

The Confluence

International Outdoor Recreation and Education Conference 2008

Christchurch, New Zealand

The Confluence attempted to blend theory and practice through the exchange of knowledge within the international outdoor research, practitioner and trade communities and incorporated six key strands:

- Research and Theory
- Teaching and Learning
- Sustainability and the Environment
- Risk Management and Safety
- Applied Theory and Practice
- Outdoor Recreation and Adventure Tourism

With over 200 delegates from fourteen countries and a wide variety of workshop topics ranging from the esoteric to very practical, there was much to see, do and learn. I came away feeling I had been challenged in my thinking in many areas of education outdoors but also had confirmation of my ideas in others.

Key-note Dr. Allen Ewart from Indiana University, spoke of the place of Outdoor Recreation and Education in Society, certainly a wide ranging topic.

He began with the issues surrounding what he sees as the two general streams working in the outdoors; educators and recreators. These issues, while different are often similar and included:

- Participation rates
- Staffing – including pay, sustaining relationships, burn out etc.
- Certification and Standards
- Access – land and water
- Relationship to the Environment – do we contribute to or help with the many environmental issues
- Working with local communities
- Programme fidelity – does it work and how do we prove it

Dr Ewart also spoke about the outcomes that we hope to achieve from education outdoors and that historically we have been referring to ideas such as self-esteem, self-concept and character building. He feels that more contemporary programmes are focussing on outcomes such as achievement, empowerment, resilience and positive adaptation but cautioned that the outcome we are hoping to achieve must be worth the risk/journey that is taken to get there.

He finished with a quote from Einstein

‘Not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted’

I was fortunate to attend many high quality presentations, including two from Western Australians and thoroughly agree with a comment that was made remarking that attendance at the Confluence was similar to ‘drinking from a fire hose’.

I have attempted to summarise the main issues for me in dot form.

- Sustainability was a key underlying issue during the confluence from how do we run our programmes in a sustainable way to delegates questioning their attendance at the conference being worth the amount of energy used to get them there.
- Leadership and Judgement
 - How do we teach and evaluate these key qualities of an outdoor leader and how they equate to good risk management.
- Unaccompanied student activities
 - Are they worth the risk?
 - What are the risks and are they greater than when a student is accompanied by an instructor?
- Developing positive group culture – control vs. empowerment
- White water rescue – some new findings and techniques
- The Comfort Zone
 - Is forcing our students out of their comfort zone and expecting them to learn a valid model?
 - Does creating disequilibrium through stress = learning.
 - Does this just lead to compartmentalisation of learning; outdoors/camp vs. 'the real world'.
- Friluftsliv (Free lufts leave) – the Scandinavian model of education outdoors and a Nordic tradition. A more holistic approach combining folklore, adventure travel and a sense of place rather than the current Australian model stressing outcomes and competencies. Possession of information is not necessarily knowledge.

Another area I found interesting is that New Zealand is also grappling with a rationalisation of their Instructor certification and are moving toward a national scheme that seems similar to our National Outdoor Leader Registration Scheme. In talking to many people I felt they were about five years behind us in the process and are having many of the same doubts and issues with RPL, currency, assessment of quality and being 'bulldozed' into the scheme. Food for thought.

If anyone is interested I am happy to answer any questions to the best of my ability and also make available the proceedings from the Confluence. It is also worth noting that Brendan Munge from Explorus and Liam Sullivan from Scotch College presented at the Confluence and will no doubt have a different perspective.

Mark Tait