



Walk on the Wild Side

by Amanda West

As a fifteen-year-old on my first ever trip to the mountains of Snowdonia, I was fortunate enough to complete the Snowdon Horseshoe, in near perfect conditions. As I made my way down from the last peak at the end of the day, just as the sun was setting, I experienced feelings of happiness, pride in what I had achieved mingled with a sense of inner calm. I knew from that moment that mountains and the outdoors would play a significant role in my life.

A long-term love of mountainous and wild environments has influenced my life in many ways. Subsequent adventures in a variety of mountainous environments, on my own and in the company of small groups of like-minded people, brought about a realisation that there was more to life than the acquisition of material goods, power and prestige that were so often held up as the *raison d'être* in Western society. Mountains presented me with an alternative personal philosophy or set of values which have guided me through most of my adult life and nurtured a love of adventure, a respect for the natural environment and an acceptance of my own mortality. These experiences have also allowed me

to develop a better understanding of myself and a resilience that has served me well in coping with life's unexpected problems and difficulties.

I wanted to offer such experiences to my own children and also to others. Such an opportunity arose through the Duke of Edinburgh's (DofE) Award. As a qualified teacher also holding the necessary outdoor qualifications for taking groups of young people into the hills, I was able, with the help of a colleague, to start an Open Award Group to serve young people in a small market town in south-west Oxfordshire where the local secondary school had stopped offering the Award. The group was started in 2002 with eight young people. By 2008 twenty young people had successfully completed a Gold expedition, a further nine were working towards their Gold Award, ten towards Silver and fifteen towards Bronze.

Outdoor adventure activities, such as self-reliant expeditions in challenging country, allow young people the freedom to immerse themselves in first-hand experiences outside their normal environment. Such experiences can help to bring about changes in personal characteristics, attitudes and awareness of self, the environment and wider social and global issues. In 2006 when studying for a Masters Degree

The young people identified the following experiences as being most significant:

in Education at Oxford Brookes University, I was able to use my interest in outdoor education and my work with young people on the DofE Award scheme as the basis for my dissertation research.

While it is my belief that taking part in a self-reliant expedition in unfamiliar territory, as required to fulfil the requirements of the DofE expedition section, is an adventure opportunity with many potential benefits, I was interested to discover the participants' own thoughts and feelings about their expedition experience. Many previous studies in this area have been based upon Outward Bound courses, especially in the USA and Australia where expeditions are often 20 days long and accompanied by instructors; I was interested to discover if some of the same feelings and emotions were replicated in shorter expeditions ranging from two to four days in which the young people were self-reliant and unaccompanied by adult leaders.

The case study was based upon thirty-five young people in the DofE group, aged between fourteen and seventeen, who were undertaking either a Bronze, Silver or Gold unaccompanied multi-day practice expedition as part of the Award Scheme in the summer of 2008. The Bronze and Silver Expeditions were both by foot and the Gold was a cycling expedition. The investigation incorporated both a closed, Likert style questionnaire and an open-ended questionnaire requiring more detailed answers. These were used to record the thoughts and feelings of the expedition members and along with informal observation and field notes, enabled the subjective experiences of the young people involved to be recorded. From the data it was possible to discern what the participants considered to be their core experiences of taking part in the venture and then to identify first emergent themes and after re-examination, general themes that were common to the young people across all three expeditions. This approach allowed the participants to describe what they considered to be the most valuable learning experiences they had gained from taking part in an expedition, especially in terms of transferability to their home lives and for the future.

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- **ENVIRONMENTAL** - enjoyment and appreciation of being outdoors, greater awareness of landscapes and the need to preserve them.
 - **PHYSICAL CHALLENGE** - greater appreciation of the value of physical activity and challenge and the importance of keeping fit.
 - **INDEPENDENCE AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY** - a feeling of empowerment through having to take personal responsibility for self and others.
 - **SOCIAL AND INTERPERSONAL SKILLS** - increased social and interpersonal skills and a growing recognition of the importance of teamwork.
 - **SELF-CONFIDENCE** - an increase in self-confidence through a better understanding of personal strengths and weaknesses in the face of physical and mental challenge; feelings of achievement and positive self-worth from having successfully accomplished a demanding project.
 - **HAVING FUN** - a sense of freedom and fun being away from normal structured environments and living a more simple life requiring a focus on the 'here and now' not encumbered by extraneous pressure.
 - **SPIRITUALITY** - feelings of wonder, happiness and peace, even in the face of physical exertion, from exposure to beautiful landscapes and having time to connect with oneself.

The evidence collected indicates that taking part in an adventurous, unaccompanied expedition provides a valuable route by which young people can start to develop many of the skills and social attributes that will allow them to function as active, effective and concerned citizens in society. The experiences reported by expedition participants also coincide closely with the outcomes for personal well-being and development described in the Government's Every Child Matters initiative (QCA, 2008). These outcomes include building confidence and self-esteem; being healthy; staying safe by assessing and managing risk and making informed choices and decisions; achieving economic well-being through the development of problem-solving and communication skills and making a positive contribution by developing social, interpersonal and teambuilding skills.

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On the expedition I felt more relaxed and at peace with myself than normal.

I was moved by the feeling of wide open spaces and how they made me feel small and vulnerable.

I know now that I need to listen to and accept other people's views and that sometimes I need to compromise.

These findings suggest firstly that, in contrast to widespread public sentiments that we should strive to minimise or even eliminate young people's exposure to risk and discomfort, a reasonable level of risk can have positive dimensions for personal development (Sharp 2004). Secondly, that programmes of personal development may be better achieved through participation in adventure-based learning activities outside the classroom rather than a formal programme of study lending support to the Government's recent moves to promote learning outside the classroom (DfES, 2006).

We found out for ourselves, rather than just being told by an adult what we should do....I feel more confident about making decisions now.



In this respect, schemes such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award have a valuable role to play. In contrast to Outward Bound style expeditions and those organised by the British Schools Exploring Society, DofE expeditions are relatively short – two to four days, depending on the level – and for the most part do not take part in true wilderness environments. However, the findings of this research demonstrate that participation even in a shorter but unaccompanied expedition can still have a significant impact on those taking part, where being independent adds to the uncertainty and therefore to the excitement and sense of adventure.

If young people are to grow up as responsible active citizens who feel connected with society and who have the skills necessary to succeed, they need to develop a range of personal attributes and social skills.

I have realised that everyone has something useful to contribute to the successful functioning of the team and I need to be more tolerant of others.

*I know now that if I keep trying
I can succeed, even when I don't
think that I can.*

The experiences of the DofE expedition participants in this report appear to support the arguments of Cooper (2006), Crossland (2007) and Spence (2007) that exposure to adventure and a degree of risk are life affirming experiences that contribute to personal development and that recent trends towards over protecting young people are misguided. Instead, there should be greater access to outdoor and adventure programmes and the provision of a wider range of experiential learning opportunities outside the regular classroom. ■



*On the expedition
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at peace with myself than normal*

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Author's Notes

Amanda is a specialist dyslexia teacher with a long-time interest in mountains and the outdoors. In 2002 she co-founded Faringdon Duke of Edinburgh's Award Open group, which is run on a voluntary basis. They started with eight young people and now have over fifty.

Photos: All from the author