

# Engagement or Avoidance?

**Leave only footprints and take only memories** – I'm sure we've all used that phrase, but I consider it to be a flawed statement that is unrealistic and counterproductive. Since time began all manner of living organisms have had an impact on the environment they have lived in and moved through.

**T**he earth is our environment and our bodies are designed to interact with it and that interaction will change it. Currently there seems to be a big movement for people to engage with our environment and not just to be an observer. Rather than getting too hung up about having zero impact on the environment why not think about engaging people in a way that inspires, teaches and lets them appreciate and take ownership of the environment they're in.

A collection of thoughts based on a staff meeting where it was determined that one of the fun elements of a regular mountain walk was damaging the environment, i.e: by jumping into certain bogs and making them bigger. The reaction was to stop the jumping activity and therefore minimise any environmental impact. Commendable we all thought. Well, in the short term, but I am not quite so sure about the long-term benefits. Youngsters now engage less, arguably have less fun and probably are less enthused about the environment they are in, so in the long term they are less likely to take any active role in either promoting or conserving their environment.

They need to be able to see the impact their actions have, and make an educated decision based on their experience and their appreciation of the outdoors being a special place. I think allowing a bit of bog jumping could partially destroy fragile habitats, but thinking of the bigger picture those same people are likely to have a much better view and love of the outdoors and are likely to look after it. Engaging in an activity or environment is necessary to understand it; perhaps a little abuse might be good in the long term.

Think about the positive benefits of all those honeypot venues around the country. Yes, we have had a massive impact on Porth Yr Ogof cave in South Wales, but look at the benefits, most of the local centres must agree, they all use it extensively.

How many youngsters love building fires and either using them for warmth, cooking, singing or story telling? We are able to fulfil some of the basic human needs in this manner. Is this a good thing to do, are we not releasing carbon into the atmosphere and adding to the greenhouse effect?

Reading the biographies of key environmentally sound people shows they have all got down and dirty with it, it's basic human nature, this is what young people enjoy and are so very often denied. I would rather let them experience a real environment than some purpose built mud pit, otherwise they'll never make the connection between the activity and the environment.

If we are that bothered then none of us should go into the great outdoors, or drive, or fly, or cycle, or walk, as they all change our environment to a greater or lesser degree. Has conservation gone mad? I went into Otter Hole recently and some bits are so precious that no-one is allowed to see them for fear of damaging them. If no-one is ever going to see them then what is the point of them being there? I was a bit irate, as I am an experienced caver, NCA cave leader, lover of the environment, a member of a caving club and was on an officially organised trip with a leader into a locked cave. I think the chances were that I might have been careful.

This article was really a plea for people to think about hasty reactive decisions they might make when either leading young people in the outdoors or organising such experiences without looking at the bigger picture and long-term impacts.

Perhaps rather than "Leave only foot prints and take only memories" it should read "Everything in moderation". ■

by Jeff Handley

## Author note

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**Illustrations:**  
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