

The Triple Crunch:

The New Economics and the Outdoors

by Marcus Bailie

Over the years Marcus Bailie has observed the ability of the outdoor sector to address specific social issues by applying its fundamental principles. In the early 2000s, it was recognised that the outdoors was an excellent arena for young people to develop fit and healthy lifestyles, and so combat the growing problem of obesity. Later this idea of taking certain small risks in order to gain substantial benefits was expanded in the risk-benefit argument, culminating in Tim Gill's excellent *Nothing Ventured*: balancing risk and benefits in the Outdoors. Now the risk-benefit principle has broadened and the latest opportunity for the outdoor sector is **sustainability**. Of course this issue has been around for a long time, but now the stakes are massively higher. Marcus looks at why, and what the outdoor sector can do to show that, once again, it is part of the solution, not part of the problem.



The economic crisis

Anyone who believes that exponential growth can go on forever in a finite world is either a madman or an economist.

Quoted in *The Great Transition*, New Economics Foundation. (2010)

We face a Triple Crunch.

The most immediately obvious is the current economic crisis which, as part of its impact, is putting outdoor provision under serious threat. Less immediate, but no less serious, is the environmental crisis the planet is facing, which is manifesting itself in areas as diverse as pollution, rising sea-levels and global food supply. Finally there is the coming energy crisis. Some commentators claim that we have already reached the point of Peak Oil: that point in time

when we start to survive on ever dwindling oil supplies, but in an economy where demand for oil is still soaring, and the alternatives are insufficient to fill the gap.

One thing these three crises have in common is that we simply can't go on as before. Since the current generation has, by and large, blown its opportunity and shows no commitment towards the required scale of change, it's down to the next generation to succeed where we failed.

Yet the entire western model of economics is founded on perpetual growth. Part of the problem is to do with how we define growth. In traditional economics the only concepts which count in terms of growth or progress are those which can be counted, primarily money, wealth and possessions. As a nation we measure this collectively as Gross National Product. As early as 1968 the American politician Robert Kennedy (brother of President John F Kennedy) was decrying what counts towards GDP and what doesn't count.

He (Robert Kennedy) said:
"Too much and too long, we seem to have surrendered community excellence and community values in the mere accumulation of material things. Our gross national product counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts the destruction of our redwoods and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl ... and the television programs which glorify violence in order to sell toys to our children.

Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It measures neither our wit nor our courage; neither our wisdom, ... our learning ..or our compassion; it measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile."



Intuitively we know there is more to life than money, and these days there is any amount of evidence to support this view. In 2007 UNICEF produced An Overview of Child Wellbeing in Rich Countries and concluded that the average UK child had the poorest family and peer relationships amongst developed countries, demonstrate the worst risk behaviour (and consequently had the highest rate of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections in Europe). Indeed, in none of the six dimensions measured did the UK come in the top half, and over all the dimensions taken together we came a shocking 21 out of 21.

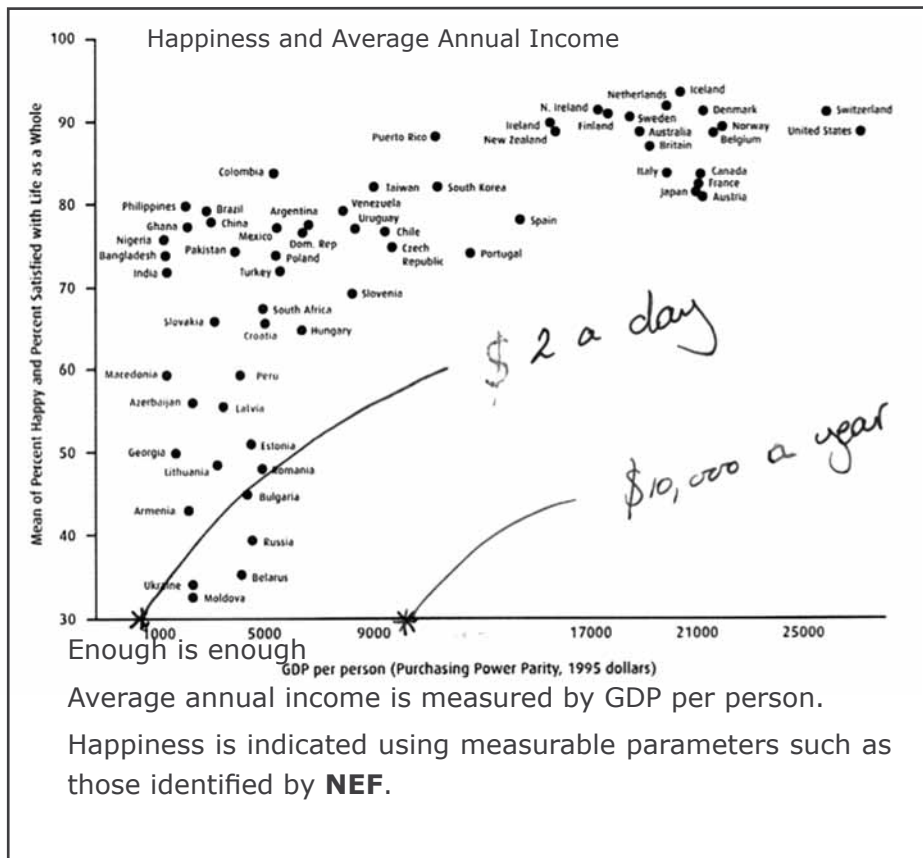
The New Economics Foundation (quaintly abbreviated to nef and not NEF) have impeccable economics credentials, but also bring to it the refreshing context of "economics as if people mattered". They took this strap line from E.F. Schumacher's sub-title for his ground breaking 1973 book Small is Beautiful.

If happiness cannot be measured as a quantity it certainly can be recognised as a social reality. The New Economics measures those things which go hand in hand with observed happiness. Richard Layard in *A Good Childhood* (2009) sets out the findings of a survey by The Children's Society of what young people mean by well-being, and its not just money! Family, friends, lifestyles, values, schooling, mental health and inequalities all feature highly.

NEF and others identify what they call the core economy, which includes not just monetary issues but family, neighbourhood, community, society, and the natural environment. The very things which Richard Layard identifies as being important to young people, and are equally important to adults. And when the core economy collapses everything collapses.

By selecting parameters which **can** be counted we can produce evidence which then cannot be discounted. And what works for individuals works for countries.





Yet it seems as if there is a conspiracy against us to ensure that we continue with the perpetual cycle of living to work, working to earn, and earning to consume. It is self-evident that we need to break this cycle, and outdoor residential experiences offer young people an ideal opportunity to experiment with new lifestyles, and new values.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

The second crunch is our rapidly deteriorating environment. The ramifications of this crisis are hard to grasp but could easily end in environmental catastrophe, and within the life times of our children or grand-children. However, this is finally being challenged on a wide front, from Greenpeace to the Sustainable Development Commission, and I won't insult your awareness by elaborating on these here. It is sufficient

to know that they exist and that at least some people are passionately supporting change. What is more difficult to tell is whether we will be in time, whether these measures are sufficient, or what more needs to be done, and by whom?

Nobody made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could only do a little.

Edmund Burke, political theorist and philosopher writing towards the end of the 18 century period known as the Enlightenment, quoted in The New Green Consumer Guide

The *New Green Consumer Guide* is virtually a step by step manual for how a family or a residential outdoor centre should operate. Today, central and local governments are both supporting initiatives which enhance the environment, as part of the Green New Deal.

Outdoor centres are ideal vehicles to allow young people to experiment with being different and green, by looking at where the centre's food comes from to how it recycles its waste. Doing is learning.

THE ENERGY CRISIS

We are running out of oil, renewable energy is not likely to be sufficiently plentiful, and it will take too long to bring enough nuclear energy on line, even for those counties of the world which opt for it. This crisis will drive the agendas of the other two in terms of both direction and pace.

One particularly obvious solution, use less energy, does not even seem to be on this agenda. We're using more. Nor is small-scale local power generation getting the attention it deserves.

The sustainability mantra of Repair, Re-use, Recycle, Replace seems to have gone out of the window. An outdoor residential centre seems tailor made to be a microcosm of what is green, sustainable, healthy and emotionally fulfilling. Many already are, but we could go much, much further.

HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

Human contact is the driving force for self-help. The more you reduce things to internet connections or automated systems, the further you get away from the human relationships that actually make change happen.

Tim Jackson,
Prosperity without Growth.

Schumacher argued that things should be done at the lowest, or most local, feasible level with the aim of maximising social, economic and environmental benefits, and minimising costs. Hence, every neighbourhood might have a bakery, but not every town would have a factory making trains. Nurturing the local community in which your outdoor centre may be situated is as important as your young people taking back a glimmer of an understanding about what makes a community work.

The New Economics makes reference to 'social capital', by which it means all those social interactions which make up the daily life we know; parents with the children, shop-keepers and traders with their customers, voluntary interaction whether organised or spontaneous. All these are crucial, and form one part, one essential part, of the 'core economy'.

BACKING THE FUTURE. NEF. (2009)

This nef study shows just how much money a Local Authority can **save** with only a modest investment in the facilities which enhance the well-being of our young people. They also set out how even this investment could be funded in the short term, showing that investing in sustainability makes short and long term sense.

Author's Notes

I have now been involved professionally with adventure activities for 30 years, as an instructor (including being in charge of the mountain leadership department at Plas Brenin, the national mountaineering centre) as a manager (including Director of Tiglin, the National Adventure Centre of Ireland), and as a regulator. The views expressed here, therefore, are a summation of what I have learned over that time, and from others, and are not necessarily the views of TQS (my current employer) or HSE (to whom we are currently contracted).

Photographs: all from the author



The last edition of Horizons had an article about the developments at Plas Gwynant in the heart of Snowdonia. "**Plant** Gwynant" is a wonderful case study of an outdoor centre being at the heart of a local community, albeit well removed from their home authority in Inner London. Not only do young people get to experience what a local community means, and be a part of it, they learn about community, as well as the more traditional introduction to "green recreation", far removed from the Play Station and Facebook. Real relationships.

Sustainable recreation, sustainable living (eating, energy, recycling), sustainable local communities, sustainable finances. ■

Further reading For managers and budgetary decision makers:

The New Economics: a bigger picture. David Boyle and Andrew Simms nef (2009).

Backing the Future: why investing in children is good for us all. nef (2009).

Happiness: lessons from a new Science Richard Layard. Penguin (2005)

For Heads of Centres:

The Transition Timeline for a Local Resilient Future. Shaun Chamberlin, Green Books (2009).

This is not only very, very clever, its compelling reading, and overwhelmingly convincing.

National Accounts of Well-being: bringing real wealth onto the balance sheet. Nef (2008).

For front line staff:

The New Green Consumer Guide. Julia Hailes, Simon and Schuster (2007).

A Good Childhood: searching for values in a competitive age. Richard Layard, The Children's Society (2009).

For general further reading

The Great Transition: a tale of how it turned out right. Nef (2010)

The twenty-first century enlightenment. Matthew Taylor, RSA 2010.

This really is big-picture 'joined-up' stuff. Encouragingly the English Outdoor Council are engaging with the RSA on how to implement the C21st Enlightenment in the Outdoors.

The Happy Planet Index. Nef.