Outdoors WA Conference 2007
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Emerging Themes – what are the emerging themes & trends for camps in Australia?

– David Petherick, Executive Officer ACA

Risk Aversion

Risk & risk management have become a central preoccupation of governments & business since the late 1980's.

Undoubtedly we are becoming more risk averse – a bubble wrap society as one UK child psychologist recently put it during a visit to Australia.

Safe (from latin - salvus) – free & secure from danger, harm, injury & risk – BUT people participate in outdoor programs to engage with risk. Risk is used as an educational tool.

Risk management should be about the consideration of risk – it becomes problematic when it is about the elimination of risk.

If risk management causes us, as a community, to focus on what went wrong then liability & blame become central. It has been reported that it in NSW the work cover authority takes an approach that does not recognise that there are accidents – in this approach "whose fault?" becomes the primary focus of any investigation & the first question.

Risk shapes services – favours some services over others, determines priorities, influences judgements about quality & performance.

When risk becomes dominant the future then becomes more important than the present – our attention is focused on what might happen in the future instead of what the needs of our participants now.

"The worship of safety and the avoidance of risk make up the new moral order, an order which is prescriptive, intrusive and deeply anti-humanistic" (Stalker 2003:221)

Risks are generally only defined as hazards and dangers – but risk taking:

- Is integral to learning, development & identity
- Is the way we explore difference, new places, new relationships & come to understand a rapidly changing world
- Is central to an innovative, creative practice & the exercise of judgement
- Is the pathway to liberation from our fears & dependencies

(David Green)

What does risk management mean for a risk taking practice, the exercise of professional judgement & ethical decision making?

Are we practicing in an era in which every adverse incident is an indication of failure & error?

How do we properly manage risk?

Focus on purpose & mission – why are we doing the activities we do? How do they contribute to the outcomes we are seeking?

Consult, communicate, build relationships – participants, parents, teachers, program staff. This is also a way of sharing risk – this is of growing importance in a blame culture. "It is easier to accuse a stranger of wrongdoing than a friend" (Preston B Cline).

In educational terms risk is human interaction with uncertainty – in modern times the pace of change is increasing exponentially & it is becoming more & more critical to skill our young people to cope with change & uncertainty.

Undergo a risk analysis which includes the spectrum of needs & goals of the participants beyond safety and security. Consider the question "What is the risk to our mission and goals if we seek to eliminate risk in all activities?" in other words what is the risk of NOT doing an activity as well as the risk of doing it?

Accepting risk – after analyzing & evaluating risk & considering all the options (including consultation – risk sharing), deciding to continue the activities which give rise to risks as a necessary element of the enterprise.

Both controlling risk & risk taking are essential to the achievement of goals & outcomes.

An ethical & effective service has to be one which takes risks AND protects participants, staff & community.

Benefits

An important response to increasing risk aversion is to focus on the benefits that derive from our programs - & the **risks associated with not participating** – lack of resilience & coping skills, obesity, mental illness, an epidemic of youth suicide, a focus on individual rather community benefits.

For me one of the key messages which emerged at the ACA Conference in September was "benefits".

- James Merlino, Victorian Minister for Sport, Recreation and Youth Affairs, in opening the conference talked about the governments commitment to ensuring

more people from diverse backgrounds are exposed to the benefits of the camp and outdoor recreation experience.

- Amma Griffiths made a very interesting presentation about the research she has been doing to establish and measure the benefits of outdoor education. It is in the early stages but Amma said she was keen to develop it to the point that all camps could use the tool with the schools who visit them.
- Adam Ruggero from GSDM spoke about marketing camps and one of his key messages was that if we want to attract more business then we need to market the benefits of camps and outdoor recreation rather than a list of features.
- Kevin Joyce spoke about the environmental and financial benefits that arise from using less energy on our sites and the links this might have to changing camper behaviour when they return home. And these were only from the speakers that I was lucky enough to hear.

The following is based on a snapshot presentation that I made at the conference. The information comes not only from my background in education, youth work and the disability sector, but more importantly from listening to a large number of members and other stakeholders over the last 12 months – it is premised on the question what might be the key benefits that we would want to promote about camps & outdoor recreation?

I think they are as follows:

1. Healthy Active Lifestyles.
   This is a message that all levels of government are trying to get out. The obesity epidemic is all over the media and the statistics are damning and frightening. Mental health is also an issue that is gathering strength as we recognise that it is not enough to simply treat people medically when they become unwell. We need to find ways to be proactive in preventing mental illness and in supporting people to stay well and engaged with their community when they are discharged from acute inpatient facilities. We are in a strong position to contribute on both of those fronts.

2. Environmental Awareness and Action.
   The link between spending time in the environment and developing understandings and commitment to the environment are well understood. There are also many camps who are undertaking environmental programs with groups such as Landcare and Waterwatch. There are great opportunities for us to tap into and benefit from the growing community awareness and commitment to environmental issues. It is arguable that if we don’t our clients will vote with their feet in the future.

3. Community Strengthening.
   The benefits and opportunities offered through camps in this area are well understood by groups as diverse as sporting clubs (pre-season fitness and team building), corporate groups (team building and bonding) and the criminal justice system (Brat Camp and various wilderness programs for disadvantaged

youth). It covers not only community building initiatives but also programs to build resilience and self-worth in individuals which assist them to be better functioning, healthy members of society.

4. Educational and Curriculum Links.
   Schools have been undertaking programs in camps and the outdoors for a very long time. It includes not only Outdoor Education as a subject and curriculum area on its own, but links to the broader curriculum such as writing camps, science camps, music camps.

5. Tourism.
   Just in case you hadn't noticed – camps and outdoor activities occur in fabulous and beautiful environments and are a great way to simply have a holiday and relax – and a very affordable holiday at that.

There may be other things I have missed that fit into these categories or deserve a category all of their own.

I am confident that most of us would agree that these things are all benefits that accrue from a camp and outdoor education/recreation program. But I don't think this will be enough into the future. I think there are worrying signs about a growing risk aversion in the broader community and a continuing concern amongst educationalists about the crowded curriculum. For us this means that we will need to be in a position to defend our sector with cold hard evidence-based arguments.

Our next challenge is to bring the key stakeholders together to see if we are in agreement about the 5 or 6 things that we should be promoting about camps, outdoor recreation and outdoor education. We then need to identify the research, expert opinion and anecdotal evidence that already exists to support these arguments. We will then need to find ways to support research in areas where the current evidence is not clear or strong. But it won't just be about empirical research and expert analysis, it will also be important to collect and share the human stories from those who come to our sites because these will be powerful adjuncts to the research that already exists.

I am keen for us to embark on this journey in the coming year and I hope you come along for the ride. I think it will be a lot of fun – but I also think it is important for the future of our industry.

Regards

David Petherick
Executive Officer