

## Outdoor Experiences - thinking through our bodies

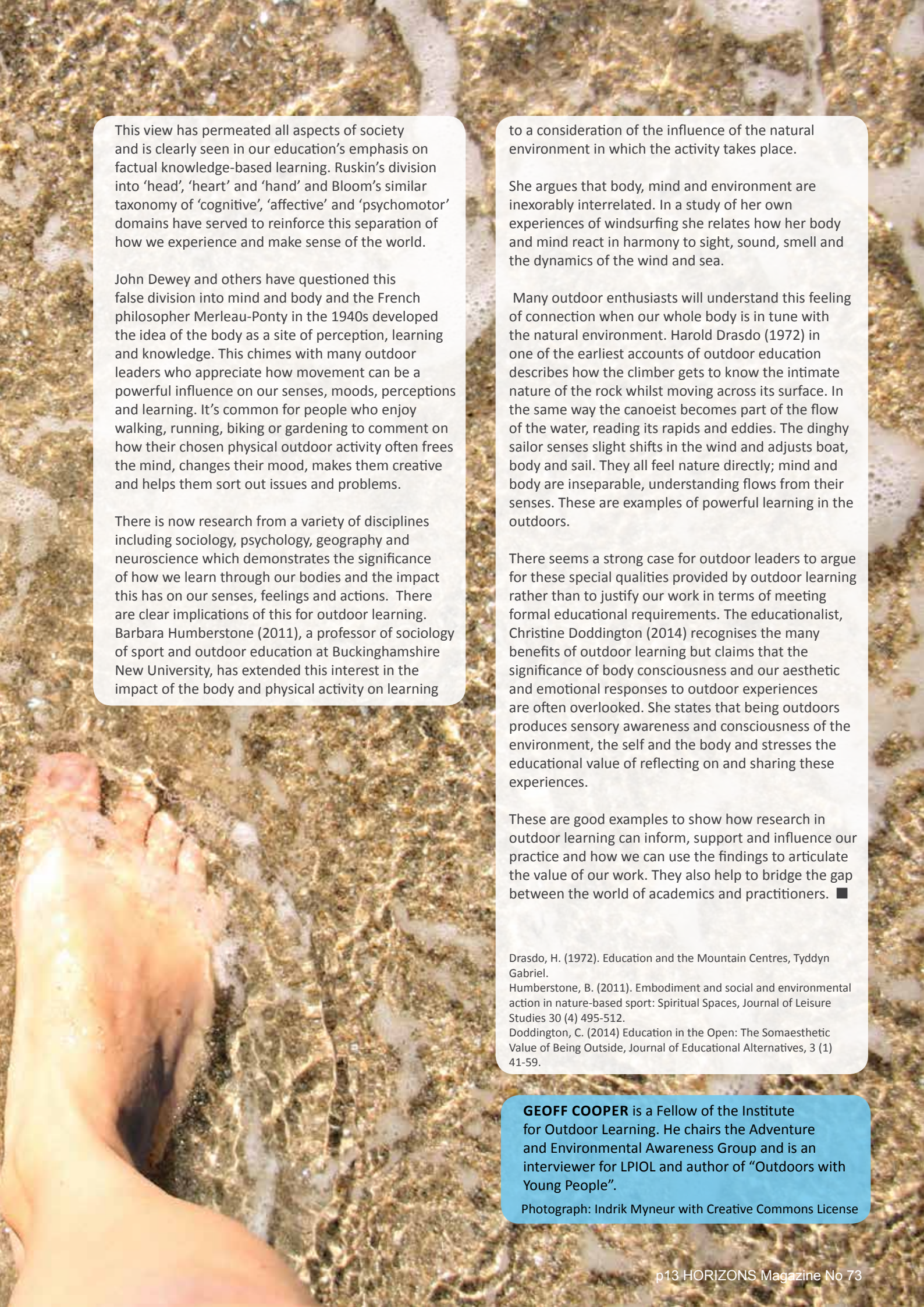
*"Retreating into our minds, we have forgotten how to 'think' with our bodies, how to use them as agents of knowing. In doing so we have also cut ourselves off from our natural environment and have forgotten how to commune and co-operate with its rich variety of living organisms".*

Fritjof Capra, The Turning Point, 1982.

In outdoor learning we are constantly faced with the need to justify our work. There is a dilemma; should this be achieved by relating our work to the structures and curricula of formal education or should we put our heads well above the parapet and make claims for more far reaching goals connected to our life with others on the planet?

Our society suffers from an entrenched world view which is based on rational thought and which dates back to the writings of Newton and Descartes in the seventeenth century. These state that knowledge and understanding are products of the analytical mind and quite separate from the rest of the body.





This view has permeated all aspects of society and is clearly seen in our education's emphasis on factual knowledge-based learning. Ruskin's division into 'head', 'heart' and 'hand' and Bloom's similar taxonomy of 'cognitive', 'affective' and 'psychomotor' domains have served to reinforce this separation of how we experience and make sense of the world.

John Dewey and others have questioned this false division into mind and body and the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty in the 1940s developed the idea of the body as a site of perception, learning and knowledge. This chimes with many outdoor leaders who appreciate how movement can be a powerful influence on our senses, moods, perceptions and learning. It's common for people who enjoy walking, running, biking or gardening to comment on how their chosen physical outdoor activity often frees the mind, changes their mood, makes them creative and helps them sort out issues and problems.

There is now research from a variety of disciplines including sociology, psychology, geography and neuroscience which demonstrates the significance of how we learn through our bodies and the impact this has on our senses, feelings and actions. There are clear implications of this for outdoor learning. Barbara Humberstone (2011), a professor of sociology of sport and outdoor education at Buckinghamshire New University, has extended this interest in the impact of the body and physical activity on learning

to a consideration of the influence of the natural environment in which the activity takes place.

She argues that body, mind and environment are inexorably interrelated. In a study of her own experiences of windsurfing she relates how her body and mind react in harmony to sight, sound, smell and the dynamics of the wind and sea.

Many outdoor enthusiasts will understand this feeling of connection when our whole body is in tune with the natural environment. Harold Drasdo (1972) in one of the earliest accounts of outdoor education describes how the climber gets to know the intimate nature of the rock whilst moving across its surface. In the same way the canoeist becomes part of the flow of the water, reading its rapids and eddies. The dinghy sailor senses slight shifts in the wind and adjusts boat, body and sail. They all feel nature directly; mind and body are inseparable, understanding flows from their senses. These are examples of powerful learning in the outdoors.

There seems a strong case for outdoor leaders to argue for these special qualities provided by outdoor learning rather than to justify our work in terms of meeting formal educational requirements. The educationalist, Christine Doddington (2014) recognises the many benefits of outdoor learning but claims that the significance of body consciousness and our aesthetic and emotional responses to outdoor experiences are often overlooked. She states that being outdoors produces sensory awareness and consciousness of the environment, the self and the body and stresses the educational value of reflecting on and sharing these experiences.

These are good examples to show how research in outdoor learning can inform, support and influence our practice and how we can use the findings to articulate the value of our work. They also help to bridge the gap between the world of academics and practitioners. ■

Drasdo, H. (1972). *Education and the Mountain Centres*, Tyddyn Gabriel.

Humberstone, B. (2011). Embodiment and social and environmental action in nature-based sport: Spiritual Spaces, *Journal of Leisure Studies* 30 (4) 495-512.

Doddington, C. (2014) *Education in the Open: The Somaesthetic Value of Being Outside*, *Journal of Educational Alternatives*, 3 (1) 41-59.

**GEOFF COOPER** is a Fellow of the Institute for Outdoor Learning. He chairs the Adventure and Environmental Awareness Group and is an interviewer for LPIOL and author of "Outdoors with Young People".

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