

## **Lost in the Australian bush: outdoor education as curriculum**

### **Abstract**

In Victoria, Australia, school outdoor-education programmes are unusually widespread and well established. Is any form of outdoor education essential? I use this question to develop a critical reading of outdoor-education discourse in Victoria. I contend that this discourse has been dominated by universalist and decontextualized understandings of outdoor education which fail to account adequately for the development of particular programmes, ignore important social, cultural, geographical and historical differences, and are flawed as a basis on which to build outdoor-education theory. I show that outdoor education must be understood not only in broad national contexts, but also in local and regional contexts, and that outdoor-education programmes must be understood as particular contributions to existing relationships between particular communities and particular regions. To do so requires a critical reappraisal of how experience is comprehended and geographical location accounted for in curriculum studies.

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## **Lost in the Australian bush: outdoor education as curriculum**

In Victoria, Australia, 'outdoor education' has unusually wide acceptance in schools as a distinct curriculum offering. No doubt many curriculum benefits may be found amid what may appear as a confusion of different outdoor-education programmes, most of which are linked in some way to visits to what Australians call 'the bush'. But is any form of outdoor education essential? That is a different matter, and I unpack this question, and use it to probe some conceptual limits in outdoor-education discourse. In so doing I hope to throw some light into a neglected corner of curriculum inquiry.

I begin from the assumption that any essential roles for outdoor education may be specific to particular geographical, social and cultural contexts. I suggest that the question of whether outdoor education is necessary requires a curriculum conversation that is attentive to the particulars of relationships between communities and geographic regions, and that can provide a conceptual grasp on the reality-constituting and epistemological dimensions of outdoor experience. Voices able to meet these requirements have failed to emerge in Victorian outdoor-education discourse, which has been dominated by neo-colonialist understandings of 'the bush' in which particular locations are seen either as empty sites on which to establish social or psychological projects, or merely as examples of more abstract realities such as 'the environment'. Experiences are predominantly conceived as episodes from which insights may be quarried, or tools with which to inscribe the self, rather than as constituting relationships in which understandings are inherent.

My reading of Victorian outdoor-education discourse reveals that although Victorian outdoor education has been shaped by local geography and by a tacit experiential epistemology, understandings of the curriculum significance of these factors have failed to surface in outdoor-education curriculum discourse, which has been shaped by, and in turn constituted, discursive situations indifferent if not inimical to such considerations. A persistent search for universals in outdoor-education discourse has drawn attention from the particulars of what are often distinctive, school-initiated programmes. This not only has left largely unexamined how distinctive outdoor-education programmes have developed in particular geographic,

social and cultural contexts, but has also substantially attenuated the development of critical perspectives on outdoor-education practice.

These failings have been attended by an uncritical acceptance of imported outdoor-education theory, and point to some widespread inadequacies in outdoor-education theory internationally. Although in the curriculum studies literature some attention has been paid to field trips (Nespor, 2000) and to teaching classes in outdoor spaces, there has been less attention to the question of 'outdoor education' as a substantial and distinct area of curriculum. Moreover, references to curriculum theory have been difficult to find in outdoor-education curriculum discourse. Attempting to bridge this gap raises questions not only about outdoor-education theory but also about the nature of curriculum studies.

### **The bush in Australian curriculum: forgotten but not gone?**

Does it matter if, and how, contemporary Australians experience the bush? Arguing for an Australian curriculum, Hannan (1989) alludes to his father's life in the bush as emblematic of the origins of Australian democracy, but consigns such experiences to the past: 'by the time I was born, my parents were living in Melbourne. . . . Apart from train rides to Ferntree Gully, I did not know any bush, much less the bush of legend' (p. 13). The bushman<sup>1</sup>, he claims later, has vanished, with lived experience distilled into history, geography and literature classes, and the bush legend appropriated by conservative politicians. Hannan judges, no doubt astutely, that in contributing to curriculum debate, a contemporary role for bush experience need not rate a mention. However, although it is a given that a large majority of Australians live in cities, there are reasons to treat the apparent urbanization of Australian consciousness as educationally problematic.

Imperatives to improve relations between aboriginal and settler Australians provide one reason. Hannan (1989) advocates attention to aboriginal history and literature but not to the land itself, which contains the texts (Muecke, 1992) on which traditional aboriginal cultures centre. As Australians struggle to achieve reconciliation between aboriginal groups and settler Australians, it seems doubtful whether approaches to curriculum that are unable to

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<sup>1</sup> Not to mention the bushwoman (Schaffer, 1988).

comprehend local knowledge systems are an adequate basis for understandings to develop between urban Australians and those aboriginal Australians for whom knowledge of specific 'country' is profound. This is not a matter of attempting to appropriate aboriginal knowledge, but of paying attention to implicit lessons from aboriginal cultures about how to approach questions of knowledge and place.

Environmental issues provide a second reason. The colonization of Australia has been implicated in extensive, ongoing ecological disruption. Hannan's (1989, p. 13) expression, 'I did not know any bush' is a reminder that school-based knowledge of the bush is not equivalent to personal experience. He does not pursue the point; but in what circumstances is experiential local knowledge important, and how may it be accounted for in the curriculum? Environmental issues do not boil down entirely to questions of personal or local knowledge, but at the same time abstractions and representations are always incomplete. The question is not just about knowledge, but about the experiential and narrative structures in which knowledge is comprehended; Hajer's (1995) analysis of political discourse on issues such as acid rain has demonstrated how environmental politics can be understood in terms of contests over storylines. The imperative is to devise means to have the necessary conversations that determine if, and when, specific local knowledge and the experiences and stories in which it is embedded are important, while avoiding parochialism or mysticism.

These two imperatives locate this inquiry in the broad context of European colonization of Australia. As Carter (1988) has described it, early travellers and settlers sought holds for their imaginations on an alien and often bewildering landscape. Predominantly, colonization treated the land as an empty space on which settlers could inscribe their intentions, inevitably resulting, given profound ecological and cultural differences between Australia and Europe, in deep environmental and cultural misunderstandings. In contemporary Australia, Anzac Munnganyi, a Bilinara man from the Northern Territory, has observed that 'White people just came up blind, bumping into everything. And put the flag; put the flag' (Rose, 1996, p. 18). The development of universalist outdoor education can be read as the continuance of a colonizing mindset, operating not through obvious physical occupation but through seepage into everyday assumptions in what Rouse (1987) has termed, following Foucault, the capillary effects of power.

### **Framing outdoor education as regional curriculum**

In the state of Victoria 72% of its 4 500 000 population live in Melbourne, and 80% live in either Melbourne or one of 4 regional centres. If, in some important sense, ‘knowing the bush’ by experience is not equivalent to knowing the bush through abstractions and representations, the Victorian situation presents a striking environmental education problem: democratic responsibility for management of an extensive, vexed and complex landscape rests with a culturally diverse urban population for which experience of the bush is problematic.

Living in a city does not in itself extinguish experience of the bush; it selectively reconstructs it. In Victoria different groups – regional, ethnic, social, economic – negotiate and construct multiple realities, through travel, keeping beach houses, hobby farms and bush blocks, visits to relatives in rural areas, family traditions of camping, fishing, hunting, bushwalking<sup>2</sup>, motor cycle riding, surfing and other activities. Outdoor education is located within, and intervenes in, patterns of existing relationships between communities and regions. Much of this activity is mediated by public policy (as land management, tourism policy and initiative, regional development, national park provision and management) and could be read as (de facto) curriculum.

How are worldviews shaped by existing patterns of geographical experience? How is knowledge shaped by and embedded in particular experiences? What are the gaps and silences in the content and distribution of these patterns of experience? How and why might schools take a particular responsibility for contributing to the mix? While these questions link outdoor education to broad contextual factors, such as military history, national identity, landscape, population density and population distribution, they also emphasize some irreducibly local dimensions of bush experiences. They point to the unlikelihood of determining whether or not any form of outdoor education is essential without attending to the circumstances in question. To do otherwise would be to reify the abstractions in which broad national imperatives are expressed.

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Tramping’ in New Zealand, ‘hiking’ in the USA, ‘hill walking’ in the UK.

In an important sense outdoor-education programmes do not take Australians to the bush; they take particular groups to specific places. Although it may be tempting to regard this as a truism, it is central to reading outdoor education as curriculum.

### **A brief epistemological and ontological excursion**

Outdoor education also constructs particular experiences. Before considering the case of Victorian outdoor education in detail, it may be helpful to consider some epistemological and ontological issues that the question of bush experience as curriculum, rather than merely teaching strategy, raises.

The example compares the broad characteristics of geography field trips with recreational bushwalking. It is not my intention to imply that one side of the comparison is to be preferred, but to illustrate some of the considerations. In fact, neither a geography excursion nor recreational bushwalking as described would be regarded as typical examples of outdoor education in Victoria, and there would be resistance to considering either to be outdoor education at all.

While field trips tend to focus on single episodes of experience, to be a bushwalker suggests an on-going relationship with a region through periodic re-inhabitation. The geographer's significant relationship is with the field of geography. Social relationships in bushwalking are linked to places; the walker accumulates social and geographical experience around which narratives and memories are constructed. Places are filled with stories of past visits, and expectations of future visits. In the same way a childhood home not only stirs memories but also contains memories, the landscape becomes meaningful partly because it contains bushwalking memories that emerge when certain sights, sounds and smells are re-encountered. For the geographer social relations during the excursion may be important, but not in the context of geographical knowledge; the epistemologically significant social relations are with academic geographers and perhaps examiners or curriculum writers.

Geographic knowledge is not personal, and knowledge is not embodied in the expectation of

repeat performances, as is the case in bushwalking, but abstracted from the experience – knowledge is ultimately recorded in the classroom, the examination room or the work force. For the walker the physical and emotional experience of the walk helps to define its meaning; for the geographer these are private and not epistemologically relevant. The bushwalker's local knowledge – knowing where a campsite is, recognizing a particular tree that marks a waterhole, or noticing that certain flowers are out early one year – may be meaningless when the relationship with the place ceases. The relevance of experiential local knowledge to curriculum has to be considered as inherent in particular relationships; in comparison, the point of curriculum is usually to develop knowledge that will have relevance outside the (school) contexts in which it is obtained.

Perhaps the bushwalker and geographer will encounter the same fact or use the same map; there is no strict boundary between bushwalking and 'geographing'. The distinctions can be overdrawn; one can be both a geographer and a bushwalker. Local experiential knowledge systems are not necessarily antithetical to abstract or disciplinary knowledge, and may overlap. In outdoor-education practice the issue is how continuous dialectic tension, between abstract understandings and those inherent in on-going experience, is negotiated, and to what ends. In curriculum the issue is how patterns of 'bush' experience are to be comprehended, and how the significance of particular forms and patterns of experience are to be evaluated.

### **Victorian outdoor education as geographically constructed**

Victorian outdoor education has geographic origins. Melbourne, the Victorian capital, sprawls on a coastal plain. The most popular dwelling in the suburbs is a single-storey detached house on a 'quarter acre' block; consequently, the city covers a large area. Rural land on the city outskirts is mostly privately owned farmland (to which there is no right of public access), or forms part of a closed catchment for the city water supply. In Australian vernacular 'the bush' can mean remote rural areas, but it also refers to areas that have not been cleared of native vegetation, particularly forests and woodlands. For recreational bushwalkers the 'bush' has thus centred on public land, often some hours by motor vehicle from the city, particularly the mountains and other areas seen as unsuitable for agriculture in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Hall, 1992). While some of the mountains are quite steeply

dissected, they offer steep walking terrain, not mountaineering. Rivers are often unnavigable; to travel with the grain of the country for the most part is to follow the spurs, ridges and high plains, or tracks along the larger valleys. A sense of discontinuity between city and the bush – emphasized by the need to travel through the suburbs and past the surrounding farms or water reserves – is accentuated by a discontinuity between indigenous flora and fauna in the bush, and those encountered in parks and gardens in Melbourne, which are almost entirely alien (even ‘native gardens’ tend to mix species from widely divergent Australian ecosystems). These particular geographical features not only have influenced the forms in which outdoor education emerged in Victoria, but have marked green politics in Victoria, local nature-writing up until the 1960s, and the development of bushwalking since the 1890s.

Outdoor education influenced by UK traditions, often called ‘outdoor adventure education’ to distinguish it from field studies (Drasdo, 1972), is structured around adventurous recreation pursuits. Although Victorian outdoor education has also been influenced by outdoor recreation, the landscape offers no mountaineering to speak of, and rock-climbing (central to outdoor education in the UK) can be considered in Victoria a separate sport on distinct crags – it is neither a necessary nor (usually) practical part of travelling in the bush. Whitewater kayaking, also important in outdoor adventure education, is similarly a possibility but not an obvious response to the Victorian landscape, as, for example, canoe tripping is in Canada. While ‘outdoor adventure education’ and traditions of organized summer camping (mainly from the USA and Canada) have influenced outdoor education in Victoria, it contains a distinctly Victorian tradition of bush camping and bushwalking.

‘The bush’ has complex resonances in Australian consciousness influenced but not wholly determined by more generalized Western understandings of nature, and more recently by contemporary environmentalism and US concepts of wilderness. These contributed to the selective appeal of outdoor education in Victoria, the forms in which it emerged, and its social distribution. It drew on and appealed to established constructs of and beliefs about the bush, but these were not ubiquitous. For example, most migrants to Australia since World War II have been from countries of high population density and have settled in the larger cities (Powell, 1988). Participation of the children of migrant families became an issue early in the development of outdoor education (Louchart, Freestone, Roberts, & Wood, 1982).

While bushwalking appealed to a relatively small proportion of the urban population (except during the hiking boom of the 1930s (Routley, 1994)), the literature of bushwalking and natural history immediately prior to and in the two decades following World War II demonstrates that urban Australian understandings of 'the bush' had an experiential component, notwithstanding the literary and urban origins of the 'the bush myth' in the 1890s (Davison, 1992). Early bushwalkers were mostly professional urban dwellers who maintained significant contact with the bush. While bushwalking practice was later transformed as more walkers were introduced through formal courses rather than induction into a club, bushwalking can be interpreted as a knowledge-based activity, like bird-watching, mushroom hunting (Fine, 1998) or fishing, rather than simply physical activity in pleasant scenery. Bushwalking clubs, at least to a degree, socially constructed regional geographies rendered meaningful by stories of past experiences and plans for future visits.

A review of issues of *The Melbourne Walker* (described on the title page of several issues as 'Victoria's Geographic Magazine . . . A Journal devoted to Walking as a Healthful and Educational Pastime' (e.g. *The Melbourne Walking and Touring Club*, 1961) between 1950 and the mid-1970s suggests that bushwalking was not merely an inchoate precursor of contemporary environmental consciousness (constructed around abstracted nature) or adventure travel (constructed around risk-taking). Bushwalking emerges from the pages of *The Melbourne Walker* as local and risk-averse. Threads of exploration and discovery run through many accounts, but the dominant theme is of individually and collectively building experience of the bush regions around Melbourne. Bushwalking maintained and passed on experiential knowledge through programmes of walks that formed loose patterns of repetition and geographical coverage. Narratives were woven around regional geography, local history and the social and phenomenological experience of walking.

Bushwalking provided a local template for outdoor education in Victoria. The incorporation and subsequent transformation of bushwalking in Victorian outdoor education may be read as emblematic of the struggles between local initiatives and universalist tendencies that have been evident from the outset. In Victorian outdoor education, at least until the mid-1980s, bushwalking remained the dominant activity. In 1982 60% of 2600 approved excursions for

state post-primary schools used bushwalking, compared to a total of 12 rock-climbing activities (0.5%) and 59 surfing excursions (Ministry of Education, 1988, p. 3).

### **The contingent nature of Victorian outdoor education**

Geographical aspects influenced but did not determine the shape of outdoor education – there were other influences, including some habitually cited as foundational to outdoor education internationally. Although there are evident links between Victorian outdoor education and international institutions such as Outward Bound and the scouting movement, the unusually high incidence of outdoor education in schools in Victoria owes something to public ambivalence about these and other organizations. Victorians have not delegated socialization into the outdoors entirely to organizations outside the school. Outward Bound substantially reduced operations in Victoria in the 1960s following a serious accident (Wheeler, 1991), although it continued in other states and eventually re-emerged in Victoria. Scouting has not been universally embraced; doubts about the competence of some scout leaders in the bush surfaced from time to time (Wheeler, 1991), perhaps reinforcing a more general Australian suspicion of the kind of authority and tradition perceived in scouting. In contrast to the USA and Canada, there was no significant middle-class tradition in Victoria of sending children to summer camps. In comparison to Scandinavian countries, Australia did not have compulsory military service, which in Scandinavia may have designated outdoor education as at least partly the responsibility of the military.

The extent to which outdoor education became established in Victorian schools is unusual. Outdoor education has been accredited to the final year of year of schooling since 1982. About 1700 students took outdoor education in year 11 or 12 in 1987 and by 1993 outdoor education was offered in 156 Victorian schools at year 11 and 12, and taken by over 5000 students (McArthur, 1994). While these figures represent less than 5% of students at these year-levels, many more take outdoor education in years 7 to 10. For example, in 1987 four times as many students studied outdoor education at year 10 as at year 11 (Ministry of Education, 1988). Prior to its recognition in state curricula, many schools had established programmes. In 1979 state schools owned or operated 78 campsites, although not all had resident staff or developed accommodation (Bewsher, 1981, p. 27).

Circumstances such as rural school closures contributed to this growth. Many of the camps occupied surplus rural school sites re-allocated in the early 1970s (School Camps Branch, 1977). Most schools did not own or operate a camp, but almost 80% of secondary schools had a camping programme in 1978, and the Ministry of Education operated two fully staffed camps for year 9 students (Penhall, 1978). The impetus for camp development in the 1970s came at a time of expansive support for state schools by the federal (Labour) government (Marginson, 1993). Development of new camps tailed off as funding tightened and after the most suitable sites were taken, but in 1988 state schools still owned and operated 90 camps, many with full-time staff. By region, between 52% and 96% of state schools reported having an outdoor or camping programme (the lower figure in the western suburbs of Melbourne, with a high migrant population and economically disadvantaged) (Ministry of Education, 1988). A spot check on a single day in March 1987 revealed 163 excursions using ‘adventure’ activities (including bushwalking and camping), involving over 2000 students (p. 4).

The growth of outdoor-education programmes in the 1970s, and Department of Education sponsored curriculum projects in the early 1980s lent outdoor education in secondary schools a momentum that continued through to the 1990s, despite tighter funding and pressure on state schools to ‘go back to basics’. Increased retention rates in state schools assisted--- Outdoor Education was one of a suite of Victorian Certificate of Education subjects that proved attractive to an expanded year 11 and 12 cohort.

Although few private schools offered outdoor education in years 11 and 12, outdoor-education programmes for years 7 to 10 in the elite non-government schools, often compulsory, have been a mainstay of outdoor education in the state, with some programmes dating from the 1930s. Its association with elite schools elevated the status of outdoor education across the state. A relatively high proportion of students attend non-government schools in Australia, all of which receive some public funding. The elite schools offer better university entrance performance, and are seen as offering better material resources, a superior school culture, and social mobility (Marginson, 1993). A substantial outdoor-education programme, or a rural campus, became almost mandatory inclusions in the list of elite private

school benefits. In a joint advertising supplement in 1992, more than a third of 48 schools included their outdoor-education programmes or campus when listing their key attributes in less than 100 words (The Age, 1992).

Other local factors, such as a relatively large number of young teachers employed in state schools in the 1970s, underscore the extent to which the establishment of outdoor education in Victorian schools was to some extent an accident of history as much as a product of regional geography. Significantly, outdoor-education programmes were well established by the time outdoor-education discourse surfaced at state, and later national, levels.

Unlike the development of fields such as geography (Goodson, 1985), Victorian outdoor education grew without a corresponding university field of study. Contributions to discourse represented an increasingly evident diversity of interests – of which education was only one – in practitioner organizations, and occurred in discursive situations with a limited appetite for academic inquiry. As outdoor-education discourse increasingly reflected this diversity of interests and national orientation, universalist tendencies took root relatively uninhibited by critique, and uninformed by insights that might have emerged from a sustained academic inquiry centred on curriculum, place and experience.

### **Struggles for territory in a field of practice without a field of study**

From the outset an uncritical preference for universalist accounts of outdoor education was apparent in outdoor-education discourse. Universalist tendencies required only a willingness to follow the path of least resistance. Context-free accounts of outdoor education promised immediate applicability, and drew on conceptual frameworks readily to hand as globalise economic and cultural influences increased in Australia. Explanations of outdoor education in Australia as imported, or as following a maturation process that parallels, but lags, developments in the UK or the USA, became conventional wisdom. For example, Gass (1998, p. 14) suggests that Australian outdoor education essentially followed ‘adventure programming trends in other areas of the world’. Priest (2000) advised Australians to follow US rather than UK examples. Numerous accounts traced outdoor education to the development of Outward Bound and its originator, Kurt Hahn. Although at best partial truths,

these statements were rarely challenged. Some international influences were evident in the report of the first national outdoor-education conference (Melbourne State College, 1978), which contained no discussion of the Australian or Victorian contexts as significant in themselves. Subsequent conference reports and publications of the Victorian Outdoor Education Association (VOEA) routinely mixed local and international articles without comment. Visiting experts offering activity packages became a regular feature of professional development and conferences in Victorian outdoor education. Lacking conceptual purchase on the possible curriculum significance of locality, discourse increasingly drifted away from consideration of local contexts. This transformation of outdoor-education discourse was most evident in the national journal, which was dominated not by outdoor education as curriculum but outdoor education as a psychological tool (Australian Journal of Outdoor Education, 2000).

As the dominant focus of outdoor-education discourse became less local, specific universalist themes emerged, often embedded in debates about qualifications. Abstractions – the outdoors, the environment, the bush, and nature – were reified. The self was seen not as multiple (e.g. parent, colleague, friend, client, patient) and always constituted in contexts (e.g. home, office, sporting club, bank, hospital) (Goffman, 1959; Kagan, 1998), but as an autonomous entity onto which meaning could be inscribed by nature or camp life, but which paradoxically could be relied on not to be reinscribed by contrary experiences, when everyday life resumed. I (Brookes, 2000, p. 3) have previously suggested that the default position for outdoor-education curriculum discourse was realist and individualist:

Realism and individualism are convenient; they exempt outdoor educators from having to know much about nature (it can be perceived directly) or culture (since meaning comes from within the individual rather than from collective memory).

Outdoor educators were also exempted from local knowledge or experience. Accordingly, outdoor-education teachers could be seen as requiring not a capacity to develop local outdoor-education curriculum, but training in safety, certain outdoor pursuits and instructional techniques, together with a repertoire of facilitation strategies. By the late 1990s, the staff training coordinator of Outward Bound Australia expressed a contested but

mainstream view of outdoor education, when she (Herbert, 1998, p. 30) insisted:

Outdoor activities themselves however, are a means to a process. This process engages participants in challenging personal and social situations, reflection, visualisation, and development of short and long term goals. . . . Selection of staff . . . is based on interpersonal skills, compassion, and commitment to working with others.

In this view it was of peripheral importance where outdoor education occurred, how those places were experienced, or by which groups or communities, provided that some logistic requirements were met, such as isolation and physical challenges. By implication, the significance of outdoor education was located not in relationships between communities and geographic regions, but in the autonomous selves of the participants.

Whereas contributions to discourse in the late 1970s predominantly focused on the particular practices of outdoor education in Victorian schools, and on sustained efforts to improve and develop outdoor education within state curriculum structures, later contributions increasingly emphasized use of the outdoors for management training, offender programmes and other areas only distantly related to education.

As the field expanded, the interests of subject teachers emerged as only one of several groups of interests represented by state and national outdoor-education associations. In the early years of VOA (formed in December 1981, with a membership of 330 by 1984), most newsletter articles and conference papers focused on curriculum issues and teaching strategies. Early state conferences were funded by the Ministry of Education and attended mostly by teachers and curriculum specialists. Later conferences served activity leaders who worked for residential camps, organizations that provided outdoor-recreation activities to schools under contract and therapeutic programmes (for offenders, at-risk youth, drug-dependant youth), adventure travel guides, and for a time, management trainers. (Corporate adventure training proliferated in Australia in the early 1990s in the wake of federal legislation mandating corporations to spend 1.5% of payroll costs on structured training. In a Melbourne newspaper supplement, Macken (1993, p. 14) observed: “the Act has spawned an industry in which abseiling down a cliff is called team-building”.)

This shifting focus of professional identity further marginalized curriculum considerations. Within professional associations, diverse ideological, conceptual and cultural inheritances, geographical location, and sometimes incompatible aims and intentions were accorded less attention than the possibilities for developing a unified field around common use of outdoor recreation and camping, and standard facilitation techniques. Some who saw outdoor education not as a specialist area of curriculum but as an industry defined by outdoor activities questioned the role of teachers' colleges. Reporting from the 6th national conference, Freakley (1990, p. 21) argued that "tertiary training in outdoor education is increasingly . . . irrelevant because . . . it persists in keeping to the traditional rôle of outdoor education in the school". His point made pragmatic if not educational sense. Fields such as management training, substance-abuse therapy, personal or character development, youth work and school teaching suggested quite different tertiary courses and disciplinary bases, if tertiary courses were called for. While many schools, particularly in Victoria, continued to employ outdoor-education staff who were graduates in outdoor education or had outdoor education as a major component of their degree, the national trend was to define outdoor education as an industry requiring vocational training.

As educational issues were displaced from the centre of outdoor-education discourse, the question of an essential role for outdoor education was marginalized. Contributions to journals and newsletters routinely treated experience as decontextualized and abstracted. However, far from leaving open the curriculum contribution of outdoor-education practice, struggles ostensibly over issues such as staff qualifications could predetermine how outdoor education was conceived and practiced as education.

### **Risk narratives and the social construction of outdoor-education curriculum**

Debates about qualifications were necessarily debates about risk and safety. Although Victorian outdoor education had mostly avoided making a fetish of risk, as is sometimes the case in adventure tourism and outdoor adventure education, safety arguments could generally be relied on to trump educational considerations. The institutionalisation of outdoor education at a state level in Victoria was initiated by the death of a child on a bushwalk in

1972. The Ministry of Education responded by establishing a School Camps Branch (SCB), which by 1978 had eight staff. The branch conducted an extensive programme of in-service courses, developed excursion guidelines, and advised school councils on excursion applications (Penhall, 1978). In a subsequent re-organization the SCB became the Outdoor Education Section (OES). The establishment and normative influence of the SCB and OES legitimised outdoor education in state schools. Together with the Bushwalking and Mountaineering Leadership Certificate course, to which OES staff and many school teachers both contributed and participated, the OES helped to maintain an experience-centred approach to accreditation and certification of bushwalking leaders and to keep the question of outdoor-education teaching standards largely in the educational domain and centred on ‘the bush’. An epistemology centred on the experienced bushwalker was, at least to an extent, institutionalised in these initial responses.

As the Ministry of Education regionalized curriculum services, it appeared the baton for outdoor-education training would be passed to the tertiary sector; in 1982 the Victorian Post-Secondary Education Commission approved the development of an outdoor-education degree by Bendigo College of Advanced Education. When established, the course combined descriptive assessment for theory and practical subjects and other strategies to sustain an experience-based model of outdoor competence, used bushwalking as the core practical activity, and structured some core theory around curriculum considerations, rather than recreational leadership. However, the course had little influence on the field in the 1980s; very small numbers graduated and completed subsequent teacher training prior to 1990, and schools continued to draw staff from diverse sources. Meanwhile the normative influence of the OES waned until its abandonment in 1984. By 1986 conference attendance had collapsed and in-service courses offered by VEOA routinely cancelled. Graduate diplomas offered by colleges of advanced education only partially filled the gap; they were time-consuming, expensive and brought little additional recognition from the Ministry of Education to those teachers who completed them (Costermans, 1991). Subsequently, as former colleges of advanced education merged with universities as part of tertiary education reform in the 1990s, outdoor-education faculty found themselves working in universities, and struggled with imperatives to reorient both their careers and the courses they taught.

Vocational-training organizations moved to occupy and reconfigure the space vacated by the former colleges, offering uniform national competency-based training for outdoor leaders, underwritten by federal funding for vocational-training initiatives. In these contexts outdoor-education teachers were increasingly referred to as guides, leaders or facilitators. Students became 'clients'. Outdoor education was seen as an industry that provided human capital, as embodied modular competencies (activity skills, safety skills and facilitation skills), to a range of employers of which schools were only one. Acceptance of these developments by schools and the wider community, including universities, some of which offered vocational modules within outdoor-education courses, hinged on acceptance of particular risk storylines.

Risk narratives help define many outdoor recreation activities. For instance, among mushroom collectors risk is associated with accidental poisoning because of mistaken identification. The vast number of species and difficulties of identification help to maintain a network in which trust is invested in particular known individuals (Fine, 1998). In whitewater paddling, risk is primarily associated with misreading the river resulting in entrapment. While institutional responses to risk in paddling have tended to emphasize certification of paddling and river-reading skills, in other cases, such as Franklin River rafting, a guide is expected to have a very detailed knowledge of the particular river and the effects of different water levels (Brookes, 2001).

Risk narratives also shape how Australians understand the bush. In the Victorian bush, the climate is relatively mild, dangers posed by wild animals are slight, and dangers from terrain (falls, avalanches, dangerous torrents) are minimal or usually avoidable. The main risk is the possibility of getting lost. In 1974, prior to the formation of the SCB, 74 children were lost (temporarily) during school camps (Penhall, 1978), and reducing these numbers was a priority for the newly formed branch. The phrase 'lost in the bush' captures a particularly Australian image of nature, invoking the apparent monotony of 'the scrub', and its lack of sustenance. 'Lost in the bush' stories can be read as cautionary and exemplary tales through which understandings of the bush are negotiated and reproduced.

Stories of children lost in apparently endless, indifferent bush have resonated with Australians since the early days of British occupation:

When the children failed to return Mrs Duff began to search in the scrub for them. She called and cooed [sic] but by then they had walked too far away. She hastened back to tell her husband. He saddled up and rode through the scrub calling constantly. Nothing. (Blake, 1964, p. 12)

The three Duff children, lost in the west Wimmera near Mount Arapiles in Victoria in 1864, were found after nine days when an aboriginal referred to as Dicky, Dick-a-Dick, or 'King Richard' joined the search and tracked them (Brookes, 2000).

The very possibility of getting lost depends on an image of the bush as unfamiliar and in some sense unreadable; at the same time the role of the aboriginal guide is not entirely opposite to the role of the husband and his friends who later joined the search. The story of the Duff children retains a sense that a competent non-aboriginal bush guide is also someone who 'knows the bush'; trust is embedded not in an abstract system of competence, as may have been the case a century later, but in known individuals who knew the country, albeit in a different way from the Aborigines.

At least in the early years, the bushwalker was someone who 'knew the bush'. Prior to the ready availability of accurate topographic maps, bushwalking clubs offered access to the previous experience of others, in the form of written accounts of trips, contacts with local stockmen who grazed cattle in the bush under licence, sketch maps of previous trips, and above all through providing relationships with experienced and trusted individuals. New bushwalkers were not taught skills so much as inducted into a knowledge-based social network. As might be expected, with the advent of bushwalking courses came an increased emphasis on navigation as technique, rather than 'knowing' particular areas of bush. Topographic map-reading and navigation became central to bushwalking instruction. Topographic maps originally developed for the military provided information that enabled the technically competent to plan a bushwalk as a strategic exercise in unknown terrain. Competence based not on familiarity with a region could thereby be substituted with its opposite; the definitive test of leadership was a navigation exercise in an unfamiliar place.

The availability of storylines in which familiarity was made redundant by technique laid down conceptual foundations on which the development of vocational-training courses seemed natural and inevitable. Competency-based training courses required the substitution of abstract for place-bound epistemologies, and of trust in systems that deliver generic professional services (such as facilitation and accurate map-reading) for trust in on-going whole-person relationships. Such changes in the nature of risk and trust were, as Giddens (1990) has pointed out, defining characteristics of modern life, and by implication part of the taken-for-granted character of urban consciousness. Acceptance of competency-based training of outdoor teachers required no stretching of the institutional imagination.

The centrality of risk narratives to outdoor-education discourse and to the institutionalisation of outdoor education is common in outdoor-education discourse; it is not unique to Victoria. Accidents in the outdoors periodically propel outdoor education from relative obscurity to the centre of public attention in the newspapers, electronic media and the courts. It is not a given that a professional stranger with technical competence will be a safer guide than the familiar local. However, the requirements of particular institutional settings and the dominance of particular storylines about risk may profoundly limit the terms in which outdoor education can be conceived as curriculum.

### **Curriculum in outdoor-education discourse**

Contributors to outdoor-education literature who wished to develop curriculum perspectives that stayed within the conventional terms of outdoor-education discourse, were inclusive of the diverse range of outdoor-education practices and interests, and took account of the diverse educational backgrounds and qualifications of outdoor-education teachers and instructors, faced a difficult task. Understandably in the circumstances, many resorted to mirrors or smoke.

The mirrors came in the form of demonstrations that outdoor education could reflect many of the curriculum outcomes which schools could. Howell (Howell), for example, provided a detailed mapping of Key Learning Areas of Victorian Curriculum Standards Frameworks onto the camping programmes offered at the Rubicon School Camp. Much of what schools

can do, camp can do, and why not? A camp could be considered a temporary boarding school. Any reasons for preferring the forms of socialization and patterns of bush experience provided by the outdoor-education programme remained outside the curriculum conversation.

The smoke came in the form of over-generalization and under-specification of curriculum. Taking a recent example, Quay et al. (2000, p. 15) claim that outdoor education can “deliver outcomes in the areas of caring and community” which schooling, they assert, cannot. They attribute this capacity not just to camping, but to a range of practices associated with outdoor education around the world, including adventure education and experiential education. Community building is a common theme in Australian outdoor-education discourse, reflecting the influence of US and Canadian organized camping, in which can be seen vestiges of the utopian visions that inspired emigration to the New World. Unlike pioneering communities, however, outdoor-education communities are usually temporary; there is tension between the idea of community as something to belong to and the idea of community as something from which educational benefits can be extracted. Quay et al. (2000) avoid this difficulty by reifying community, and by focusing their educational claims on the individual’s sense of community. Thus community is defined as a context-free thing, and the student is defined as autonomous. A reified view of community as free from ideological, cultural, political, religious, economic and other dimensions is almost a contradiction in terms, and leaves the troubling impression that outdoor education can be conceived in terms which leave it particularly vulnerable to capture by particular interests. Organized camps are not the sole province of outdoor education – camps and retreats are favoured by cult leaders and militia groups alike, and although it is highly unlikely that anything equivalent to these extremes would slip unnoticed into schooling through the outdoor-education door, the fact that the context-free model of community is incapable of discriminating between even these two possibilities illustrates its weakness.

Martin and Thomas (2000, p. 43) suggest a framework for understanding outdoor education as “develop[ing] more intimate human-nature relationships’ that they suggest can be understood, metaphorically, as interpersonal relationships. They offer this understanding as a basis on which to reconceptualize ‘the way in which we work in the bush with our clients . . . and ultimately the contribution of outdoor education to society” (p. 39). On the premise that

“Western culture does not have a history and set of words which help us understand the ways in which humans relate to non-human nature” (p. 39), they clear the way for understandings of the bush that are psychological rather than socially, culturally, geographically and historically constructed. Scholars in disciplines from literature to anthropology might want to quibble with the premise, but read with the implicit intended audience in mind it offers the reassuring suggestion, to outdoor-education practitioners of diverse backgrounds, that everyone is starting with a blank page when it comes to nature. In this case nature is reified; one place is as good as another educationally, and one part of nature equivalent to another. As in the first example, Martin and Thomas centre their educational focus on the autonomous individual. They present a context-free model of interpersonal relationships, and imply that this provides not only a conceptual basis for understanding human-nature relationships, but also a normative one for outdoor-education practice. Their psychological model has two poles, with acquaintanceship on one pole, and friendship at the other, preferred pole. It is unclear either where other forms of interpersonal relationship fit the model, or where non-interpersonal relationships, such those between and with corporations or governments, fit. The model discriminates between relationships with nature that are intimate and those that are not, but is otherwise permissive with respect to where outdoor education takes place and what forms of experience it uses. The question of what knowledge might be embedded in what relationships for what reasons is avoided by construing ‘knowing’ to be a thing in itself and a desired property of relationships with nature; the question of what kinds of interactions in or with particular regions might satisfy curriculum imperatives is avoided by construing ‘interaction’ with nature also as a thing to be desired in itself. Likewise, the question of what specific interests or concerns curriculum should foster is avoided by construing concern (defined as attraction, commitment and caring) as an end in itself.

### **Outdoor education and curriculum theory**

From a curriculum studies perspective, outdoor education appears as a confusing tangle of influences and associations, which range, at least vestigially, from evangelical Christianity through military training to communitarianism. Moreover, the Australian outdoor-education literature may fail to convince anyone that there is much of curriculum significance in the mix. Considering some criticisms that have been made of some outdoor education, silence in

curriculum studies on the subject of outdoor education might be seen as appropriate or tactful.

For example, in response to the development of outdoor education at years 11 and 12 in Victoria, Craven (1990, p. 14) contended that outdoor education, among other subjects, was:

devoid of serious academic content. . . . the extraordinary subject of Outdoor Education. . . . with its concern to 'highlight the importance of spontaneity, innovation and inventiveness within the broad concept of adventure'. . . . [T]he list of academically 'Mickey Mouse' study designs can be expanded almost indefinitely.

Packaged outdoor-education programmes derived from 'character building' adventure programmes such as those offered by Outward Bound have been criticized on ideological grounds (Fullagar & Hailstone, 1996), and (in New Zealand) for needless risk-taking following participant deaths (Brett, 1994).

However, neither superficial impressions nor what may be justified criticisms of some programmes, provide sufficient grounds to dispose of outdoor education as a curriculum issue. Outdoor-education discourse has failed to explore properly its curriculum potential, and perhaps failed to do justice to particular programmes, but rectifying these failings is not simply a matter of contributors to the outdoor-education literature paying more attention to curriculum theory. Consideration of the possible curriculum significance of particular relationships between particular groups and particular regions of the bush entails contemplation of the nature of curriculum studies.

In the academic world rootlessness has become a virtue, according to Zencey (1998); an expectation of rootlessness is part of the taken-for-granted definition of what it means to be a successful academic, and might be taken as an ontological given in the education teachers receive. Although tendencies to define school curriculum as context-free have been contested (Simola, 1998), debate has not necessarily focused on physical location of curriculum. Attempts to locate curriculum bioregionally (Orr, 1992) are found only on the margins of curriculum studies, and are partial. Geography classes may attend to geographical location as

a curriculum study, but not to the intervention of schooling in patterns of geographic experience. There are reasons to be concerned about curriculum that is inattentive to the geographical location of curriculum practice. However, the liberatory potential of schooling arguably lies in its future-orientation and its capacity to overcome the limits of physical location. Curriculum has focused historically on the classroom (as generic learning-place), the book (as relocatable knowledge) and the timetable (as future-oriented sequence of learning). For Lundgren (1983) the eternal curriculum problem – the problem of representation – arises precisely because of the dislocation of the contexts of knowledge production from the contexts of knowledge reproduction. That is, decontextualization is an ontological given, to which schooling must respond with appropriate epistemological approaches. The word ‘curriculum’ itself refers to the ordering of learning in time (Reid, 1994), rather than the location of learning in place.

The fact of the establishment of outdoor education in Victorian schools, if not the ways in which it has been conceived as curriculum, suggest that these ontological assumptions and epistemological consequences need not be absolutes. Outdoor education offers the possibility of transcending some limitations of schooling without abandoning some necessary foundations of curriculum. But it requires a place in curriculum discourse for patterns of geographical experience to be understood as curriculum, through the introduction of dialectic tension into what are necessary, but problematic, ontological and epistemological assumptions in curriculum studies.

### **A manifesto for outdoor-education curriculum?**

How are worldviews shaped by existing patterns of geographical experience? How is knowledge shaped by and embedded in particular experiences? What are the gaps and silences in the content and distribution of these patterns of experience? How and why might schools take a particular responsibility for contributing to the mix? These questions outline a framework for development of outdoor education as a curriculum study, but they also imply that outdoor-education curriculum development must ultimately be local and school-based. Moreover, outdoor-education curriculum requires of teachers a capacity to shape and interpret experiences in response to particular circumstances, and in accordance with a deep

understanding of local curriculum imperatives. This is a demanding requirement; it is not surprising to find it on a path largely not taken in Victorian outdoor-education discourse.

The case of Victorian outdoor education shows how any such inquiry must take into account discursive situations in which adherents to particular approaches to and understandings of outdoor education are already in occupation. Outdoor-education curriculum inquiry is an intervention in a contested field in which territorial struggles over qualifications, access to outdoor locations and control of school programmes, may trump curriculum considerations. Passions for particular forms of recreation, commitment to certain programmes or forms of programme, and professional and personal identities are at stake. It is clear from the literature that outdoor-education adherents frequently link their practice with strongly held personal beliefs and values. Curriculum inquiry in outdoor education will not necessarily be welcomed.

How should contemporary Australians ‘know the bush’? How, for that matter, should contemporary Norwegians or Kosovars ‘know the landscape’? Such questions require regional responses that take into consideration issues such as how landscape is linked to national and local identity, militarism, regional geography and ecology, and an account of what education problems – perhaps quite local ones – seem to require particular forms of ‘indigenous’ or local knowledge. To respond to these questions with global prescriptions for intimacy with nature or decontextualized senses of community not only is banal, but also profoundly misses the point of why particular experiences of the bush should be considered as curriculum in the first instance. If there is a single lesson from Australia’s vexed colonial history, it is surely an imperative for Australians to pay attention to where they are.

There is a further reason to develop more adequate conceptions of outdoor-education curriculum. The question of how Australians should know the bush is not necessarily confined to schooling, and outdoor-education curriculum inquiry may extend beyond formal education. In Australia, knowledge and worldviews mediated by tourism and recreation leave some areas and landscapes largely unknown while construing others to be destinations and venues. The forms that tourism and recreation experiences take render some dimensions of physical reality visible and meaningful, while obscuring others – the person fishing and the

person canoeing see quite different rivers. Outdoor-education curriculum discourse could extend to inquiry into relations between communities and regions as shaped in the public interest by tourism policy, land and catchment management, recreation planning and other areas of public policy that all could be read as de facto curriculum. The imperatives to do so are identical to the imperatives to do so within schooling.

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