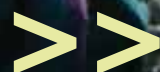


## Outdoor Learning, Environment and Sustainability - Presenting the big picture: Part 2

by Geoff Cooper

**I**n the first article (Horizons 49) I argued that outdoor leaders are in a strong position to promote the bigger picture. There are many opportunities to connect our work with environmental, global and sustainable issues. I outlined six core values (which are repeated at the end of this article) essential to sustainability that can be encouraged through outdoor learning. This article considers the value of existing projects that can be used to introduce aspects of this bigger picture and suggests that we take a critical look at how we can use them in our own programmes to encourage this process.



## Introduction

The argument for presenting the bigger picture goes as follows:

1. We face enormous issues on our planet from climate change, overpopulation, inequality, malnutrition and depletion of resources and species.
2. Our education system is based on the needs of a Victorian industrial society and fails to address these issues. Knowledge is still boxed into traditional subjects and little attention is given to an understanding of the interconnectedness of people and life on the earth which is fundamental to our future.
3. There is strong evidence that confirms that outdoor education is a powerful means of learning. Learning through outdoor experiences gives many opportunities to demonstrate this interconnectedness of life.
4. As leaders, teachers or facilitators we should take advantage of these opportunities to present the bigger picture. By doing this we strengthen outdoor education and contribute to a more sustainable future.

## Programmes

There are a variety of programmes that contribute to the bigger picture in terms of awareness, understanding and action on aspects of environment and sustainability. These operate on a scale from the personal through to the global. No one programme will meet the needs of an outdoor organisation but it is possible to incorporate several of these programmes alongside each other to provide a broader agenda.

### 1. Leave No Trace ([www.lnt.org](http://www.lnt.org))

This is not so much a programme as a code of good practice for use in the outdoors. It was designed in the 1970's for trail users in the USA and is based on common sense principles such as "plan and prepare", "camp on durable surfaces", "leave things as we find them". It is valuable in helping us understand our impact on particular environments and leads to sensitive behaviour in the outdoors. It doesn't, however, consider the wider aspects of environmental awareness, personal connections to the environment or more sustainable lifestyles. As a tailor-made programme "Leave No Trace" has gained some popularity in Ireland and the UK over recent years. The principles need adapting to the British context, for example there is little reference to land use and ownership. It also doesn't address the use of hi-tech equipment and transport to the outdoors. It is, nevertheless, a useful starting point in gaining an interest and understanding of our impact on the environment.

Other organisations such as the Adventure and Environmental Awareness Group ([www.aea-uk.org](http://www.aea-uk.org)) and Best of Both Worlds ([www.bobw.co.uk](http://www.bobw.co.uk)) have for a long time promoted codes of good environmental practice for a range of outdoor activities including climbing, canoeing, mountain biking and gill scrambling.

### 2. Eco-Centre Award ([www.eco-schools.org.uk](http://www.eco-schools.org.uk))

This is based on the Eco Schools award developed by the Tidy Britain Group and is designed to influence the whole organisation of outdoor centres. It starts with an audit of the organisation's environmental practice in terms of use of buildings, energy, transport etc. An Eco-centre committee representing all members of the organisation is established and they draw up an action plan for improving environmental practice. At a later date the organisation is inspected and if successful awarded a certificate.





The value of the programme is that it addresses good practice across all aspects of the organisation and not just in the group use of the outdoors. It does not consider personal connections with the environment but clearly the good examples set by an organisation will often encourage take up by individuals and the transfer of ideas and good practice to other groups.

### 3. John Muir Environmental Award ([www.jmt.org/jmaward](http://www.jmt.org/jmaward))

Using the life of John Muir as inspiration this is an individual award based on four challenges - to discover, to explore, to share and to conserve. There are three levels of award and the basic "Discovery" level conveniently fits into a 4 or 5 day outdoor programme. Individuals keep a personal log or diary of their experiences. The award is flexible so that discovering and exploring can be achieved through a variety of adventurous activities such as canoeing, kayaking or mountain walks, whilst sharing can be achieved through reviews, short presentations or displays. The conservation element is best covered through a practical task and this provides the opportunity to work with local organisations such as the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, the National Trust or Forestry Commission.

Although the programme doesn't involve learning particular knowledge of the environment, it does raise environmental awareness, develop a sense of place and a personal connection with the environment. It also encourages skills of communication and leads to action.

### 4. Earthkeepers ([www.eartheducation.org.uk](http://www.eartheducation.org.uk))

This is a tightly structured programme designed by the Institute of Earth Education for 9-11 year olds. There is a story line in which the group is invited to solve environmental issues by revealing the secrets of Em, a mysterious character who they get to know through knowledge-based and sensory activities and taking their own personal action. The programme fits into a short residential outdoor course and it introduces learning through key concepts such as interrelationships, energy flow and change through time. Although it is a comprehensive environmental programme covering awareness, understanding and action it is dependent on props and a script and the slightly evangelical approach doesn't always fit comfortably with British outdoor

education. It is also debatable whether some of the concept activities produce the motivation or inspiration gained from more adventurous outdoor learning.

### 5. Forest Schools ([www.forestschoools.com](http://www.forestschoools.com))

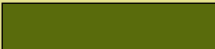
This is a very successful programme for school groups using particular outdoor sites throughout the year on a regular basis. It is unstructured, allows for play and follows the interests of the children. The outdoors is used as inspiration for a whole range of activities - physical exercise, nature study, problem solving, orienteering, shelter building, lighting fires, cooking, writing, dance, drama, practical conservation etc.- and these experiences can be developed and linked to the curriculum back at school.

### 6. Global Outdoors ([www.globaloutdoors.co.uk](http://www.globaloutdoors.co.uk))

This programme is being developed by Cumbria Development Education Centre in partnership with the Institute for Outdoor Learning and the Adventure and Environmental Awareness Group and addresses the wider issues of sustainability and global understanding. It is different from the others in that it considers a bigger canvas. It challenges us on how we relate to the planet and how we relate to other people on the earth. The aim is to develop global citizenship through the outdoors by encouraging critical thinking, questioning our values and taking greater personal responsibility for our actions. Still in its early stages, the project team hope to influence outdoor practitioners through existing professional development programmes.

The diagram summarises these programmes. It indicates which aspects of the bigger picture, from personal contact with nature to global awareness and understanding, is emphasised by each of the six programmes. This is presented as a basis for discussion rather than a definitive summary. It is clear however, that no one programme meets all requirements and that some of the programmes are limited in their ability to present the bigger picture of environment, sustainability and global awareness. If outdoor practitioners are interested in this wider agenda it is certainly worth considering the aims of these programmes and how they can be incorporated into our personal and organisation's practice. ■

	Personal Contact with Nature	Environmental Understanding	Environmental Issues	Communication Skills	Personal Environmental Practice	Organisation Environmental Practice	Sustainable Living	Global Awareness & Understanding
LEAVE NO TRACE								
ECOCENTRES								
JOHN MUIR AWARD								
EARTHKEEPERS								
FOREST SCHOOLS								
GLOBAL OUTDOORS								

 indicates those aspects that are emphasised by each programme.

The six core values (repeated here from part 1 of this article in Horizons 49) that are essential to sustainability that can be encouraged through outdoor learning.

### 1. Reconnection

The outdoors provides opportunities to experience freedom, happiness and humility through contacts with the natural world. We can respond to the elements – wind, water, rock, sky – and the natural rhythms and begin to appreciate the interdependency of life on the planet. This may help to rebuild our connections with the earth, we can see ourselves as part of nature rather than apart from it. For some this could be the key to gaining commitment for the environment.

### 2. Co-operation

Learning in schools is often based on competition. This may be appropriate to train a top class athlete or a university professor but it is totally inadequate for educating for community living in a rapidly changing society. Teamwork and co-operation can be developed in many ways in the outdoors, for example through problem solving activities, group fieldwork and expeditions. Trust and empathy can result from living and working together in a small group. Such values are transferable and of fundamental importance to sustainable living.

### 3. Responsibility

Outdoor education often places young people in situations where they have to take responsibility for their own actions. They may experience real situations where failure to act responsibly will have unfortunate consequences for themselves and others in their group. Peter Higgins (2006) has argued that taking responsibility is a more worthwhile aim for outdoor learning than developing self-esteem. In Western countries, we all need to take more responsibility for our lifestyles if we wish to sustain the earth's resources and distribute them more fairly.

### 4. Tolerance

Being in the outdoors we confront real issues, for example there may be land use conflicts such as the need to protect an ancient woodland threatened by a new road or the impact of a wind farm on a small community weighed against the benefits of renewable energy. Through investigation, critical thinking and role-play we can begin to explore the complexities of such issues, appreciate the underlying social, economic and political pressures and make our own judgements. Exploring real issues helps to clarify our own values and may lead to more tolerant attitudes to other points of view.

### 5. Simplicity

In a classic article in 1996, Chris Loynes argued that outdoor adventure is being packaged and commercialised and this process dissociates people from their experience of community and place. There is, however, the opportunity in the outdoors to experience a simpler, healthier and less commercialised existence. Wild or quiet places can provide an antidote to a screen culture that emphasises speed, glamour and glitz. The outdoors allows us to step outside of our everyday existence. There is time to reflect, to put our lives into perspective, to consider our values. Outdoor leaders are in a position to address the differences between needs and wants. They can introduce young people to the idea of 'quality of life' as opposed to the quantity of income and material possessions. This concept may be a key mechanism with which to discuss and challenge values.

### 6. Reflection

Experiences in the outdoors provide many opportunities for reflection. In a society based on constant noise and action there is a fundamental need to have time and space for reflection. This is vital to our mental and physical health and allows us to develop our sense of values. Reflection is relevant to all aspects of our lives and constant reviewing and planning helps us to cope with change.

### Author's Notes

Geoff Cooper is head of Wigan Council's two outdoor education centres in the Lake District. He is author of *Outdoors with Young People - A Leader's Guide to Outdoor Activities, the Environment and Sustainability* and chairs the Adventure and Environmental Awareness Group.

**Photographs - all from the author**

