

Provoking Dialogue: A Short History of Outdoor Education in Ontario

By James Borland

I wish to foster dialogue with Ontario outdoor educators about our history. Five branches have shaped outdoor education in Ontario: agricultural education, environmental education, outdoor adventure education, ecological education and climate change adaptation. While each is a unique discipline, they all incorporate outdoor experiences. History helps educators more clearly describe the role of outdoor education in improving society by fostering awareness of human-nature interconnections.

Agricultural Education

The roots of outdoor education began during Ontario's agrarian revolution as British Loyalists during the 1800s transformed the forested wilderness into a self-sufficient agrarian society. This revolution was perceived by Ontario's first Superintendent of Education, Dr. Egerton Ryerson, as a way to transform the province from a British colony into a self-sustaining society that could support the industrial expansion of Ontario. While previous attempts to establish a public school system failed due to irregular student attendance, agricultural education facilitated increased school attendance as education systems became relevant to agricultural communities struggling with an environment that provided a subsistent livelihood (Davey, 2003). Agricultural education promotes Agricultural Science with direct experiences outdoors through farm work. By the early 1900s Agricultural Science had become a course for many secondary school students, while elementary teachers focused on nature study and school gardening. Traditional disciplines were connected to issues facing agricultural communities, and many students were assessed based on how they demonstrated their curricular knowledge through farm work (Thompson, 2009).

Environmental Education

As the gasoline engine took hold and Ontario's automotive network expanded, some agrarian landscapes became urbanized. In the 1960s the Ontario Ministry of Education changed Agricultural Science to Environmental Science (Andrews, 2003). Public concern for the environment increased, starting the environmental education movement. Environmental education recognizes that people are one of many species on Earth, and teaches students to identify and develop solutions to environmental problems (Andrews, 2003). In 1965, the Ontario government permitted school boards with over 10,000 students to purchase land and operate environmental field centres to address social concerns about human impacts on the natural environment (Passmore, 1972). In the 1970's environmental education began to shift to the classroom as science education transitioned towards lab-based studies (Pyle, 2001). Outdoor educators began to integrate outdoor pursuits into their environmental education programs to motivate students and teachers to continue participating in nature-based experiences. The term "environmental education" began to be used interchangeably with the term "outdoor education" (Andrews, 2003).

Outdoor Adventure Education

By the 1990s outdoor adventure education took a prominent role in outdoor education as Ontario entered an economic recession. Outdoor adventure education promotes personal social development (Henderson & Potter, 2001). At this time many school boards faced a shortage of financial resources and growing student populations (Borland, 2009). Outdoor centres were considered to be non-essential fiscal burdens and were closed. Surviving facilities had no choice but to appease school boards and the governing Conservative Party by shifting from environmental programming to more

lucrative outdoor pursuit-based programs. Outdoor educators began to offer these programs to school groups, the public, and corporate groups for user fees. Many new practitioners entering outdoor education at this time came to believe this was the way many outdoor education programs had always operated.

Ecological Education

In 2000, the Ontario Ministry of Education (governed by the Ontario Conservative Party) removed Environmental Science from the secondary school curriculum, promising to integrate ecological concepts across new science and geography curricula. Yet by 2003, few geography and science teachers taught ecology due to time constraints, a new curriculum, and a lack of attention to ecological concepts in the curriculum. Puk and Belm (2003) recommended outdoor education be integrated with ecological education and studied across all natural settings. Ecological education uses direct experiences in the natural world to promote awareness about human dependency on ecological services.

The Future: Climate Change Adaptation

In 2007, the Ontario Ministry of Education (governed by the Ontario Liberal Party) identified outdoor education as essential. A 2009 policy document mandates and guides its implementation across the curriculum. Educators are now expected to work with local communities to offer outdoor experiences that foster an understanding of humans' place in ecosystems. At a current historical precipice where humanity needs to move from an oil-based economy to an alternative energy economy, outdoor education is again being identified as important for transforming the provincial landscape. I only wonder how outdoor educators will tackle this challenge.

References

- Andrews, B. (2003). *Accountability in Outdoor Education*. Toronto, ON: Andrews Education Services.
- Borland, J. (2009). *A Demonstration of Craft: An Outdoor Educator's Autoethnography*. Unpublished master's thesis, Brock University, Ontario, Canada. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/hFsoS9>
- Davey, I. E. (2003). The rhythm of work and the rhythm of school. In N. Janoviček & J. Parr (Eds.), *Histories of Canadian children and youth* (pp. 108-121). Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.
- Henderson, B., & Potter, T. (2001). Outdoor adventure education in Canada: Seeking a country way back in. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 6, 225- 242.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2009). *Acting today, shaping tomorrow: A policy framework for environmental education in Ontario schools*. Toronto, ON; queen's Printer for Ontario.
- Passmore, J. (1972). *Outdoor education in Canada – 1972*. Toronto, ON: Canadian Education Association.
- Puk, T., & Belm, D. (2003). The diluted curriculum: The role of government in developing ecological literacy as the first imperative in Ontario secondary schools. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 8, 217-232.
- Pyle, R. M. (2001). The rise and fall of natural history. *Orion*, 20(4), 16-23.
- Thompson, B. (2009). OSEE's history – and future. *Interactions: The Ontario Journal of Environmental Education*, 21(3), 18-22.

James Borland, Faculty of Education, University of Windsor. This research is supported by internal scholarships from the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Faculty of Education at the University of Windsor. James can be contacted by email: borlandj@uwindsor.ca