

**A Profile of Outdoor Education Programs  
And Their Implementation in Australia**

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Photo: Louise Dawson, 1995

“A Circle of Friends”:

Participants with an intellectual disability lay underneath the ‘Flying Fox’ tree during an 9-day Outward Bound Australia outdoor education program.

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Abstract

This paper describes and critiques the development of outdoor education (OE) programs in Australia. It is argued that attention should be paid to a country's history, geography and culture when investigating the application of outdoor education programs. Australia has a highly urbanized Western culture which has been heavily influenced by nineteenth century British colonialism and twentieth century American culture. The living in Australia is materially comfortable, yet youth remain starved of organized opportunities for healthy experiments in living, risk-taking, practical skill development, discovery of inner strength, and development of a moral, community ethic. Thus, OE makes sense, in theory, as a medium through which to help train youth in the skills necessary for leading a 'good', fulfilling life. After the initiation of OE programs in the 1950s and 1960s in Australia, there was a healthy growth phase during the 1970's and 1980's. There was continued growth during the 1990's, however there are increasing signs of plateauing in the growth curve, with a growing emphasis on accreditation, legalization and consolidation of safety systems, training and program delivery methods. This places Australian OE at a cross-roads. There are rich opportunities for gathering forces and fueling a new growth phase. However, there is a lack of coordinated strategy from either government or a guiding body created from within the field. Thus a decline in innovation and growth in OE programming in Australia seems likely.

A Profile of Outdoor Education Programs And Their Implementation in Australia

This paper sketches my impressions of outdoor education (OE) programs in Australia at the beginning of the twenty first century. I mean to provide a viewpoint on the current state-of-play, but also to serve posterity by recording some thoughts on what has contributed to the current situation and to suggest possible directions from here. A further intended use of this paper is to help in the comparison and analysis of OE in different countries. In this respect, the current paper draws on the interesting work by Priest (1999) in which he proposes that the trajectory of national development of OE programs can be seen as following a natural life cycle of initiation, growth, plateauing and decline.

I am particularly grateful to Japan's National Assembly for Youth Development in asking me for this perspective on OE in Australia as a means of considering Japan's own response to the needs of its youth. By asking the same question about how outdoor education has been implemented in North America (from Dr. Chris Cashel, Oklahoma State University) and in Europe (from Werner Michl, Bavarian University of Applied Science), I believe this forum is very much on the right track, gaining broad perspectives in the process of developing a strategy for more widespread implementation of OE programs in Japan.

What is Outdoor Education?

I use the term ‘outdoor education’ (OE) fairly loosely to mean all purposely designed educational activities which have a common ‘growth through challenge’ philosophy and which utilize natural environments or other novel environments, such as living on board a tall ship. The OE programs typically conducted in Australia are multi-day programs for groups of between 5 to 25 students and are lead by instructors who are usually trained in education or social services, as well as more specific training in outdoor leadership.

Typical learning activities include land or water-based expeditions involving hiking, river or lake paddling, and camping, challenge-focused adventure activities such as ropes challenge courses, initiative tasks, and group exercises, and personal growth activities such as journal writing, solo, communication skills exercises and individual feedback from instructors. The general aim of these OE programs is the enhancement of participants’ personal skills and social development, but some programs also seek specific outcomes, such as management of behavior problems or enhancement of academic performance.

### History, Geography, Culture and Youth in Australia

Awareness of a country’s history, geography, and culture is important to understanding the implementation of OE in that country. In the case of Australia, we are talking about a sparsely populated country which has only recently become a Western civilization.

Australia has vast natural resources, with an ancient geological history characterized by

barrenness interspersed with incredibly diverse, ecologically rich areas. Prior to 1788, Australia had been populated for approximately 40,000 years by a few hundred thousand Aboriginal people who lived nomadic lifestyles. Over hundreds of generations these Australian Aboriginal people developed a vast array of integrated knowledge about living in, and looking after their natural environment.

About 200 years ago, life in Australia changed with the arrival of British colonists who brought convicts from their overflowing prisons, pastoralists, and members of government to construct a new British society (see Figure 1). The Aboriginal peoples' lifestyle and culture (see Figure 2) was swept aside in favor of a new culture built around agriculture and the mining of mineral resources. Today, approximately 2% of the 19 million people in Australia are of Aboriginal descent, with most Aboriginals living in urban settings, although some land has been turned back over to Aboriginal people for their care and usage. Over the past 200 years, Australia has also accepted substantial intakes of migrants from Asia, Europe and North America in its pursuit of a labor force to fuel economic progress.



*Figure 1.* Captain Cook's landing in Australia, 1770, as sketched in 1872. National Library of Australia.



*Figure 2.* Australian Aborigines fishing with lines and cooking their fish in canoes, painted by Governor Philip Gidley King, 1790. Mitchell Library.

Today's Australian culture is a unique hybrid of nineteenth century British influences, twentieth century North American influences and some traditional Aboriginal influences. The full benefits and ills of modern Western society are as evident in Australia as they are anywhere in the world. Australia has modern housing, transportation,

communication, and so on, but the highly urbanized society (see Figure 3) has associated downsides including poorly balanced diets, busy pace of life, families with high risk of divorce, and a youth culture with significant problems relating to violence, delinquency, drug abuse, unemployment, depression, and suicide. Currently 75% of 15 to 19 year olds in Australia are students at school or university (Australian Bureau of Statistics, n.d.), whilst 22% are unemployed which is substantially higher than the national unemployment rate of 7% across all ages (Australian Bureau of Statistics, n.d.).



*Figure 3.* Aerial photograph of part of the city of Sydney. Six of the Australian seven state capitals are coastal urban cities.

The current problems associated with living in industrialized, Western societies have not altered in their essence from what was observed by important progressive educational figures in the 1930's, Kurt Hahn, founder of Outward Bound (see <http://www.kurthahn.org/>) in Europe and John Dewey (see <http://www.siu.edu/~deweyctr/>), an educational philosopher, in North America. For both Hahn and Dewey, the proposed solutions called for a shift from the traditional Western style education which focused on delivering textbook-style knowledge to an education focusing on providing students with real-life, practical learning experiences. Carefully

sequenced physical, social, emotional, intellectual and moral challenges, together with facilitated reflection on the experience, it was proposed, would allow students to learn more about themselves and to develop their personal and practical capabilities. The ultimate aim of such educative experiences, argued Hahn and Dewey, was to provide students with experiences that equipped them for leading a 'good', fulfilling life.

### Ten Notable Outdoor Education Programs in Australia

The field of outdoor education in Australia has generally drawn on the philosophy of progressive education and has sought to complement, rather than replace, mainstream schooling. There has been a slow, steady trend towards outdoor education experiences accepted and offered by traditional schools. Promisingly, outdoor education experiences are being increasingly built in to school curriculums, as opposed to one-off camps which are conducting every now and then during a students' schooling.

From an international perspective, Australian OE programs have the advantage of access to a vast natural environment and a relatively sparse population. Thus it is possible for schools in all capital cities to organize five to ten day expeditions in isolated wilderness areas within a few hours drive. Another advantage of OE programs in Australia is that there a cultural focus on and acceptance of sport and outdoor participation. Thus, on the whole, schools, parents, and communities are reasonably receptive to the possibility of being involved in OE.

It is difficult to grasp the full extent of outdoor education programming in Australia. But a reasonable hypothesis is that most Australian students would at some point during their schooling participate in at least one substantial camping or outdoor education program. Whilst this may sound impressive, it needs to be emphasized that there is a wide variety in the type, style and quality of these educational experiences. Many so-called outdoor education experiences are quite frankly unexceptional, many are solid programs, and a few are unique and exceptional with regard to their innovation and quality of application.

Thus what I would like to do is describe ten OE programs in Australia which I believe have been notable for their success and/or innovation (for a summary see Table 1).

Where my selections and emphases are disagreed with by my Australian colleagues I invite them to articulate in more depth the contributions (or otherwise) of organizations I have neglected or ‘falsely’ represented. My hope is that by highlighting these ten programs that some good ideas are made more salient and that weaknesses in Australian OE are identified and discussed.

Table 1.

*Descriptions of ten notable Australian outdoor education programs.*

Australian OE Program	Description
Mittagundi and Wollongara	Non-profit, independent OE centers built by students with a focus on simple, rustic living and education about the environment
Outward Bound Australia	Non-profit, independent major provider and developer of long OE expedition style programs based on the compelling philosophy of Kurt Hahn.

Outdoor Education Group	Independent major provider of five day school OE programs focused on personal development from outdoor activity and expedition skills.
Extension Stay Outdoor Education School Programs	Residential rural living schools developed by private high schools for students to attend for a term, a semester or a year.
Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme	Non-profit, independent award scheme for high school students and young adults which involves physical recreation, skill, service and expeditions.
Wilderness Enhanced Programs	At-risk student program funded by Department of Education using non-direct intervention on expedition programs.
Rediscovering Your Indigenous Heart	Short programs based on indigenous Aboriginal and native American Indian principles.
State Outdoor Education Programs	Each Australian state has developed a series of outdoor recreation camps used by state schools for student camps.
School Outdoor Education Programs	Some high schools have appointed specialized outdoor education teachers who organized programs for each year level.

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## Mittagundi and Wollongara

Mittagundi and Wollongara are Aboriginal names for two non-profit OE schools in Victoria started by Ian Stapleton, an innovative educator who believed in getting back to simple principles. Stapleton's educational vision was that students should be fully involved in all aspects of living in a school environment in a natural setting. Both Stapleton's schools were started from scratch, with money raised from donations, and the facilities were constructed by student groups. Students initially lived in old buses and transported all supplies, gear and building materials by zip line to the site of the schools (see Stapleton's books "Something Small: The Story of Mittagundi" and "Second Hand and Solid"). Today, student groups usually participate in Mittagundi and Wollongara programs for one to two weeks during which the focus is on simple rural living, outdoor activities and expeditions, and on environmental and cultural studies.

## Outward Bound Australia

Outward Bound (<http://www.outwardbound.com.au>) programs originated in Britain in 1941 and were characterized by intensive, four week long physically-oriented programs of outdoor adventure, skill learning, and community service for adolescent males. Today, there are approximately 40 independent, non-profit Outward Bound schools around the world. The initial Outward Bound experiments in Australia in the 1950's and early 1960's led to the establishment of a permanent base near Sydney which ran successfully

for several years, however went bankrupt in the late 1960's. The Outward Bound concept was still appealing and, when a new School Director was appointed, the school was relocated more strategically near the national capital. Since then the school has flourished and during the mid-late 1980's the Australian Outward Bound school was the largest OE provider in Australia and the largest Outward Bound school in the world in terms of numbers of students on programs per day.

The style of Outward Bound programs has evolved and diversified considerably since its early days, although the strong philosophy of Kurt Hahn has been maintained and is a key strength of all Outward Bound schools and programs. A particular strength of the Outward Bound Australia program, however, was that it did not simply content itself with the Kurt Hahn philosophy, but it also strove to build its program from educational and psychological theories of growth and change. This was an important strategy, and lead to the development of programs which were far more than just an odd collection of outdoor activities. Another critical part of this success was that the organization undertook an extensive internal research program, in which the outcomes and processes were carefully measured and scrutinized, with constant adjustments and improvements being made in course design and delivery. Indeed, recent research evidence has borne out impressive outcomes for the Outward Bound Australia programs for young adults in particular (Hattie, Marsh, Neill & Richards, 1997).

In terms of operations, Outward Bound Australia developed a mobile style of operation whereby temporary, seasonal basecamps were established in various parts of Australia.

Thus ‘programs were taken to the people’, rather than waiting for ‘people to come to the program’. Today, Outward Bound Australia programs cater mainly for school-aged students and young adults, with some programs also for adults over 30 years, families, and corporate groups. Throughout this time, the distinguishing features of the Outward Bound Australia style have been highly challenging multi-element expedition-based programs.

Over the past 10 to 15 years, the Outward Bound schools in the UK, USA and Australia have been challenged by the proliferation of other, similar organizations, and as a result enrolments have generally dropped. From Outward Bound’s point of view this may be disappointing. However, the very existence of these other programs is a testament to the success of the ideas implemented and hot-housed for over 50 years by Outward Bound.

#### Outdoor Education Group

A particularly successful “Outward Bound”-style organization created more recently in Australia is the “Outdoor Education Group”. The Outdoor Education Group took a number of different strategies, including having a shareholder structure, and focusing on five-day programs for school students (which fitted into a school week), whereas Outward Bound persisted with nine day programs, believing that effective educational change requires at least this long with high school-aged students. Less constrained by the guiding philosophy of a historical founder, the Outdoor Education Group has been

continued to adapt and evolve its programs to meet the particular needs and demands of various client schools. The Outdoor Education Group's programming style placed a greater emphasis on teaching students outdoor skills in an expedition program as a means through which to enhance their personal development. The Outdoor Education Group required that instructors got their own training in outdoor and first aid skills, whereas Outward Bound conducted its own staff training. The Outdoor Education Group instructors were employed on a per-program basis whereas Outward Bound staff are employed year-round. The Outdoor Education Group built strong liaisons with private schools and this has evolved into several high schools employing an OEG staff member full-time to coordinate and organize their outdoor education programs. Today, the Outdoor Education Group is the largest provider of OE programs for school students in Australia.

### Extended Stay Outdoor Education School Programs

Rather than offer one-off, short-term outdoor education experiences, about 20 private high schools in Australia have independently committed to having their own rural 'bush school' campuses. Typically these schools have a hundred or so acres of rural land on which they have constructed classrooms, accommodation, dining and outdoor activity facilities. Students usually attend these rural schools for a term, a semester, or a year, during which they complete their normal school lessons whilst experiencing a rural,

communal living situation and engaging in outdoor education activities. The living conditions are rustic. For example, the Timbertop school (n.d.) claims that its students:

discover they can survive without pocket money, jewellery, television, videos, and computer games. They write to their parents and friends rather than using the telephone. They discover the joys of reading newspapers, magazines and books, and are encouraged to talk and get to know each other, the staff and their families and others in the local community

(<http://www.ggscorio.vic.edu.au/journey/78.html>).

#### Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme

The Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme (<http://www.dukeofed.org.au/>) is an international 'leadership in action' program developed by Kurt Hahn as a way of reaching the many young people who could not afford to attend progressive private schools or to attend intensive Outward Bound-style programs. The scheme provides a structure for students to work towards a bronze, silver, or gold level award in four key areas – service, skill, physical recreation, and expedition activities, under the guidance of a teacher or leader. Unlike most other OE programs which are intensive, short-term experiences, the Duke of Edinburgh's Award involves students over several years, with students choosing their level of engagements (bronze, silver and/or gold). Over the past 10 years, participation in the award scheme in Australia has more than doubled, and currently has 30, 000 participants per year (Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme in Australia, n.d.).

### Wilderness Enhanced Programs

A new program for at-risk youth was funded and successfully piloted by the New South Wales Department of Education in 1989. This 'wilderness-enhanced' program utilized the outdoor expedition format in a unique way to work on modifying the behaviors of youth who were struggling to adapt to the normal state schooling system. The program operated in districts of about six to ten schools, with a specialized unit of teachers for each district. Schools were asked to identify the most difficult, disruptive, at-risk students who could potentially benefit the most from the intervention program. A unique systems-based approach was adopted by Ray Handley and other Wilderness Enhanced Program educators with the goal of effectively challenging and changing the attitudes and behavior of difficult students. The distinguishing approach of the Wilderness Enhanced Programs was one of non-direct intervention. In other words, the teachers did not attempt to directly change students, but rather the teachers constructed, and manipulated situations in an outdoor expedition setting which made it likely that each student would be clearly confronted by the consequences of his/her attitudes and behaviors. This would then challenge the students to consider options other than their previous, problematic strategies for dealing with problems. The teacher was on hand for help and advice when is asked for, but the teachers strove to maintain their position of non-directly guiding the learning situations, trying to allow students to come to their own realizations and make their own decisions about changing their attitudes and behaviors. This approach, which

has been well described in several papers by Ray Handley, draws on the psychotherapeutic orientation of Milton Erikson. Unfortunately, despite its bold experiment and good success with students, the Wilderness Enhanced Program's weakness was that it relied on state government funding which was cut in the late 1990s and the program folded.

### Rediscovering Your Indigenous Heart

Remarkably little attention in Australian OE programs has been paid to Aboriginal ways of interacting with the land, spirit, flora and fauna. A notable exception to this are the programs run by Graham Ellis-Smith through his organization "Kadjinny Enterprises". Ellis-Smith was a park ranger who spent time with Aboriginal people in remote parts of Western Australia and who participated in extensive conversations and rituals with Aboriginal elders. As a result of these experiences and training in Native American Indian practices, Ellis-Smith developed a series of workshops and multi-day experiences in which help he helps participants to understand their own indigenesness and their connection with the surrounding land, plants, animals and personal journey. The Australian outdoor education community has only recently begun to embrace and dialogue about such programs which demonstrate a new potential direction for growth. It remains to be seen if and how such an Aboriginal orientation will become integrated with traditional outdoor education programming in Australia.

### State Outdoor Education Centers

Each of the Australian states has established its own camping facilities or OE centers which are supported by the state departments of education. The centers are staffed by teachers and usually exhibit a recreational, rather than educational focus. Students stay in dormitory accommodation and eat in large dining halls, although at some centers they may do an overnight camping exhibition. These facilities usually have a wide variety of sporting and recreational activities available. The exact approach and philosophy varies from center to center, with some centers having well developed OE programs (e.g., <http://www.boec.vic.edu.au/>). Whilst it is easy to be critical that most of these centers tend not to have well-developed philosophies and methodologies of OE, it should be emphasized that few other outdoor education resources are available to state school students. Thus, these centers play an important role in the provision of outdoor education in Australia.

### Sail Training Programs

There are several youth sailing training programs in Australia that aim to provide personal development experiences. Perhaps the best known programs involve tall ships – The Young Endeavour Youth Scheme (<http://www.youngendeavour.gov.au/>) and the Sail Training Ship Leeuwin (<http://www.leeuwin.com/>). The Young Endeavour was a gift

from Britain to Australia in 1988 and is funded and staffed by the Australian navy, conducting voyages for 16 to 23 year olds. The Leeuwin is run by a private, non-profit organization launched in 1986 and has a 70% focus on the youth market aged 14 to 25 years and a 30% focus on the non-youth market (including corporate training and open age programs). Typically these ships conduct voyages for ten days at a time for the personal development of participants. The educational process involves learning about life at sea, how to sail, navigate and manage a tall ship, with participants eventually taking over responsibility for the entire running of the ship.

### School Outdoor Education Programs

Although there are many independent organizations conducting OE programs, much of the organization and delivery of programs comes from within the high schools themselves where teachers and principals are increasingly recognizing the benefits of having students participate in real-life OE learning experiences. Some schools appoint dedicated OE teachers, whilst other schools have teachers of other subjects take trips of their own design, such as driving a bus across the Australian desert and camping along the way. Many private schools have developed a sequence of progressively more challenging programs, with students attending OE programs at least once a year. For state schools, OE programming is less extensive and OE experiences are not part of the core curriculum. The existence of OE programs within public education comes down to

whether there are sufficiently motivated and experienced teachers who decide to create such opportunities.

### A Critical View of Outdoor Education in Australia

I will now turn to making some critical comments about the ways in which OE has been implemented in Australia and possible ways ahead. A very useful framework for understanding the trajectory of development of OE in different countries and organizations has been provided by Priest (1999). Priest outlines a life cycle from initiation, to growth, to plateauing and then into decline (see Figure 4). This life cycle, according to Priest, is evident in many natural and human systems, including the development of bacterial colonies and in commercial product development. Priest suggests that this life cycle can also be a useful model for describing the development of outdoor education programming in countries around the world and he proposes ten areas which indicate the growth level of a country's OE programming -- programs, centers, professional activity, environment participation, safety, practices, certification/accreditation, leaders, litigation, and facilitation (see Figure 5).

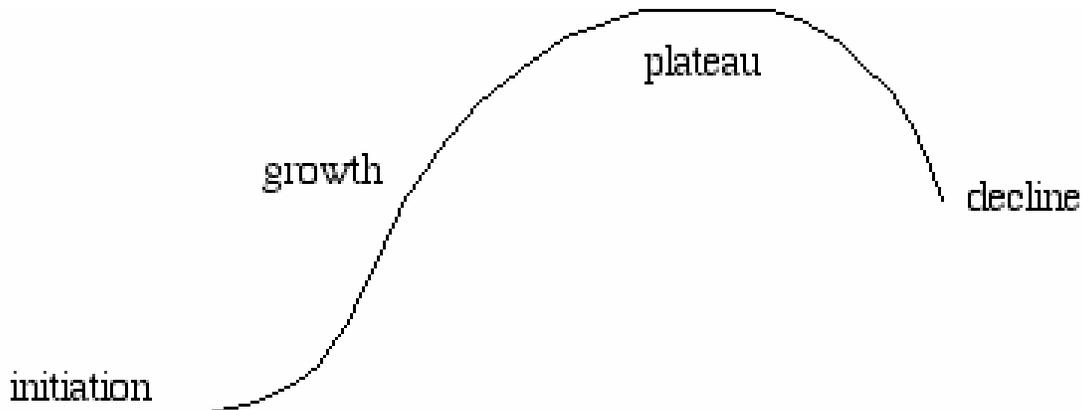


Figure 4. Natural life cycle growth curve. Reproduced with permission from Simon Priest.

PHASE	Program	Centres	Profess.	Environ.	Safety
Initiation	First program met with curiosity & fresh enthusiasm	Very few centres, most programs go from base camps	First conferences, formation of prof. group/association	More and more people going to nature for leisure	User participation in the outdoors is on the rise
Growth	Skeptics oppose large number of novelty programs	Proliferation of centres, first use artificial environs	First journal/mag. published, spinoff organization form	Increased use and more damage of fewer resources	Increased S&R and user accidents are a public concern
Plateau	Programs become more prescribed, specific & diverse	Over-reliance on artificial environs and formal centres	More journal/mag & first textbooks, research (too late)	Resource access restrictions are added by gov't	Technology added to safety; rules replace judgement
Decline	Program numbers begin to dwindle, merge & combine	Centres begin to close because of fiscal restraints	Loss of creativity & failure to prove value to cynics	Gov't legislation begins to choke programming	Well publicized fatalities tarnish profession image

PHASE	Practices	Cert/Acc	Leaders	Litigat.	Facilit.
Initiation	Self-examination and criticism of program practices	Early attempts to certify leaders fail (one puzzle piece)	Hard skills form basis of leader certification	None to very little depending on national laws	None xistant (recreation prog. most common)
Growth	Identification of acceptable and common practices	Higher education takes on role of preparing leaders	Soft skills (+hard) become the new gauge of leaders	Rising number of civil lawsuits due to poor protection	Basic methods (education prog. most common)
Plateau	Standardization of best practices, ethics considered	Voluntary prog. accreditation and not certification	Metaskills (+soft) become the true measure of leaders	Litigation begins to drive decision making process	Intermediate (developmental most common)
Decline	Required standard of prog. practices with ethics code	Mandatory prog. accreditation and gov't licensing	Staff burnout is a common/growing leader concern	First criminal proceedings with more expected	Advanced methods (therapeutic prog. most common)

Figure 5. Ten areas of natural life cycle in outdoor education programming (Priest, 1999). Reproduced with permission from Simon Priest.

As a result of Priest's extensive traveling to dozens of countries engaged in outdoor education he proposes that, generally speaking, Asian and European countries are in the exciting, initial phase of creating new OE programs and organizations (see Figure 6). There are a few countries in the earlier phases of growth, having already undergone a phase of initial program development and now engaging in a building phase. Some countries, particularly Canada, Australian and New Zealand have been engaged in OE program development for several decades and are now appear to be at the crest of that development and beginning to plateau. Priest proposes that the USA has plateaued and is now at risk of decline, as has happened in the UK, with the reductions and closures of several OE programs.

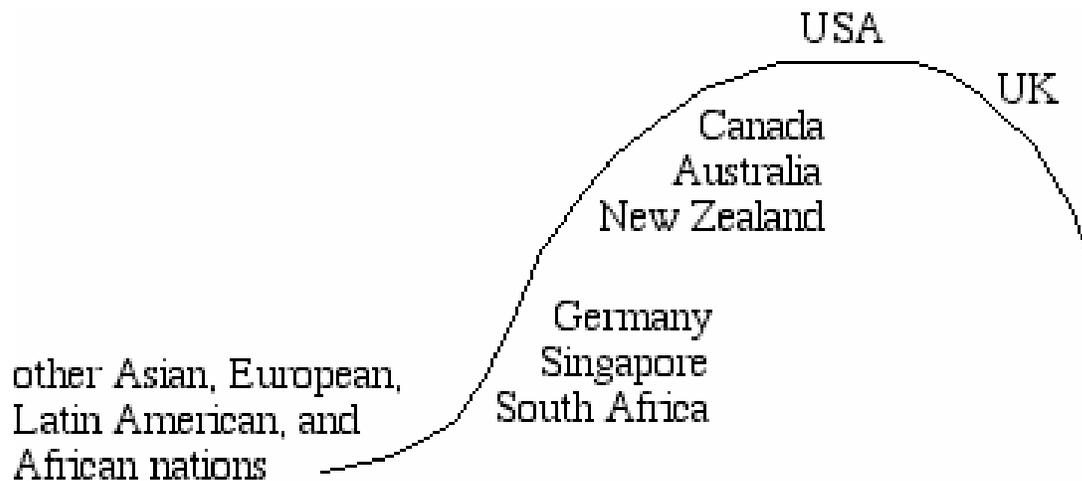


Figure 6. Natural life cycle growth curve showing the current stage of OE development in various countries. Reproduced with permission from Simon Priest.

With Australia on the crest of this growth curve, it is at a cross-roads. Following a natural life cycle may not be inevitable. It is conceivable that a country could regather and reorganize its resources and knowledge and launch towards a new phase of growth.

Australia could learn from the trajectory of the UK and of the USA and set itself new directions. Unfortunately, there has been little consistent, logical, nationally-coordinated or nationally-funded development of OE. Instead the OE scene in Australia consists of a wide variety of organizations, schools, individuals, facilities, program styles, program activities, viewpoints, associations and resources which have developed indendently from one another and which continue to head in their own directions. Thus, the Australian OE can be characterized as being rich in diversity but poor in coordination. There are plenty of ideas, some ambition, and a lack of collective, collegial strategic planning. OE in Australia has generally been a series of small, varied, isolated efforts and few programs have developed programming integrated with related fields such as social work, education and psychology.

I wish I could say that in Australia the OE and mainstream educational and youth service communities are coming together to seriously addressing the youth issues, but this is not the case. OE tends to be for those who can afford it. Despite the admirable, dedicated work going on in day-to-day programming and operations, OE has failed to make significant inroads into addressing the national youth problems. There are complaints that OE staff are underpaid, have high levels of burn out, and limited career prospects contributing to a drain of OE expertise to other professions and other countries. Unless more substantial long-term development strategies are put into action, it seems unlikely that OE in Australia will make a significant national contribution to youth issues. In recent years, with the specter of increasing legal proceedings, the Australian OE industry has been seduced into focusing energy and attention on accreditation issues and is now at

risk of going too far down this path and killing off the growth and development of new and innovative programming methods.

To be fair, in recent years, there have been some valuable curriculum development efforts. The Victorian Outdoor Education Association, for example, has successfully developed and implemented an outdoor and environmental curriculum in schools, from kindergarten to year 12. Topics include prehistory of the Australian environment, Aboriginal impact on the land, white settlement and its impact on the land, urbanization and its environmental, as well as experiential outdoor learning activities.

Another important development which has occurred in the last ten years is that we have been able to move beyond reliance on isolated, relatively small research studies on the outcomes of OE programs, to more substantial, cumulative meta-analytic summaries of research outcomes. A study by Australian researchers Hattie, Marsh, Neill and Richards (1997) summarized 99 empirical OE studies from around the world. The evidence showed that, on average, OE programs do at least as well as other innovative educational approaches in schools. Hence any lingering perceptions that OE is not real education should be discarded. However, there is an important caution: *The research findings indicate wide variability in the effectiveness of different outdoor education programs.* In other words, some OE programs are very effective whilst other programs do not achieve the educational objectives that they may claim. Thus, it is important to judge outdoor programs on individual merit, rather than OE's general reputation, whether positive or negative.

I work in teach and research in the field of OE because I believe this it is has enormous potential for helping people to acquire skills necessary for dealing with our rapidly changing human society. OE has shown the potential in theory, practice and research to have notable impacts on participants. However, OE in Australia has done a poor job as a whole of directing its own development, integrating with other forms of education and intervention, and in documenting, critiquing, and analyzing its methodology, outcomes, and practices. This lack of collective professional effort and commitment I believe is proving to be the Achilles Heel of what is otherwise a dynamic educational medium that has the potential to play a significant role in addressing the needs of human society and well being in the twenty first century.

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