SUSTAINABLE FUTURES

Naomi Greenwood explores how outdoor educators can promote a sustainable future

Author profile

Naomi Greenwood is a Senior Outdoor Education Instructor working at Heatree Activity Centre on Dartmoor. She is a qualified teacher and delivers a wide range of adventurous and environmental activities. She has a particular interest in accessibility, equality and sustainability in the outdoors.

Sustainability is one of the buzzwords of the moment. We see so-called 'sustainably sourced food' in our supermarkets and restaurants, businesses and schools that have 'sustainable travel plans' and political rhetoric that looks towards a 'sustainable future'. There are national and international initiatives to promote 'Education for Sustainable Development' (ESD), such as the UK's Sustainable Development Strategy (1), but what does sustainability mean and how can we as outdoor educators play our part?

What is sustainability?

Our understanding of our place in the environment and the impact we have on it is not new. In 1992 David Orr claimed that "ecological literacy is becoming more difficult, not because there are fewer books about nature, but because there is less opportunity for the direct experience of it" (2).

The guiding principles of the UK's Sustainable Development Strategy would argue that sustainability is about more than just consideration of human impact on the planet and its resources, instead they challenge us to live sustainably in all aspects of life. This means living within environmental limits, achieving a sustainable economy, promoting good governance, using sound science responsibly and ensuring a strong, healthy and just society (1). More recent initiatives such as the United Nations Decade for Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) and Curriculum 2030 have sought to generate not just awareness of environmental and sustainability issues, but to stimulate the development of skills and experiences which lead to action (3).

I find this broader definition of sustainability helpful. If we just get stuck in seeing sustainability as about climate, or living within environmental limits, the debate often gets stuck when people consider the cost to themselves, whether financial or in terms of convenience. Broadening the definition helps re-frame those aspects in a more balanced way. For example, aiming for an economy which is sustainable for the long-term as a specific goal helps us to re-frame our short-term self-interest in favour of a collective long-term gain. Similarly, setting out the need for a society that celebrates diversity creates opportunities for all and is governed in a way that enables people to actively participate gives everyone agency. For me, feeling that I can personally make a difference is a big factor in not succumbing to apathy and accepting the status quo.

What is the current situation?

As a community of providers, I think that many of us in the outdoor learning sector have grasped the simple concept that the outdoor environment is linked to our livelihood and would echo the sentiment of the Institute for Outdoor Learning's Environmental Sustainability policy that "it is in their interests to conserve the resource on which they depend". The same policy encourages members to contribute to the maintenance and conservation of sites which they use. This is a step in the right direction, even if it is motivated by self-interest, however, our impact on the outdoors is greater than just our own presence whenever we take a group into this environment.

There is an increasing body of evidence that recognises that simply knowing about environmental issues does not always motivate a change in a person's behaviour (4). For genuine change to occur, studies found that students need opportunities to reflect on themselves in the environment. When given opportunities for reflection, students were more likely to have considered their relationship to the non-human world, evaluating their attitudes and values which are the drivers of behavioural change.

How can we make a difference?

As outdoor professionals we have the moral duty to be ambassadors for the outdoor environment. We have both a great opportunity and responsibility for facilitating the immersive experiences which are valuable in shaping behaviour for the groups we lead. One of the earliest tools taught to many new outdoor instructors and educators is the 'plan, do, review' cycle (a simplified version of Kolb's experiential learning cycle). This cycle can be adopted by outdoor practitioners not just for ourselves, but to facilitate reflection with the groups we lead. It is not enough for the activities which we lead to be great experiences, because experience without reflection is unlikely to result in lasting changes in behaviour. This reflection could take a number of forms and, if the broadest understanding of sustainability is used (as per the UK's Sustainable Development Strategy), might cover a wide range of subjects, for example:

1. Encouraging a group planning a Duke of Edinburgh expedition to reflect on their training expedition as they take ownership of their own route, food and team logistical planning (promoting good governance).

- Facilitating the group to consider all their experiences and to make choices in a way that includes, and values, the experience of actively participating in decision-making. As plans are made, you can encourage the group to reflect on the process.

- Questions to pose: Does everyone feel heard and valued? Are creative, or alternative viewpoints encouraged? Are there particular people that excelled in drawing others into the process, or were only a few dominant voices heard?

> " **Do you feel that you, as an individual, are able to affect change or make a difference?** "

2. Using the National Outdoor Learning Award (NOLA) to work on character education concepts and taking responsibility for self and others (ensuring a strong, healthy and just society).

- For example, on a low-ropes course a group might be working specifically on the NOLA competency of "I helped with kind actions". During the activity, the focus may be on their group as a micro unit of society. They may only be seeing the impact of their behaviour in a small and local way, but the concept of being responsible for another person can help to make the wider link to the ways in which our actions impact others in other parts of the world.

- Questions to pose: How does it make you feel when others help you with that problem? Are you able to do things that you couldn't have achieved alone?

" **What impact can you have on wider society?** "

3. Discussing the impact that leaving rubbish has when you stop for a snack or participating in activities to improve the local environment such as a park litter-pick or two-minute beach clean (living within environmental limits).

- Whenever I take a group out for a day on Dartmoor we inevitably find litter, whether it is our own or the result of other land users. The simple act of picking it up and taking it home with me is noticed by the group, even if I do not make it a particular teaching moment. As we are walking along, it generates conversations and natural moments of reflection on the places familiar to the participants and how they interact with them.

- Questions to pose: Do you see litter in your local area or special places? Do you see people caring for those places? How does it make you feel to see them treated in a particular way?

" **How would you like people to behave in those places?** "

Conclusions

When provided with both knowledge and experience of the natural world "people will care about it, want to know more and want to do something about it" (5). As outdoor educators we are the front-line of reaching the heart of the issue and facilitating a more sustainable future. It is my intention that each group I interact with is given the opportunity to connect with the natural environment and their role and responsibilities in it. To take a moment to stop and appreciate it in some way, or perhaps even contribute to improving it. For me, that is more than just moving through a space, or using it for an activity. It is my hope that when they leave that environment, they will have a greater respect for it, what makes it unique, the animals, insects, plants or birds that call it their home, and how it feels to be there. Perhaps they have had an opportunity to consider their choices around governance, finances and economy, or where they fit into society.

One of the locations I love to use with groups is an abandoned medieval village. In it we get to explore how people have lived in the past and often play a game role-playing trade and daily life in the village. What is fascinating to watch is the way in which the participants are often less interested in the fairness of those trades and are out for whatever they can get, until we review the activity. Suddenly, with some space to reflect, they realise how unsustainable it would be trying to cheat and rip off their neighbours while living side by side over the long term. They start to realise that things they might get away with once would hurt them over the course of time when no-one trusts or will interact with them. And while some still walk back home bragging about the time they managed to trade a whole pig for six jugs of milk, I usually also overhear brilliant conversations about the trades that were fair, the ways in which they drew the imagined community together planning weddings or facing hardships, and how much they felt a sense of pride and ownership of the house that they had been allocated. Walking out of the village, I no longer need to remind even the most enthusiastic participants to use the doorways or avoid climbing on the walls because they now see it as a 'place' not just a collection of stones. If I can help someone to care, even just a little, about the space that they have been in, then I believe that can make a difference to their values and, thus, their current and future behaviour ▲

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TAKING AWAY TECH

Dr Jack Reed discusses the latest guidance from the UK Government on banning phones in English schools and what impact this might have for outdoor education

Author profile
Dr Jack Reed is a Postdoctoral Researcher on the ESRC-funded Nature Recovery and Regional Development (NaRReD) project at the University of Exeter. His previous research has focussed on young people's constructions of nature through networked spaces in residential outdoor education contexts.

The place and use of young people's mobile technologies and social media in outdoor education environments has seen increased interest over recent years. In February 2024, a new special issue in the Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning was published on the topic (1), and we are beginning to see consideration placed on the impacts of social media, the metaverse and artificial intelligence on outdoor education globally.

Looking at education more broadly for a moment, the UK government has just published guidance for schools in England on banning mobile phones. The guidance states "that all schools should prohibit the use of mobile phones throughout the school day – not only during lessons but break and lunchtimes as well" (2). This means that schools in England will be phone-free environments. Interestingly, the guidance also makes mention of residential trips, stating that schools "should determine how they wish to manage the use of mobile phones by pupils on residential trips or trips outside of the normal school day. Schools should ensure that pupils' educational experience on a school trip is not disrupted by the presence of mobile phones and should consider prohibiting or restricting their use" (2). Guidance essentially applies the in-school phone-banning guidance to away-from-school educational visits, including outdoor education.

In response to this guidance, I have just published a critical article with colleagues that draws on the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child, and specifically on young people's rights in relation to the digital environment. The UN state that young people have the right to access information through technology and "that the exercise of that right is restricted only when it is provided by law" (3). Given the UK government's stance on banning phones in schools does not constitute legally binding statutory guidance, this raises important questions for all education providers considering banning young people's phones. In particular, does the removal of a young person's phone breach their protected human rights as stipulated by the UN?

The stance in our paper encourages caution on the part of outdoor educators, educators more broadly and policy makers, especially in relation to young people's right to access digital information and their right to culture, leisure, and play. These factors are clearly outlined in UN human rights documentation and suggest that all those involved in decision making around young people's mobile phones consider how banning phones could breach young people's protected human rights. This could be particularly relevant in any outdoor education context where removing young people's phones is considered either standard or desirable practice. Our full article on this topic is freely available to read (4) ▲

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