



The Heart of Bushcraft

by Dave Watson LPIOL

Professional Insight

Did I really expect to get an ember that time, I said to myself as I put my Bow drill set down on the floor. I had only put a moderate amount of effort in and it was clear to me that if you really want it to work you will need to give it your best.

It was 1995, I was coming to the end of a 10 year career in Outdoor Activity Centres and preparing myself to go self employed teaching what is now called 'Bushcraft'. I had been deeply inspired one day whilst on holiday the year before. Yet it didn't quite make sense for me to take this path; everyone who taught that sort of thing was much tougher and better built than me, so who was I trying to kid? I even had a student say virtually the same thing a few weeks after. However, this did not change my deep conviction that this is what I should go and do. I had a enough understanding to get started, born out of real experience as a teenager trying to live in semi-wild places. there was just one hurdle: to my embarrassment I had not yet created the all important 'fire by friction'.

I picked up my bow drill set again, something I had done a number of times over the previous two years and was determined to give it my best shot. After spending a few moments psyching myself up I got into the most comfortable position and started getting a rhythm going. Once all was going well I started to put more and more energy into it until I had given it everything I had in. I dropped the bow and looked; expecting no more than my history had taught me to expect, charcoal powder but nothing more. This time was different: the smoke rose in glorious wisps. A Eureka moment (to say the least)! It was a shame I had no tinder ready, although I am not sure I had any energy left. I did not care. Now I knew that I could create fire. Fourteen years later I estimate that I have demonstrated this over 2000 times. That said I never seem to tire of the special magic, that deep satisfaction and WOW! that creating fire gives.

In the early stages of setting up 'Woodland Survival Crafts' I had the conviction that in 'Bushcraft' more than anything, we have a universal set of skills that have something to say in every significant situation of life. As the years roll by I see this to be even more the case.

So what is it about Bushcraft that has fired so many of us up?

There is the name Ray Mears. With so many inspiring programmes on TV and increasing amounts of excellent books it is no wonder that hardly a course goes by without somebody mentioning his name. For me Ray is very much the right man at the right time. His passion and understanding seem to have touched so many of us. More recently we have had another person emerge on the screens in the form of Bear Grylls with his daring and bravado. With these two celebrities on our screens there is an on going discussion about who is better than who and why.

One of the most commonly asked questions is “what is the difference between Bushcraft and Survival” and for me these two people represent very well what is at the heart of the two subjects. On the surface it may appear very similar and to some extent it is, after all, some of the basic skills are the same. The ability to make shelter and fire along with the ability to find food and water is, in essence, the same. Where it differs is when we look at what is at the Heart or Root of the two subjects.

Now you might think that I have a big problem with a Survival way of thinking. Well not really, as there is a time when this is needed and I’m sure there are plenty of you like myself that have been caught out and needed to apply a no nonsense approach to your situation. The key thing for me is that you understand the base line concepts so that you understand better what it is you are trying to teach. Once you have achieved this for yourself I have little issue in how you put your sessions together. A simple example to explain this is:

If you run a shelter-building session in the woods under the banner of Bushcraft and your using a Basha sheet and paracord only, then no matter



what you say to your students you’re really saying that the environment cannot supply you with your needs. You may of course not have the resources to build much in the way of natural shelters but if you can do something even in half scale, that shows how a descent shelter can be made out of what is around you. You are teaching them that the natural environment can provide us with a quality resource.

Let us now go back to the original question of why Bushcraft is firing our imaginations so much. The answer, I believe, is both complex and yet very simple.

BUSHCRAFT	SURVIVAL
Long Term Living	Overcoming Disaster
Use resources responsibly so there is some for tomorrow	Use whatever you can find to meet your immediate needs
Comfortable reliance on the resources available	Fight to make things do what you need them to do
Utilises	Manipulates
Focuses on natural resources	Tends to rely on man made equipment where possible
Works with	Fights against
Inspires awareness and creativity	Usually destructive due to desperation
Learns to live and cope with	Draws out extremes of character
It is built on Hope	It fights with fear
Ultimately sustainable	Ultimately non sustainable



← previous page

In teaching Bushcraft professionally I have been constantly amazed at how the experience of being out in the woods (especially over a night or longer), has impacted the students no matter what their age. I have had a teenager come up to me after two days and tell me that they have realised that they need to move on in life from where they are now. I have seen a very aggressive young man break down in tears because of the abuse he received as a child. I have had a man have his whole outlook on how he saw himself challenged whilst he was receiving tuition in Friction Fire lighting. While I personally have had only very limited training in mentoring and counselling, I have seen people overcome many fears; be it of the dark, creepy crawlies, dogs or even making a cup of tea for themselves. These were massive issues to the individuals concerned.

Over the next few issues of Horizons I want to expand more on why Bushcraft is proving so inspiring, but I want to leave you with a couple of thoughts.

Think of the moments in your time in the outdoors that have either inspired you or, more importantly, had an impact on an individual.

Can you just repeat the programme and get the same result again? For me the answer is simply no. You might be able to have repeat success with the same session formula, but I suspect you won't repeat a major impact. Like so many things in life, it's about how inspiring the tutor is every bit as much as how well the session is organised. I have seen Bushcraft sessions run with complete staleness because there was no personal inspiration behind them and I have seen one of the most difficult sessions (tracking) taught to manicured, defensive teenage girls and they have simply come alive with it.

In our society we try to fit people into boxes and formulas. We so often talk as if we have fathomed out the details of why we behave, react etc. We act as if we understand it all, we classify every problem as some kind of syndrome and treat it with whatever therapy. I do value much of what we gain through trying to increase our understanding, however I believe very strongly that although we think we can increasingly fathom these mysteries, they are very empty without a genuine love and care for others as well as ourselves. ■

If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love I am nothing.

1 Corinthians 13.2

A trip out into a wild place using just the knowledge you bring with you, focusing on understanding and utilising what is around you, brings out a good deal of what real living should be about, much more so than relying on what is in your rucksack.

In its simplest form it touches/draws out most of the key ingredients of what makes life worth living.

Adventure, Excitement, Risk, Creativity, Teamwork, Natural Beauty and an Awareness of our surroundings that can draw out some of the deepest of feelings which leads to this very interesting word, Spirituality.

There is more that could be added to this list but I think that this will keep us going for a good while.

In all my years of working in the outdoors I am more and more drawn to how others can really benefit from being in the outdoors. In my time in Outdoor Centres it was obvious that people gained confidence whilst having a great time and on occasions this was quite profound, although the deep learning was more often taking place in the young instructors.

Author's Notes

Dave Watson LPIOL set up Woodland Survival Crafts in 1995 following 10 years in Outdoor Activity Centres mostly as a Chief Instructor. He is very much a Pioneer and was strongly involved very much in the development of two of the Centres he worked at in the 1980s and 90s. Before this he had gone through several years trying to get to grips with living off the land, which although was largely unsuccessful did lead him to discover his Faith which has held him ever since. Over the years Dave has worked with a huge variety of clients including Schools, Families and Businesses as well as individuals. His courses range from surface fun days to in depth Training and Mentoring.

Photos: All by Ian Cresswell