

Blooming Bushcraft

by Dave Watson



You have to smile at some comments people have made especially in regard to Bushcraft ethos. I was once told by a well established outdoor professional that 'bushcraft would be only about teaching skills whereas their work was about developing people'. Well that was a new one on me as my conviction has always been that bushcraft covers such an incredible set of fundamental skills that it is ideal as a way to develop and inspire people. It can also be used as an end in itself - to learn skills, or as part of gaining understanding of a wider subject - including 'academic' topics like maths!. The one thing you should definitely not do with 'Bushcraft' is box-it-in or limit its scope to do so is to limit its incredible learning potential.

To be a bushcraft practitioner you don't have to wear green, you definitely don't need to wear anything cammo and neither do you need several knives or axes hanging from your belt or anywhere else for that matter. You don't even need lots of woodland, although it can open up wider opportunities. Some Outdoor Centres own lots of resources and others have precious little and yet they are running some lovely sessions that are impacting people of many ages.

Bushcraft is also a subject of contradictions. Half the time we are improvising kit out of old tin cans and left over bits and the other half we are investing in the best knife we can afford. Defining Bushcraft (and its neighbour survival) has opened up plenty of discussion over the years but since I have written plenty on this in previous articles I will leave that one alone for now!

Bushcraft although seen as some as an 'outdoor activity' has gone through a refining process in the last 10 years, and is still developing. These days it seems to have become as much an outdoor methodology and some might now define it as an outdoor pedagogy.

In a nut shell – 'Professional Bushcraft' should be about

- 1 Safe practice in the woods and countryside
- 2 A measure of good understanding of your surroundings/ materials
- 3 Competence in a selection of skills in addition to the basics of shelter, fire, food and water
- 4 Sensitive and appropriate use of materials/resources and be very careful on the impact you have in a given area.

We could arguably add more to this list but these are the fundamentals.

I am sure some of you will giggle at the two ways of reading this title. Many people have some experience of bushcraft. For some outdoor practitioners and some specialist bushcraft practitioners there have been frustrating times with perceptions and issues with how the bushcraft/survival sector relates to the wider outdoor learning sector. However there is little doubt that Bushcraft is growing and is here to stay.

When I set up in business twenty years ago things were a bit different. I used the word survival rather than bushcraft in my business name as when I said 'bushcraft' I got questions like 'Do you do hedges or are you a tree surgeon?' I should have looked a bit further ahead! Over the years I have noticed that peoples' view of Bushcraft has, and still is, changing and being continuously refined.



Effective shelter construction and efficient fire lighting instruction/ demonstration can have a lasting impact on peoples' minds. If you are involved in schools looking at the Stone and Iron Ages then look into some of the methods that were used and learn a enough about them to demonstrate how they work. Traditional Flint and Steel throws sparks and shards about so its perhaps not ideal to be having young hands using these but a demonstration done well is really quite impressive. There are plenty of training opportunities including workshops that are run by the Bushcraft Professional Practice Group (PPG) as well as some of the IOL regions that should be able to support some of this sort of session.

One of the great things about this subject is the variety of ways it is and can be utilised. Plenty of Centres now run some lovely simple sessions often focussing on shelter and fire with various additions depending on time, experience and resources as well as inspiration of course. Others run either additional sessions or longer sessions and end up using knives and other tools in order to create clever campfire gadgets and gizmos out of forked sticks or flexible willow etc. Bow Drill for those who have the skills and confidence is one of those Bushcraft wows, adds a quality and dimension that impacts on young minds and makes the session even more memorable.

Increasing colleges and universities are incorporating Bushcraft into some or even all of their outdoor based degree courses.

I have seen some very interesting dissertations from students looking at on the impact Bushcraft can have on peoples self esteem etc. One thing was clear to them was that a well run session in various woodland skills regularly has an impact on peoples' confidence.

Schools/Colleges and Universities can capitalise on History and Archaeology by utilising some basic skills especially subjects like string and rope. The Ice man Otsi dated to around 3200bc is a super example. So much of his equipment incorporated string made from Lime Bast, nettles or grass. Just about everyone finds natural cordage interesting once they have had a go. It is also a great one for using at both a simple have a go level to a more in-depth analysis to ascertain the potential ability of fibres to be used for different tasks in different time periods. Bow Drill and Hunting Bow for instance. .

It is often commented that the more you learn the more you realise that you don't know. This is so very true of Bushcraft and it makes it all the more exciting as it leaves plenty for the next generation of professionals and students to take hold and study. ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dave Watson (in photo above right) set up Woodland Survival Crafts in 1995 following 10 years in more conventional Outdoor Centers. He has used his in depth knowledge and understanding to inspire and build confidence in people of any age and background and now spends most of his time training, assessing and equipping other outdoor professionals in the finer skills of Bushcraft. In 1995 he instigated the now Bushcraft PPG which he is still very much apart of and arranges the events around the country. PHOTOS: inserts from the author. Header image by Nicholas A Tonelli with Creative Commons License.