So is the search inevitably doomed to fail? Perhaps, but I believe that if one organisation offered the majority of the advantages mentioned above (and others I have not thought of) it would soon become popular

with those in the field. The NAOE does fit the bill to some extent but I would like to see it respond to meet these needs. It is after all a National Association. The new magazine 'Horizons' may also have a role to play but it will need support.

We are frequently told that we live in a free market and it may well be that there is someone out there who is sufficiently frustrated with the current situation to set up a new organisation. Most of the suggestions I have made require little more than standard office facilities.

Am I prepared to pay for it? Yes, if it does what I want it to do; especially if it simplifies my life, reduces the payments I make to other organisations for things such as insurance, and is to the overall benefit of the profession.

Concluding Comments

It is all too easy to confine ourselves to a narrow view of outdoor education and forget that there are many who work in the field who are 'switched off' by what seems to be a more exclusive than inclusive definition. I have in mind the many organisations and individuals who work in 'activity holidays', the Countryside Ranger Service, the voluntary sector etc. As we are seeing a decline in formal provision many children and adults get their first taste of the outdoors through organisations such as these. Indeed the Scottish Environmental Education Council recently organised a seminar on matters of current concern in outdoor education in Scotland. This was sponsored by Scottish Natural Heritage and is as far as I know, the most substantial attempt to raise the profile of the debate on the potential consequences of a decline in provision.

Any representative organisation would therefore have to give very careful thought about its name. Is the use of the word 'education' likely to encourage members in or intimidate? I am an Outdoor Educator and proud of it. I think education is what we 'do' but others may not take as broad a view.

The popularity of outdoor activities has never been higher and continues to grow. Rock climbing and mountaineering are the fastest growing sports in the UK, being responsible in 1996 for a tourist income of £149 million into the Highland and Islands of Scotland (HIE, 1996). Are there an

increasing number of professionals introducing people to the outdoors? If so, which organisations do they join at present and can their needs be met by the professional association I am arguing for? I have the feeling that we are somehow missing the boat. The world is changing out there (where we used to spend our time before we chose to sit at word processors and write about it!) and I hope we can respond to it.

In writing this I feel a little presumptuous and am aware that I am open to criticism for not delivering 'The Answer'. It seems to me that the degree to which individuals and organisations are prepared to support this is a matter for debate within the many organisations listed above. However, I am a little pessimistic about the prospects for the very reasons I raised the issue in the first place, ie that we do find it difficult to communicate our views through existing organisations and the situation is confusing. I suggest that as this magazine is the only one on offer at present and is supported by two of the major organisations listed above (NAOE and AHOEC) this is the proper place for people to make their views known (rather than write to me!).

I am aware that this is a highly contentious area and that some may be offended by this article. Whilst writing the foregoing discussion I have been aware of the large amount of work many individuals from representative organisations do on our behalf, and no criticism should be implied. I do however believe the debate is vital for the future of outdoor education and outdoor activities provision in the UK. My intention is simply to stimulate that discussion.

Acknowledgements

This article owes much to discussions with a wide range of colleagues in the field, to whom I am indebted.

A Clear Voice

I raised this issue in the introduction. I believe it confuses ourselves, politicians and elected officials when we refer to the wide range of organisations above.

We have to face the fact that there has been a decrease in many forms of outdoor education provision over the past few years and we seem to have been unable to squeak loud enough to do much about it. Whilst I don't necessarily believe it would have made much difference at least we might have felt that a concerted effort was being made.

I have the impression that a number of those in the field (myself included) seem to spend a lot of time in meetings with people whom we see at other meetings discussing the same issues we discussed at those meetings! The issues are serious, they need discussion and warrant action; however it seems to me that a lot of information gets photocopied and passed around which eventually comes to rest in a filing cabinet. This information is often valuable for all of us in the field and it would seem to me to make sense if there were a central collation and distribution point. A newsletter or magazine which covered the field and was well presented would be ideal. Access to the same information on a Website would be valuable too. As professionals I believe we should be prepared to pay something to support this service.

A Code of Conduct

A willingness to adhere to a code of conduct is a hallmark of professionalism. I, and I'm sure many others, have one which we never write down and rarely reflect upon. It is none the less real for that. As for what a written and agreed code should contain I believe this should be decided to some extent by the members (who are after all going to sign up to it). To do this is not an easy matter but could be attempted by offering options for a vote. I have my own ideas of course, most of which would not be contentious. However I feel strongly that one condition of membership should be an agreement that members will not work outside the provision of the Activity Centres Act. This is, after all, the law and those who operate outside it would by definition be the kind of people who should not appear on the Register or Database.

Furthermore, I have great respect for the work of the NGB's and the high degree of professionalism many of them exhibit. I find it difficult to accept the argument that any of us should work outside the regulations or recommendations of the NGB's, and so would suggest that agreement to work within the remit of the NGB awards we hold should also be a requirement of membership. Failure to agree to such a framework seems to be only to the advantage of those who seek to use unqualified staff. Conversely, I believe that adherence would result in organisations having a 'market advantage' in advertising etc.

This might be a contentious extrapolation but I feel inclined to suggest that an ethos where it was impossible for employers to ask professional staff to work outside their NGB awards would have prevented the Lyme Bay fatalities, and the need for the subsequent Activity Centres Act.

Implicit in this suggestion is a shift towards some sort of 'quality assurance' resulting from the decision of individuals to join the organisation and register their adherence to a professional ethos. This already works successfully for a number of NGB's.

For those without appropriate awards some form of associate status could be offered.

A Register or Database

There seem to be great advantages in openness regarding members and their qualifications. I would propose that a database be established and this should contain details of all members, their qualifications and work address details. For those available for work, the database should give details of when and where they could work. It is my view that this information should be available to anyone who requests it and preferably accessible on a Website. There may be reasons to hide details of qualifications but I can't think of them. We spend years of our lives getting these awards and we work professionally and safely within them.

A Forum for Debate

There seems to be so much change in the provision of outdoor education that it is difficult to keep track of developments. I would like to see relevant information collated and presented in an easy to digest form which would be widely available. It

seems that the proposed development of the Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Leadership into a magazine (Horizons) and a journal (JAEOL) might help in this regard, but it still needs someone to do the work! I do not have a short term solution for this but eventually I would hope that the membership fees and sales of the magazine would justify it.

Membership Benefits

I would like a one-stop-shop for my insurance. I would like to be insured to work within the NGB awards I hold. I know I already am in most cases but some of the schemes are optional and different benefits are available under each. I would like to be covered on my own holidays anywhere in the world whenever I am away and I would like those with families to have options to extend cover. Again there are schemes available and all I am asking for is simplicity. I believe this would be a major attraction to potential members.

What we do professionally is extremely safe and accidents are rare. However, in the event of a claim being made against me I would like to be confident that my professional organisation would provide full support through a protection scheme.

I'd also like a badge! I probably wouldn't wear it as I don't wear any others but there seems little doubt as to the value of a good logo and badge. I will avoid naming names but suffice it to say that some make a greater impression than others. This may seem trivial but it clearly works and is, I believe, vital.

Appropriate Professional Training

There are a number of possibilities which come to mind in this context. For example I am increasingly bewildered by the number of NGB awards which must be regularly revalidated, and I think a professional association might have a part to play to help me.

It is quite reasonable to expect those involved in the schemes to remain up to date but there seems little acknowledgement of the fact that many of us are involved in a number of different schemes and there is much crossover of information. I may be 'baying at the moon' but I would like to think that a

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Acknowledgements

The views expressed are my own and should not be taken to represent those of any of the organisations of which I am a member.

Cross Reference

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Outdoor Education and published elsewhere.

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D'LEARY T. (1996); '*Nae for the Likes of Us*': Poverty, Agenda 21 and Scotland's Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations; Edinburgh; Scottish Affairs; No. 16. Discussion of the degree to which conservation NGO's tackle the alienation from nature of the poor especially those in 'urban ghettos'.

SHIELDS D.L.L. and BREDEMEIER B.J.L. (1995); *Character Development and Physical Activity*; Champaign, Illinois; Human Kinetics. This book looks at the links between sport and physical activity and personal development including morality, moral action and character development.

The editor would appreciate recommendations for this column.

"Reviewing Adventures: Why and How"

Author: Roger Greenaway

Published by NAOE ISBN 1 898555 01 X

This new publication takes the form of a long essay first written for an unpublished book. Roger Greenaway has been practicing and teaching reviewing as a Development Trainer for many years and has had the opportunity to explore his ideas extensively with youth and adult groups.

The booklet opens by explaining the place of reviewing within experiential education and its relationship with related activities. Whilst an accurate and well written account I have some difficulty with a model that leaves the reader feeling that a 'good' programme must include a review. In my experience good reviewing can enhance many developmental objectives but it can also take away from them. There is also such a thing as 'bad' reviewing and perhaps the field should develop criteria to identify what may be 'bad'.

The next chapter goes a long way to doing just that. It is a readable explanation of the purposes and scope of reviewing which every practicing reviewer could benefit from reading. It has the potential to help practitioners choose a focus, time and style for the review in a more considered manner. It also forms an excellent framework for reviewing your own reviewing experiences!

Greenaway's third chapter is an interesting integration of different reviewing models. He claims there is nothing so practical as a good theory and this certainly works for me. However, the models are all drawn from the realms of humanistic psychology. Although this has been the traditional theoretical framework for Development Training it has its limitations which, I believe, it is time to explore. Maslow and Rogers, are Greenaway's main sources. The humanistic definition of growth has many of the problems associated with growth in the economic world and, I suspect, will have the same sustainability questions as a result. Reviewing is in danger of contributing to this as 'The City' contributes to a growth economy.

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