



# Outdoor Education in the 21st Century: Is it Meeting the Needs of Students?



There is no doubt that the 21st century is throwing challenges at educators faster than at any time in history. In order to keep up with them, educators have a responsibility to keep asking themselves whether their programming – no matter what aspect of the curriculum – is relevant in the 21st century. Is it providing young people the tools they need to survive and prosper in the future?

Appropriate then, is the question of whether the education outdoors industry in Australia is meeting the needs of 21st century students adequately. While answers can be found by addressing a number of areas, I'd like to focus on what I see as one of the most crucial ways the education outdoors industry can meet the needs of 21st century students. That is, by its programming having an inextricable link to environmental education.

Let's take a step back for a moment. It is generally accepted that quality education out of the classroom in Australia is informed by a combination of experiential learning, adventure, personal growth and environmental learning – outdoors. It should follow then, that in planning and implementing school camps, outdoor education programs, field trips and excursions for young people, environmental learning should be an integral part of the learning outcome. That's the theory. But is it the reality? Does the Australian education outdoors industry provide a sufficient environmental component? Does it endorse environmental learning? Does it set the example? And if not, why not?

I'd like to contemplate some answers by first considering a bigger picture in regards to environmental issues.

Our world is changing rapidly. There is overwhelming scientific evidence that humanity is currently living in an unsustainable manner. The reality of climate change is upon us. Of major political concern around the world is the importance of humans developing a society that is sustainable.

Australia in particular has major environmental issues that are having a direct and immediate impact on our fragile natural environment. These include – but are not

limited to – the use of natural resources and the direct impact this is having on the environment.

As such, I believe it is imperative that Australian educators incorporate environmental components into the curriculum wherever possible. I believe we have a responsibility to young people to do so. In fact, our industry should be providing leadership in this area. After all, we are the people who – more than any others – take young people out of the classroom and into their (natural) environment. We are the ones who know that young people gain a sense of belonging to their environment, and therefore feel a sense of responsibility for it if they are not alienated from it, if they understand it and if they like it. I believe a generation of young people who haven't been given the opportunity to spend time in nature is catastrophic from an environmental perspective. (This might sound alarmist, but it is a universal truth that the future of the planet is in the hands of the young people we are educating today...)

The fact is we are not addressing this priority in education outdoors to the extent we should be. Why? What is happening in Australian education outdoors that has resulted in the environmental component not having the consideration it should? And what can be done to turn current practice around to ensure environmental education's place in the 21st century's education equation?

It is my belief that there is a disturbing trend in education that, due to the pressure of the 'market', some sectors including the education outdoors industry are too often designing programs that meet the 'needs of the consumer'. Ironically and unfortunately the consumer is not the student! The consumer is of course, the school hierarchy. School boards, school principals, executives, teacher bodies and parent bodies. For the consumer to provide their students (either through an internal department or in partnership with an external organisation), high-quality opportunities out of the classroom year in year out, takes enormous commitment. Even before the school has started planning its programming, it is already under pressure...

It's expensive to get students out of the classroom. It's logistically challenging. There is the issue of risk management and the paperwork involved. There is the school calendar to contend with. There are individual time pressures on teaching staff and on students themselves. There are increased expectations in all areas – academic, sporting etc. The curriculum is crowded. In short, taking students out of the classroom requires strong leadership, effort and diligence.

It takes dedicated educators to overcome such pressures to ensure education outdoors programs are of the highest quality possible. However, the problem then lies with school departments and education outdoors organisations who, believing they are meeting market place needs, consistently bow to programming that is of a lesser option – it is, what I call, the 'fast-food' option. This option decreases the effort, expenditure and diligence required by the school community. It makes everyone's (including the education outdoors organisations') job easier as well...but at what cost?

So what is this 'fast-food' education outdoors option? And what is, in my opinion, its more worthy alternative?

The 'fast-food' option is programming that is generic and prepared and served quickly. It is designed for large numbers of students at a given time (tick the 'logistics' box); it provides mediocre 'adventure/fun' outcomes (tick the 'risk management' box); it is too often centre-based (tick the 'accompanying teacher/adult comforts' box) and surprisingly perhaps, it doesn't provide value for money. Furthermore it is usually programming that is likely to have been designed five to fifteen years ago, and it isn't evolving to meet the needs of students. Lastly, it is the programming least likely to provide a worthy, if any, environmental component. And while there's nothing wrong with the 'fast food' option occasionally, there's a far more nutritious alternative that should be considered for more regular consumption.

Staying with the food analogy, the alternative is the home-cooked meal. Prepared with care, it takes into consideration what was eaten



previously during the day; it is nutritious, and when consumed it has a community feel. There is a minimum of packaging and very little waste.

In short, if students' needs are held in a higher regard, quality education outdoors is, like the home-cooked meal, the obvious option. Quality education outdoors offers programming that is sequential in nature, considers progression learning, challenges students mentally and when appropriate, physically. And, like the home-cooked meal, it may not be the easiest or least expensive option, but it does provide value for money. Happily once this thoughtful, considered approach is implemented, more subtle outcomes are valued, a key one being the environmental outcome.

I am not advocating journey-based experiences over hard-top or centre-based experiences. Spend some time looking at Santa Sabina's Tallong Campus and you'll see quality programming being offered from a centre. Or, if the school community can commit to a five-day bushwalk on the Main Range of

Kosciuszko National Park with Land's Edge, you'll bare witness to the enormous learning that takes place on a such a journey. Both these experiences are fundamentally different in style, however both have a philosophy that embraces the home-cooked meal option, servicing the student, their education and the environment. Both programs are enormously worthwhile from an environmental perspective – they expose students to a natural Australian landscape and provide them an opportunity to investigate the impacts they have on it. Each puts important environmental considerations under the microscope and just as importantly, each program is conducted in a manner that is environmentally appropriate.

But the most significant benefit of the home-cooked meal type of programming is that students learn to understand and enjoy the natural environment by simply spending time in it. Without a doubt, the most wonderful thing about taking a group of students on this type of program is to see them in awe of a sunset, excited by a wind-change, amazed by

a wattle blooming, thrilled by a snowfall or lying on the earth engrossed in a cloud shape.

In the words of Richard Louv, author of the international bestseller, *Last Child in the Woods*, "The child in nature may well be the most important indicator species of future sustainability." If the education outdoors industry is to meet the needs of 21st century students to a greater degree, it needs to offer more programming that puts the students' learning and education as a higher priority, embracing quality over ease. This will, in turn, ensure that it has an inextricable link to environmental programming. ■■■

*Antony Butcher along with Fleur Harmelin is a founding director of Land's Edge. Now in its 12th year, the company offers education out of the classroom in four key locations throughout NSW: Sydney Harbour, the Illawarra region, the NSW South Coast and Kosciuszko National Park. Further information is available at [www.landsedge.com.au](http://www.landsedge.com.au)*



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