

Viewpoint:
Do Environmental Goals in Outdoor Education Reflect Client-needs or Outdoor Educator-needs?

Tony Pammer
Outdoor Education Group

I find myself increasingly questioning whether the collective thinking of Outdoor Educators is responsive to the needs of 'clients' or indicative of the views held by the individuals or collective who provide outdoor education.

In a recent informal survey at a Victorian Outdoor Education conference, completed by 50 delegates, by far the most prevalent view was that Outdoor Education existed to save or care for the environment. In response to the request "From your perspective, list the three most important aims of Outdoor Education..." there were four responses suggesting 'care/save the environment' for any one of the sum of all other responses. In response to question "In your opinion, how important will Outdoor Education be to the health and well being of a) individuals and communities comprising our society? and b) the environment in 2022? 56% of respondents rated OE as of "great importance" to individuals and community, compared to 81% for the environment.

As I travel around Melbourne and Sydney talking to heads of independent schools, I am beginning to feel that it doesn't occur to leaders of schools that outdoor education has much to offer in creating the outcomes they desire, when to me Outdoor Education seems to have a lot to offer.

So it has begun to strike me that outdoor educators have spent a great deal of time telling each other what we think society needs (all hail the great panacea – "Outdoor Education!"), and very little time asking society what it thinks it needs!

Was it possible that Outdoor Educators wanted to 'save the environment' through outdoor education, whereas the schools I was talking to wanted something else from the medium? And does my profession seek to impose its views on participants, without due consideration of what the perceived needs of these participants or their educational sponsors might be?

This leads us into the question – do or should educators have clients? I have for a long time taken the view that we do – but am equally aware that many in our profession do not perceive students as clients. Does it follow that the representatives of students – parents, schools, school communities are also not clients?

It also leads us into the question should educators be market/needs driven – or impose their views on the basis of "we know best"? Clearly there is a role for groups in society to be on the forward edge of thinking, and to be trying to shape or at least challenge ways of thinking. But blend into this debate the need for outdoor education as a profession to negotiate with its "parent" bodies – education and educational institutions for a role in the entire process or curriculum. And then determine whether social issues impact on the environment and thus should be worked on before or at least equal conjunction with Outdoor Education programs, rather than in isolation to environment or secondary to environment – and the dialogue becomes more complex!