



In rude health

Society's interest in the outdoors is higher than it has ever been in my memory. The wealth of interest in nature, outdoor exercise, environmental sustainability, outdoor learning and other related activities and issues is very apparent. The recent IOL National Conference was a fantastic gathering of practitioners that reflected the many different faces of outdoor learning and was all the more impactful for the variety of practices shared and explored.

As I write this, what seems to have become the key season for outdoor related conferences is approaching its end. Participating, one way or another, in quite a few of these gatherings has left me with a favourable impression of the state of our sector. Individuals and organisations (involved in outdoor learning) are thinking carefully about how they engage effectively with their clients/learners, how they can make their learning facilitation more impactful, how they might reach more people and challenging how sustainable their practice really is.

My thanks go to Neal Anderson, the Institute's recently appointed Professional Standards Manager, for reminding me that wellbeing is not simply an absence of illness. His statement at the IOL National Conference, that was considering Health & Wellbeing, got me reflecting. It caused me to consider the parallel scenarios where an absence of the negative was not

necessarily an indication of the positive. An absence of visible mistakes in our work with clients/learners does not mean good practice is prevalent OR an absence of conflict or obstruction when working with others does not mean collaboration. This thinking is helpful at a time when a number of this season's conferences have been considering how the outdoor learning sector might be better prepared for the future.

In seeking to be better prepared for the future of the sector, there is an increasing recognition of a need to define what we mean by Outdoor Learning. To do this we must collaborate in identifying the benefits of our practices and develop resultant messages to government, policy makers and funders. Importantly, we must become better at co-ordinating our efforts to communicate those messages to the right audiences.

So what's the problem? I see two main dangers in our current position. Firstly there is the risk that the reasonable health of our sector allows us to believe that we have reached our potential positive impact on society. We are far from this position. Just consider the education agenda around sustainability or the impact we are having on healthy lifestyles and associated health costs. Secondly I am concerned that we may sacrifice skilful, knowledge rich and impactful practices in reaching greater collaboration and co-ordination across the sector. I believe it is possible to have a greater reach and influence with decision makers whilst also developing innovative and impactful practices. I am determined that a more joined up sector does not mean that established or emerging more specialist practices in areas such as adventure therapy or field studies are no longer valued. ■