

perspective

by Andy Robinson, IOL CEO

Paying for the outdoors ? Don't forget your ticket....

The recent announcement by The National Trust that they are piloting a new approach to licensing commercial provision of outdoor activities on their property deserves wider reflection. That reflection is likely to lead you to a recognition that 'this is messy' and that the relationship between landowners and the provision of outdoor learning should never be taken for granted. The planning for a Spirit of Kinder Day in April is a reminder of how recently the legal basis for recreational access changed in England and Wales and the challenges involved in the process.

The more recent dialogue about access has raised some thoughts to add to an on-going debate that supports continued and sustainable expansion of outdoor learning. This is not an analysis of all the potential issues associated with land ownership and the provision of outdoor learning where a charge is, or is not, involved; but some thoughts that might lead us towards developing some established principles on which both responsible landowners and outdoor learning providers/practitioners might seek to operate.

A few questions followed by reflections from my perspective.

Is it appropriate to start to separate the issue of rights of access for the individual from the issue of access for groups or individuals paying for guidance and resources in the outdoors? Is it even possible to do so?

Does charging for access, when a provider of outdoor learning is already charging their participants, result in a disincentive to engage in the outdoors?

Should individuals or organisations be able to derive a living or generate profits from land and/or facilities without contributing towards the cost of the land/facilities maintenance?

Many of our current arrangements with the National Trust and other landowners involve payment when accessing sites for an adventurous activity or the study of fauna, flora and other natural formations. These payments may be car park charges, launching fees, licenses for use of crags or membership fees. Many such arrangements have been developed by a longstanding commitment to local dialogue that recognises the needs of different stakeholders.

I think there is danger that the issues of 'impact', 'sustainability' and 'cost of maintenance' get mixed up with saying who should pay depending on the type of organisation delivering the outdoor learning. It is clear that either frequent repeat visits by a groups (even of a small number of people) or occasional high volume uses of a location; can both have an impact that changes the environment and the experience for a future visitor. Whether we are a charity, public body, informal group or profit generating enterprise, I believe we all have a responsibility to consider our impact on the environment we operate in. I suggest that the debate here should be about the way in which the outdoor learning provider seeks to support a sustainable model of usage with the landowner.

More people accessing outdoor environments is to be celebrated! The challenge is in seeking to ensure an appreciation of the impact of groups of people involved in outdoor 'healthy lifestyle' or 'engaging educational' experiences. In the same way that a gym induction ensures the user can operate exercise machines or pupils are carefully introduced to laboratory resources, so we must foster an appreciation and care for the environment.

So let's keep the debate about sustainability with landowners and outdoor learning providers at the front of our minds in a positive way, and recognise that it comes as a result of an increasing proportion of the population engaging with the outdoors. ■