

# Outdoor, environmental and sustainability education (at The University of Edinburgh)

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[www.education.ed.ac.uk/outdoored/](http://www.education.ed.ac.uk/outdoored/)



# Underpinning philosophy - How we understand the outdoors/health

- 'Engagement with the outdoors' is a valuable and perhaps necessary feature of human development.
- Education outdoors should be an accepted corollary to education indoors.
- Through educational engagement with the outdoors a number of developmental processes can be promoted - e.g. health, physical activity, environmental understanding, personal and social development etc.
- This issue is worthy of detailed critical scrutiny through research, but also as a feature of the training of professionals in the field.
- Staff are committed to teaching (mostly at postgraduate level) and research in the field.
- A strong feature of this is interdisciplinary work.

# Range and Scope of Outdoor Learning

Physical activity  
Tackling obesity  
Life-long activity  
Skill development  
Adventure sport

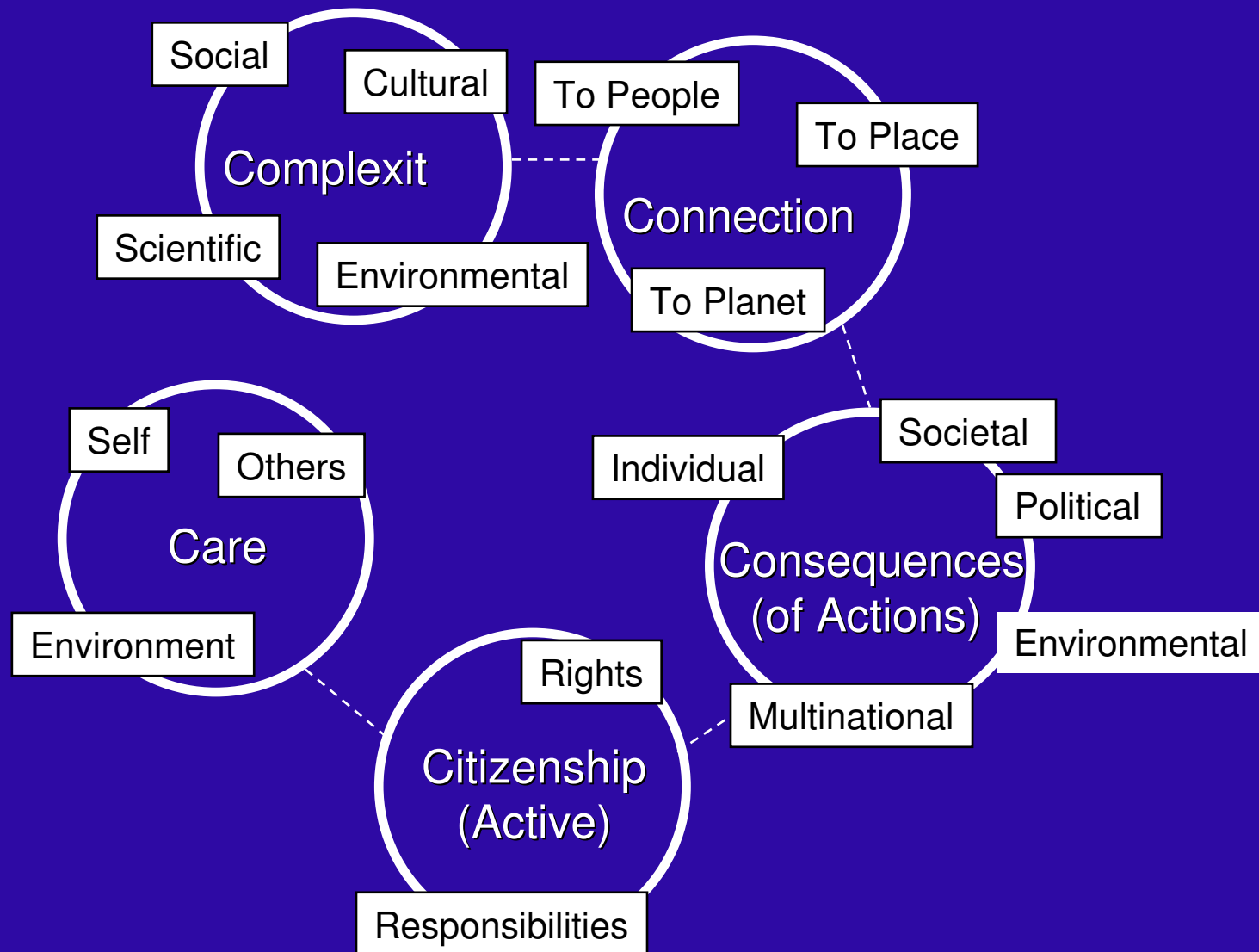
Wellbeing  
'Greenspace'

Sustainability  
Field Studies  
Biodiversity  
Awareness of local area  
Cultural landscape



Self-awareness  
Self-esteem  
Social development  
Communal living

# Taking Responsibility & the 'Five Cs'



# Research in the field (in general)

- Research in outdoor education is limited in quantity, scope and rigour (with some notable exceptions).
- The main reason for this has been a lack of curricular requirement, hence relatively few academics in the field and poor funding.
- Focus has been on philosophical and definitional issues and some empirical work on 'effectiveness' of 'interventions' in programmes in personal and social development.
- Little work has been done on process, 'relationships with place', environmental understanding, activity patterns, life-style choices etc.

# Research themes, philosophies & traditions influencing our work

- Experiential education and constructivism
- Acknowledgement of interdisciplinarity of the field
- Significance of 'environmental sustainability'
- Scrutiny of 'received wisdom' of the benefits
- Importance of impact on practice in the field
- Importance of 'political impact'

# Staff and student base

- Four full-time academic staff specialising in outdoor learning
- Five other full-time staff with strong involvement in outdoor learning (environmental and PSD)
- About 14 full-time and part-time PhD students and a number of MSc students in the field
- One part-time research assistant )+ others *ad hoc*
- All part of a wider community within the university and beyond

# Our research relates to our 'model' of outdoor learning and is in the three main areas

Personal and Social Development / 'Citizenship'

Environmental / Sustainability Education

Health (well-being, physical activity, tackling obesity)

Landownership and related issues (e.g. access to the countryside)

# Personal and Social Development / 'Citizenship'

- Staff involvement in PSD, merits of expeditions etc
- Critiques of process and claims
- Edinburgh PhD studies, e.g.
  - *Christie* (2002) North Lanarkshire & 'Outward Bound' - Students' perceptions of improved social & academic skills. Link between OL and the 'dispositions' concept.
  - *Westphal* (current) Friluftsliv – Norway and Scotland patterns, trends and beliefs in personal and social development
  - *Stonehouse* (current) Character Development in the Wilderness
- Research contracts - e.g. Venture Trust, Sail Training etc. (work with young people 'at risk' etc)

# Health

## Evidence of life-long activity patterns?

- Outdoor recreation - high participation rate; lifelong activity patterns; low stress on the body etc.
- *Telford* PhD Study - Ardentenny LEA Centre (1973 to 1996) - positive influence for 75% respondents - continuing activity outdoors; encouraging outdoor activity for children and family life; integrating outdoor experiences into their working life; or sparked an awareness and appreciation of the natural world.

... is this because of outdoor educational experiences?

... is this because of 'Greenspace' - relationships people have with the environment?

# 'Greenspace'

## Impact of 'greenspace' on health & wellbeing?

- Longstanding argument for being outdoors. Increasing academic interest in this issue
- *Geyer* PhD Study - 'The potential impact of greenspace on physical activity and well-being in Scottish teenagers' (ESRC, TSG, CAHRU).  
'Is there is an association between provision, use of green-space and physical activity and levels of subjective well-being in Scottish adolescents? It will also explore attitudes to green-space; how such spaces support developmental needs. (Mixed methods + physical activity monitoring)
- '*Greenways to Health*' - Natural England + Groundworks Northumberland. Evaluation of young people's engagement with local greenspaces.

# Environmental/Sustainability Education

Being *in* 'the environment' and its processes - a longstanding argument for outdoor learning though somewhat neglected by practitioners.

- *Takano* (2004) Bonding with the Land: Outdoor environmental education programmes and their cultural contexts.
- *Kandemiri* (2007) A Comparative Study of School-Based Environmental Education in Zimbabwe and Scotland.
- *Harrison* (current) Wild Praxis: Place-based outdoor environmental education
- *Yildirim* (Sept 2009) An investigation into the use of outdoor activities to learn about environmental issues for elementary level students in Turkey
- (Staff involvement in Scottish National Parks, Land Reform and 'Access' legislation, EU teacher education projects, UNESCO - ESD project etc)

# Landownership and related issues (e.g. access to the countryside, sense of place)

Land-ownership 'matters' to the people who own land and also to those who don't.

- Higgins, P., Wightman, A. & MacMillan, D. (2002). *Sporting estates and recreational land-use in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland*. (ESRC).
- Riddington, G., Higgins, P., & Radford, A. (2004). *An assessment of the economic impact of water-related recreation and tourism in the catchment of the River Spey*.
- Contract research work for Scottish Government (SNH and LTS) on 'access' etc.

# Research methodology and methods

- Emphasis on qualitative approaches (with some quantitative studies)
- 'Mixed methods'

# The links between outdoor use, health and behaviour

- Our knowledge is mainly anecdotal and from the literature
- There is a strong belief amongst outdoor educators and environmental educators that there are developmental benefits
- There is a similar strong belief in the field of outdoor recreation

# Our most significant OHN-related recent research projects

- Series of research contracts for Scottish Natural Heritage and Learning and Teaching Scotland (over a three year period) on:

*Teachers' approaches & attitudes to engaging with the natural heritage.*

*Working with Local Authorities to deliver first-hand experience of the natural heritage through the formal education sector.*

*Outdoor education: the views of providers from different contexts in Scotland.*

Summary report ... Nicol, R., Higgins, P., Ross, H. & Mannion, G. (2007). *Outdoor education in Scotland: A summary of recent research*. Perth: Scottish Natural Heritage.

- 'Outdoor journeys' (Beames and other staff). Working with Primary Schools on a pilot project to help them learn about local ecology, architecture, human geography, and history.
- Policy dimension to these studies.

‘There is governmental support for the role of OE in the delivery of curricular and non-curricular educational themes such as personal, social, environmental and health education.’

‘Despite widespread provision there is no national framework, no statutory requirements, regulatory mechanisms, formal teaching qualifications, quality assurance or educational policy to encourage the delivery of, or to establish and maintain the standards of outdoor learning experiences.’

Nicol et al (2007)

# Young people have views too ...

Young People value experiences that:

- are fun or enjoyable, often involving doing something new and doing activities that engaged the senses;
- leave them feeling uninhibited: being 'free', outdoors, setting their own agenda, not being rushed, being close to nature;
- feel authentic and contingent, i.e. relating to the hands-on nature of practical activity, encounters with animals, being exposed to the effects of the weather and not always knowing what will happen next.
- What young people value in outdoor experiences depends on the way three dimensions interact: the *context/place*, the *activity* itself and *social aspect*.

(Mannion et al, 2007)

# By Leaves We Live

This is a green world, with animals comparatively few and small, and all dependent on the leaves. By leaves we live. Some people have strange ideas that they live by money. They think energy is generated by the circulation of coins. Whereas the world is mainly a vast leaf colony, growing on and forming a leafy soil, not a mere mineral mass: and we live not by the jingling of our coins, but by the fullness of our harvests.

Sir Patrick Geddes

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