

Outdoor Activity Safety Guidelines and Unfamiliar Environments: A Hidden Curriculum?

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Abstract

All forms of organized outdoor activity can—and perhaps should—be evaluated as if they were environmental education, because they may significantly generate and distribute knowledge of, beliefs about, and attitudes towards particular places. Safety guidelines for outdoor activities provide one possible indication of hidden “environmental education” (or mis-education) curriculum in outdoor activities. This article uses historical examples to show how the perspective of an outsider or stranger can be normalized in outdoor activities, and shows how militaristic approaches to places or environments can be discerned in outdoor safety guidelines.

Résumé

Toutes les sortes d'activités de plein air peuvent – et devraient peut-être – être évaluées comme des activités d'éducation écologique, parce qu'elles pourraient, de manière importante, générer et répandre un savoir, des croyances et des attitudes par rapport à des espaces particuliers. Des directives de sécurité pour les activités de plein air fournissent une indication possible de n'importe quel curriculum caché sur « l'éducation écologique » (ou l'éducation ratée) dans des activités de plein air. Cet article utilise des exemples vécus pour montrer comment la perception de quelqu'un du dehors ou d'un étranger peut être normalisée dans des activités de plein air, et montre comment des approches militaristes envers des espaces ou des milieux peuvent être perçues dans des directives de sécurité pour les activités de plein air.

Keywords: environmental education; outdoor safety

All forms of organized outdoor activity can be—and perhaps should be—evaluated as “outdoor environmental education.” In countries such as Canada and Australia, in which everyday reality is predominately urban for a large percentage of the population, the overall contribution of visits to rural areas and wild places to shaping environmental knowledge and attitudes might be particularly important. Taking a broad view of environmental education—as a process that both forms and distributes environmental knowledge and understanding across a society—it seems to me essential that environmental education planning takes into account patterns of unintentional “environmental education” (or mis-education) that occur through outdoor activities.

To take an extreme example, boot camps may not ordinarily be described as environmental education, but nevertheless probably influence environmental attitudes and understandings—for better or worse—as surely, if not as defensibly, as pond studies. What I hope to do here is contribute to a conversation aimed at evaluating how hunting trips, hobby farming, camping holidays, four-wheel driving adventures, second home residency, youth-at-risk programs, and religious retreats contribute to the mix of ideas, beliefs, and knowledge in which environmental education programs intervene. In this article I examine one particular influence on organized outdoor activity, namely safety standards.

I examine how outdoor activity safety standards, or guidelines, might frame environmental knowledge and attitudes. In this I have followed Berger and Luckmann (1967), who emphasized the role of social structures in determining what counted (and what did not count) as legitimate knowledge, and what form knowledge could take. My interest is in the epistemological dimension of safety standards, that is, in what *kinds* of environmental knowledge safety standards endorse, encourage, or exclude. I have focused particularly on knowledge that can be universalized and institutionalized (for example, in safety requirements mandated by an authority) and knowledge that is local and embodied (for example, in the way a local guide “reads” the country).

I have discussed some implications for environmental education of knowledge structured around lived experience of place elsewhere (Brookes, 2002). Of course, “local knowledge” might simply refer to some facts about a particular locality. What I mean here by local knowledge is the accumulation of experience, perhaps across a community, which turns locations into “places” in which knowledge and meaning are woven together through stories. This is not to romanticize experience: in some cases, for example in areas that have seen war, the stories may be angry, vengeful, or tragic. Local knowledge may be embodied and performed rather than declared, for example in the way a hunter tracks a quarry, a canoeist chooses a path down a rapid, or a child recognizes that something has changed about a favourite tree.

My concern here is not to place local knowledge on a pedestal, but rather to argue that it should not be excluded from environmental education discourse concerned with outdoor activities without careful consideration. Nor is it my intention to assert that local knowledge necessarily occurs in any kind of pure or ideal form. I do contend that local knowledge is potentially important, and that therefore epistemological structures which seem to exclude or marginalize local knowledge deserve critical examination, even when part of outdoor activity organization, rather than formal environmental education.

In the first part of the article, I consider some historical aspects of outdoor guiding which has been influenced by British traditions. I begin by considering British mountaineering in the European Alps, and the distinction the British

made between the expedition leader (the visitor) and the guide (the local). I then consider a wider influence, namely the experience of war in the 20th century for the Anglophone populations of Great Britain, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, which was almost entirely on foreign soil. As with the British mountaineering experience, it is the predominance of the perspective of the foreigner, outsider, or invader which is significant, and I consider how the experience of war as a logistic exercise in a foreign place could have provided a cognitive template for approaches to outdoor activities in what I will call the Anglo countries (for want of a better term—many languages are spoken in each of the countries I have mentioned, but I am not sure the discussion that follows applies to other language groups).

In the second part of the article, I reverse the discussion and show how outdoor activity safety guidelines can be examined for evidence that they contain, and therefore might reproduce, the perspective of the conquering mountaineer or invading military force, even when applied to activities with very different intentions from mountaineering or war. Approaches to safety in the outdoors premised on unfamiliar environments, I argue, have the potential to normalize the notion that an outdoor leader need not be familiar with the place in which they lead, perhaps even making unfamiliarity desirable. I provide examples that illustrate how this can occur, and which illustrate how readers might interrogate the underlying epistemology of particular safety guidelines.

I should add a qualification for readers unfamiliar with research broadly based on history of ideas. To follow the threads of particular lines of thought through history and in contemporary discourse is not to suggest that their influence is necessarily absolute or deterministic, nor is it to deny that there are other threads that might also be traced. I have attended to safety guidelines because they sometimes purport to determine aspects of practice, but the ideas I examine here might, in some cases, be no more than a kind of persistent breeze that could sway thoughts in a particular direction, unless an effort is made to resist it.

From Trustworthy Guides to Reputable Companies: A Historical Shift in Emphasis?

Late afternoon on July 27, 1999, 45 young tourists—mostly Australians and New Zealanders—and eight guides, in four groups, entered Saxet Brook near Interlaken, Switzerland, for a canyoning adventure. Three guides and 18 tourists died when a wall of water caused by a thunderstorm swept them away. In December 2001, six employees of the then-defunct company were found guilty of negligent manslaughter. Two surviving guides were found not guilty. The judge ruled that it was not the guides' responsibility to cancel the trip when they saw thunderstorms upstream (The Sun-Herald, 2002). Perhaps

it is not what the judge meant, but the case seemed to imply that the guides were not expected to read the weather and know how it would affect the trip.

The scale of the Interlaken tragedy attracted widespread publicity. What interested me was the contrast between the findings of the judge in the criminal trial, and the image I had of Switzerland as the home of the legendary alpine guide. I surmised that the case might symbolize a shift, over the course of a century, from investing trust in the person of the guide to putting faith in a company and its procedures. What I found was something more complex than a simple shift in emphasis.

Local knowledge might take many forms, and in the late 19th century, what local knowledge the Swiss guides had to offer their British employers was not necessarily suited to mountaineering. According to Lunn (1963), the first Swiss guides had gained their knowledge from activities such as chamois hunting or smuggling, not recreational or scientific mountaineering. Mountaineers often wanted to go where guides had not been and do things guides had not done.

As mountaineering became more established, and shifted from emphasizing scientific exploration to recreation, guides did tend to acquire local *mountaineering* knowledge, but they did not always advertise their achievements—clients paid more for unclimbed peaks or routes (Lunn, 1963). In many cases, guides had not climbed a route they were guiding; inevitably, experienced climbers contemplated climbing without guides, implying that local knowledge was not essential for a skilled climber (Mummery, 1896/1974).

Earlier, guides had been regarded by the British establishment as essential, but as different from, and lower in status to, the expedition leader (Young, 1920). Around the 1890s, A.F. Mummery, acknowledged as one of the supreme climbers of his day, was rejected as a member of *the* (British) Alpine Club because he advocated guideless climbing, affronting the orthodox view that a true mountaineer climbed roped between two guides (Kruszyna, 1974). Mummery—who viewed his climbing as recreational, not scientific—argued that while there had been a period in which guides and clients shared an adventure, as numbers increased class distinctions between guides and clients came to the fore (the guides being lackeys), and “[t]he constant repetition of the same ascent has ... tended to make the guide into a sort of contractor ... [t]he skill of the traveller counts for absolutely naught; the practised guide looks on him merely as luggage” (Mummery, 1896/1974, p. 111).

For mountaineering nominally linked to some higher purpose, such as nature study or scientific measurement, guides provided logistical support that drew on some local knowledge. But for those, like Mummery, who saw mountaineering as a sport, guides provided skilled support. Mummery took Swiss guides to Chamonix, for example. First ascents were increasingly credited to British climbers, rather than Swiss, after 1850 (Lunn, 1963),

although prior to the early 1900s most of those ascents would have been guided. As climbing became more technical, the first ascents of expert amateurs eclipsed those of the professionals.

Contrary to my original surmise, long before two New Zealanders established the Saxen Brook canyoning trips, safety in the Alps, from the visitor's perspective, was not necessarily seen as requiring (or being about acquiring) local knowledge. The Anglophone literature from the beginning privileged the voice of the visiting mountaineer, rather than the local guide. For the (mostly) upper class visiting British mountaineers, mountaineering knowledge was valued according to its usefulness on unclimbed routes, and reflected their experiences as foreign visitors. Their accounts emphasized personal qualities, such as determination or courage, and skill; knowledge, especially local knowledge, and strength were the qualities of peasants. In his widely cited handbook, Young (1920), who distinguished between the guide and the expedition leader, pointed out to readers that "[t]he *average* guide is a peasant, with the limitations that frame peasant virtues ... The guide as we know him is hill-born, hill-bred—that is, a child, with a child's capacity for becoming much what we make him—a companion, a valet, or a machine" (pp. 123-125, emphasis in original).

Whether or not the worldview of early 20th century upper-crust British mountaineers has directly influenced contemporary norms for outdoor activities is a matter for further enquiry, and perhaps debate. Irrespective of any direct influence, it provides a template for understanding how ways of being in the outdoors can be constructed so that local knowledge is either discounted or accorded low status. For elite mountaineers, the pinnacle of achievement is the unfamiliar, that is, an unclimbed route.

The Interlaken tragedy suggests two obvious wider influences on contemporary norms for outdoor activities, namely the commodification of outdoor experience and the globalization of commerce; these would deserve a careful study. However, I have elected to follow a different thread, one less discussed in the environmental education literature. Militaristic influences on Anglo societies in the 20th century have been so extensive (Howard, 1977/2001) that it is likely that some military epistemological assumptions have seeped into many, if not most, outdoor activity standards.

Militarism and the Grammar of Outdoor Activities

[W]ar... has certainly a grammar of its own, but its logic is not peculiar to itself.
(Von Clausewitz, 1832/1968, Book VIII, p. 402)

As Clausewitz's famous dictum might suggest, to examine epistemological similarities between militarism and organized outdoor activities is not to suggest that any particular programs are militaristic in *intent*. According to Howard (1977/2001):

[militarism is] simply an acceptance of the values of the military subculture as the dominant values of society: a stress on hierarchy and subordination in organization, on physical courage and self-sacrifice in personal behaviour, on the need for heroic leadership in situations of extreme stress ... (p. 109)

Two elements of 20th century Anglophone militarism stand out when considering local knowledge. The experiences of land war of Anglophone nations were almost entirely on foreign soil and involved mass or total war (Bourne, 1997; Dyer, 2004). An epistemology based on irregular war, or small-scale local wars of the kind which have characterized almost all human societies (Dyer, 2004) may be more universal, but is not what has dominated 20th century Anglophone society.

Total war involved entire nations and entailed a shift in emphasis from conduct of battle to the overall coordination and integration of resources. Total war depended on industrial developments—initially the telegraph and the railway—that permitted large numbers of troops to be deployed (and kept supplied) relatively quickly, while command and control became more systematized and centralized. Any militaristic epistemology that can be discerned in safety guidelines owes more to this totality—control and logistics—than to the conduct of battle. The question to keep in mind here is: when approaches to command and control of outdoor activities, through safety guidelines, also emphasize systemization and centralization (for example, as the Interlaken court case seemed to suggest), is there an accompanying epistemological shift? In other words, are outdoor environments seen and understood in a different way when thinking about safety is organized somewhat militaristically?

For forces systematically deployed in large numbers on foreign soil, local knowledge is necessarily limited and comes in the form of intelligence provided to the officers. Any local knowledge that may be co-opted cannot necessarily be trusted; perhaps an informant is a spy or has a grudge against the invaders (Van Creveld, 1991). European militarism was mostly territorial (Childs, 1997), and maps and map-reading were essential skills. (The ability to read a military style map—that is, a geometrically accurate topographic map showing strategically significant features but not necessarily cultural or locally significant features—remains an orthodox requirement for outdoor leaders in Australia.) In the military, a lack of local knowledge can be partly overcome by the provision of intelligence, such as maps and guidebooks, the application of skills, and provision of sufficient resources. With strong enough tents, the need to read the local weather or know where to find shelter becomes less important.

Local knowledge may accumulate over the lifetimes of individuals, or collectively over generations (Brookes, 2002). In contrast, in a wealthy military economy, resources, intelligence, and even *skills* can be provided almost on demand by organizations. For the military, given enough raw recruits, *skills training* can substitute for local knowledge and collective experience. While

older warrior codes required years, if not a lifetime, of dedicated practice, total war required “mass production of men” (Howard, 1977/2001, p. 121). What made this possible was mass production of weapons that could be used expertly by conscripts after a few months’ training (Howard, 1977/2001). Childs observes: “By 1550, the longbow and the crossbow, both requiring years of intensive practice for effective operation, had been replaced by the musket and the field gun, which were relatively cheap to produce and could be operated after a week’s instruction” (Childs, 1997, pp. 22-23).

It was necessary for Anglo forces in 20th century conflicts to get by with limited local knowledge because they operated on foreign soil. For many forms of outdoor activity, an epistemology that highly values local (experiential) knowledge is feasible, if inconvenient, although for writers of safety standards, there may be commercial, bureaucratic, or practical reasons to discount local knowledge.

There may be other reasons why safety standards for outdoor activities might continue to be framed more around the idea of invasion than occupation. Anglo militarism required entire populations to continue the war effort; faith in a war effort necessarily entailed faith in militarism and, as a corollary, faith in whatever militaristic epistemology prevailed.

How does the military persuade individuals to sacrifice their lives, sometimes pointlessly? In 1914 nationalistic fervour partly did the job: “[Nationalism] does something to explain the most remarkable phenomena of 1914—excited crowds filling the boulevards of every major European city ... flocking to the recruiting booths ... masses of men required by military professionals came forward with super abundant goodwill ... [t]hey threw their lives away” (Howard, 1977/2001, p. 111). Total war acquired a momentum that overwhelmed whatever political reasons for war that may have existed at the outset, so that in World War I “what was good for the war was considered good for the nation” (Van Creveld, 1991, p. 165).

Military training intentionally developed unquestioning loyalty. According to Dyer (2004):

the question we rarely ask [is]... how could men do ... the mechanistic and impersonal mass slaughter of civilized warfare ... any traditional warrior would do the sensible thing and leave instantly ... [mass armies required] a different psychology ... a controlled form of mob psychology ... that tends to overpower the personal identity and fears of the individuals ... (p. 102)

It would therefore not be surprising to find the habit of unquestioning loyalty adhering to militaristic forms of thinking and organization, especially given Anglo-American military victories in the 20th century.

Nevertheless, it might be very difficult to determine why a particular epistemology has lodged in any set of safety standards and guidelines. Social and cultural influences are not necessarily tides that sweep all before; some are whispering breezes. What should be clear is that the mere fact that

safety standards appear to have authority should not exempt them from critical examination, either as safety guidelines, which would be a matter for another article, or as indicative of a hidden “environmental education” curriculum. There is no logical reason why an epistemology developed to fight wars on foreign soil, however successfully, should form a basis for understanding an environment intended to be occupied indefinitely.

Four Indicators of Militaristic “Environmental Education” in Safety Guidelines

What follows are some tests that can be applied to written safety standards, and some examples. In my own enquiries I have found that a broadly militaristic epistemology, which not only marginalizes specific environmental knowledge but also to some extent de-legitimizes it, is widespread, although not universal, in published outdoor activity safety standards. (Many safety standards either cross-reference each other or seem to have borrowed from the same sources). These tests provide a starting point for a critical examination of any hidden “environmental education” curriculum.

1. *Do written standards refer to local environmental knowledge, and what emphasis is it given?* For some environments, such as surf, local knowledge has remained central to documented safety. That a guide should know intimately the particular environment in which they guide is hardly an obscure notion. Yet in many safety standards I examined, local knowledge received remarkably little explicit consideration and was given little prominence. For example, Scouts Canada provides the following weak advice as one of 12 leadership dot points:

Leaders are familiar with the program areas and type of terrain where activities are conducted, and can adapt to changing conditions. Explanation: Leaders have a general knowledge of the area and type of terrain in which the program will occur. This knowledge includes, but may not be limited to an understanding of the educational possibilities of the site. Familiarity does not necessarily imply previous experience with the specific route, program area or activity site. It does imply that there is enough familiarity with the terrain in which activities take place so that the focus can be on the participants, and on the program goals. Leaders are prepared to address changes in weather, damaged or lost equipment, or other potential and unforeseen program changes. (Scouts Canada, 2002, p. 3)

2. Standards, it might be assumed, contain categorical statements, such as: “wear an approved flotation device.” However, *exhaustive* specific standards are arguably difficult to write *because* outdoor environments are diverse and variable. *Do standards resort to hedges and evasions?* These may take the form of written disclaimers (often in “fine print”). There may be evasive language. Standards in electronic form can be readily searched for certain words. For

example, the word “appropriate” appears 248 times in the Scouts Canada document. Each use of the term has to be read in context, of course, but in many cases the word is used so as to leave the required standard of behaviour unspecified. Only in the aftermath of an accident will it be clear that the behaviour in question was inappropriate, when it becomes “inappropriate” by definition. To take another example, at the time of writing, 397 uses of the word “appropriate” occurred across the published Victorian Adventure Activity Standards (AAS) (see Adventure Victoria, 2005).

3. *How do standards define leader or guide qualifications?* Militaristic standards emphasize discrete skill sets categorized around activities (or tasks) rather than (knowledge of) environments, with no local connection. For example, although the Tasmanian (Australia) adventure activity standards (TasORC, 2005), at the time of writing, contain a link to a site which explains that: “Tasmania is different to any other place you have walked before” (Parks and Wildlife Service Tasmania, 2005), leaders’ qualifications are linked to national industry qualifications based on skill sets. Although militaristic in structure, these seem motivated by the idea that outdoor recreation is an industry and that training requirements for all industries are structurally alike. It may be that in industry, standardization makes economic sense and can occur because built environments such as factories *can* be standardized. Qualification frameworks might serve to ensure that labour can be easily hired or fired to fit changing needs, and new operations interstate or off-shore easily established. Outdoor environments can also be standardized in certain ways, for example by building tracks and shelters, removing trees, or grooming ski slopes. Industrial agriculture also entails standardizing environments. These are exceptions, however. Wild places are the definitive non-standard environments.

The entire outdoor recreation training standards for Australia run to over 200,000 words, although there is a great deal of repetition. None of the bushwalking related qualifications require, or even refer to, local knowledge. Within the 20,000 or so words specifying bushwalking qualifications, there is single specific mention that might refer to local knowledge: “location knowledge” is a single dot point, one of 30 or so, for *SROBWG010A Guide bushwalks in unmodified landscapes* (Service Skills Australia, 2003). For the most part, places are broadly categorized (such as arid or tropical). References to the bush are sparse—there are dot point references to hazards such as crocodiles or tree roots, and broad characteristics such as steepness. At every level, navigation from a map is emphasized. Even the “human resources” required to assess each module—that is, the guides who teach the guides—need not know, or even be familiar with, the area in which they teach and assess, although they must “be current in their knowledge and understanding of the industry” and must “avoid negative statements about own organization ... [and] public bodies” (Service Skills Australia, 2003).

4. *Do standards engage with the question of how best to know and understand particular environments, or do they imply that deference is expected to organizational authority?* Page, Bentley, and Walker (2005) assert in an article in *Tourism Management* that the Victorian AAS are “best practice” (p. 396), but give no reason for their assertion. Numerous websites report the development of the Australian standards approvingly, with no discussion at all about why safety management should be organized around activities rather than places. Arguably, failure to imagine or accommodate epistemological debate and discussion is more significant than the actual contents of the standards. In this example, thinking about environments militaristically is evidently an unquestioned assumption, rather than a thought-through conclusion.

Respectful Relations or Militaristic Occupation?

The examples I have given are typical of a militaristic epistemology; not all safety standards are militaristic to the same extent, or at all. All safety standards should be read in context—some are active, working documents that merely supplement practice based on advice and education embedded in specific local communities. Some written standards may be so widely ignored that any hidden environmental education curriculum would be ineffectual. What I have tried to do is link outdoor activity safety standards with necessary discussions about how knowledge of, and attitudes to, places and environments is generated and distributed in communities through outdoor activities.

Some—perhaps much—organized outdoor activity, at least in the “Anglo” tradition, has acquired a militaristic approach to place. Forms of outdoor education that deploy groups in unfamiliar locations, confront them with daunting but achievable physical challenges, equip them with tools and skills to overcome logistical difficulties, and provide a contradictory but appealing mixture of group conformity and self-actualization do not require a particular educational logic; as educational products they are saleable and two world wars have already sold the idea that certain outdoor activities are linked to both citizenship and heroic achievement. In such instances, the purpose of location is to provide a theatre of operations, physical objectives, and logistic challenges. Normalized in outdoor activities, the unfamiliarity with place that constrained Anglo militarism in the 20th century becomes a desired condition.

Perhaps, in countries like Australia and Canada, the attitudes and knowledge distributed through outdoor activities constitute an elephant in the environmental education tent. Alternatively, perhaps they are insignificant. How outdoor activities actually generate and distribute environmental knowledge and attitudes is, of course, an empirical question, and safety standards form only part of the evidence that might be examined. What I have

sought to do here is illustrate why such critical examination should be undertaken, and how it might proceed.

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