

Chapter 1

Introduction

The case for outdoor adventure and the need for risk management

Generation upon generation of our ancestors lived freely upon the earth in forest and desert, tundra and savannah, the survival of the species, of their small bands, utterly dependent on the skill and enterprise of individuals and small groups. Life revolved and evolved around seeking shelter, finding food plants, hunting, fishing. Imagine the hunter poised, spear in hand, at one with the forest, a prey animal in view, the hunter completely engaged with his own destiny, a free agent aware of every sense and every muscle, totally absorbed in the moment when the spear is released.

Life has become constrained, controlled and commoditised to a point where many have forgotten what it is like to have this intensity of experience with nature, with oneself. Such moments are often called peak experiences and it is no coincidence that the metaphor draws on the ancient and powerful symbol of the mountain, the epitome of wilderness, of challenging, elusive but desirable goals.

As an adolescent, my own life was so transformed by an encounter with crags and mountains that, it seems to me

now, most of the truly valuable lessons that I learnt came, not from a good education and a good family, but from this exciting hands-on school of climbing. Any sense of aesthetics that I possess has grown from travel in dramatic landscapes, an instinctive sense of ecology from upland habitats and an affinity for the literature of challenge from the urge to make sense of the intensity of my own experience. But these are merely valuable by-products beside the glowing core of self-knowledge and self-reliance that grew from the adventure.



The symbol of mountains: the summit of Castor, Zermatt.

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This first experience has completely shaped the rest of my life. I still have a passion for the mountains and am lucky enough to have been able to make my career in adventure, yet many people whose experience of rock climbing or kayaking or sailing has been limited to a few intense hours still look back on these as a touchstone of adventurous experience, of life as it might be lived.

Adventure education can change lives, can intensify experience and extend its ripples far into a life. But its purpose is not to make lifetime sailors or skiers, climbers or paddlers, any more than the purpose of an education in literature is primarily to produce novelists or that in music to produce composers. A knowledge of all of these opens the doors of perception; a life denied music, literature and adventure is a life sold short.



Journeying is a great experience for youngsters.

Education in music and in literature may each have its own difficulties, but there is little doubt that the future of adventure education is under threat from a misapprehension of risk, its importance and its management. This book aims to help adventurous opportunities, especially those for young people, to flourish despite frequent hostility in the prevailing climate of opinion.

Public expectations and risk aversion

We are exposed to risk from the moment of our conception to our death. Although, in the developed world, knowledge and technology enable us to control, or at least defend against, the external hazards of climate, disease and starvation more effectively than ever before, we are, paradoxically, becoming more and more risk averse. It is easy to swallow the worm of thinking that the elimination of gratuitous risk can only be for the good but there is a hidden hook.

At an individual level many of us remember as the intense high points of life the occasions when we have faced and overcome great difficulties. Few would doubt that many of our most valuable lessons have grown from uncertainty and anxiety. Where would we be, what flaccid personalities would we have become, if all that discomfort, ambiguity and uncertainty had been removed at source?

For society as a whole there will always be a need for adventurousness of thought, deed and outlook. If we bring up children to believe that physical, emotional or intellectual risks are to be avoided we can hardly be surprised if the future does not bring successors to Captain Cook, to Darwin and to Shakespeare.

Others have written more eloquently about the philosophical and societal pitfalls of the apparently desirable elimination of risk. This book concerns itself with the more prosaic matter of the provision of outdoor activities and experiences. To set the ascent of a few hills against the wider decline of adventurousness may seem faintly ridiculous, yet those who journey in wilderness, who climb or sail, are privileged to enjoy an unrivalled practical training in risk management. We become expert in the necessary balancing act between what is desirable and what is reasonably possible to an extent where the balancing itself becomes central.

All of life is uncertain, but the engine of public opinion is inconsistent in its judgement of risk. Risks which are at a very low level, such as that from Creutzfeld-Jacob Disease, can be fanned into major public concern while daily exposure to very much higher levels of real risk do not attract proportionally greater concern. One must be sympathetic to the genuinely unfortunate individuals who find themselves the victims of statistically unlikely risks, but such sympathy does not necessarily lead to sound public policy.

We all deplore serious accidents in adventure activities or in any out of school learning. Such events, mercifully rare, justifiably raise great public concern and highlight the need for teachers, instructors and providers continually to aspire to the highest standards of risk management, but a public obsession with safety and blame and an ever greater aversion to any kind of risk threatens the availability of adventure in any meaningful form. The waste of young lives through lack of purpose and lack of self-esteem barely registers on the scale of public concern, yet many see this as the direct corollary of a diminution in the availability of opportunities for self-discovery, self-expression and self-belief. I do not pretend that outdoor experiences are the only remedy here, simply that they are too valuable, of too great a proven effect, to be rejected or neglected.

Adventure activities are certainly not entirely risk free, nor should they be. Robin Hodgkin wrote:

Columbus set out to discover a new route to China ... but he discovered America. Adventure rarely reaches its pre-determined goal.

This serves as a reminder of the essential unpredictability of genuine adventure. People seem increasingly to expect an outdoor experience to be a risk-free, error-free and controlled commodity like a pack of computer disks. Without uncertainty of outcome, without risk, we may have a very fine recreational experience, but we no longer have adventure.

We may be in danger of risk being sidelined as an undesirable by-product of adventure activity, of it being treated as the carcinogen to be eliminated from an otherwise healthy diet, rather than being recognised as itself an essential nutrient.

The balancing of risk and benefit has always been at the core of the long tradition of outdoor learning, but in many cases this balance seems to be under threat of replacement by the virtual elimination of risk. Colin Mortlock described a continuum of outdoor activity:

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- Recreation
- Adventure
- Misadventure

and argued persuasively that the maximum educational benefit was to be found in the central sector or, more exactly, at the point of transition between adventure and misadventure. We are in danger of polarising both the operation and the perception of outdoor activity into either Recreation or Misadventure and losing the essential, productive but difficult middle ground.

Recreation, as defined in this context and typified by a leisurely walk in a beautiful park, can give great pleasure but, in Mortlock's model, is not likely to bring the deep experiences, the revelations that are to be found in genuine adventure.

John Adams of University College London has, in his book *Risk*, thrown light on different attitudes to risk. He identifies a 'Formal' sector of risk management (government, commerce, industry, 'experts' in general) whose objective is to *reduce* risk and an 'Informal' sector (everybody else) who:

... go about the business of life – eating, drinking, loving, hating, walking, driving, saving, investing, working, socialising – striving for health, wealth and happiness in a world they know to be uncertain. The objective of these risk managers is to balance risks and rewards.

Tolerable risk or zero risk?

I prefer the term 'risk management' to that of 'safety' to describe what outdoor leaders and their managers do, because the former term, to my mind, carries a suggestion of a process committed to this essential balancing of risk and reward, of safety and adventure. In contrast, 'safety' seems to define the task too simply as the elimination of accident, with no consideration of benefit or balance. However, whatever term we use, it is imperative on us to avoid gratuitous risk when responsible for other people, and most especially when responsible for other people's children. Alongside this we must be honest that we are often dealing with actual risk, albeit risk limited to a tolerable level, but emphatically not a position of zero risk, or of risk that is entirely 'perceived'. It helps nobody to claim inaccurately that 'our activities are completely safe'.



First aid and sympathy – a routine part of the leader's job.

Adult practitioners of adventure sports can and should make their own decisions concerning the level of risk with which they are willing to engage and which they regard as tolerable for their own activities, but the margin of safety must be higher when, for instance, we are acting *in loco parentis*. This is discussed more fully in Chapter 14 but, for now, it will suffice to emphasise that risk management is our most effective lever of control over this margin and on the underlying balance between risk and security.

To win the trust of parents and their children, outdoor providers must demonstrate that they have expertise in the balancing act of risk and reward to such an extent that they can provide intense developmental experiences at a level of actual risk that is generally regarded as tolerable. This is why we need to be very good at managing risks – not only to reduce the risk of accidents but also to avoid killing the adventure. If providers are pushed into a corner where every sprained ankle results in an inquiry and a legal claim, it may become impossible to retain the illuminating spark of adventure.

It is now widely recognised that the provision of adventurous activities can be harnessed as a highly effective vehicle for learning about teamwork, about leadership, about personal interaction. It is also an unrivalled vehicle for learning the key life skill of balancing risk against opportunity.

By putting active risk management at the heart of adventure we can give young people a superb arena in which to develop their skills in managing the uncertainties of life, but only if we leave enough uncertainty of outcome in the process for their risk management to be real. We should aim to provide:

- better education in life skills;
- an improved ability of participants to manage risks in their own lives;
- real adventure.

All over the country, just as generations of developing adults did before them, there are groups of young people desperately trying to have an adventure that speaks to them. Too often their efforts are frustrated by regulation, inappropriate intervention and lack of imagination from those who see themselves as responsible for the control of such creative expression. Those in charge have become so transfixed by the possibility of risk that they are in danger of throwing out the educational baby with the bathwater of risk avoidance. Not long ago I heard of a typical example where a group of seventeen year olds undertaking a four-day exploration journey were so constrained by the rigid timetable and regime of reporting applied 'in the interests of safety' that their opportunities for discovery and adventure were subsumed into a sterile exercise of box ticking. Nobody was hurt, but what exactly is the point of such an experience?

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Real adventure

Adventure is powerful stuff. 'Challenge', 'achievement', 'conquest' and 'drama' are some of the more grandiose elements of its language and perhaps the ones most likely to capture our imagination. But we must not forget the darker side where uncertainty, discomfort and danger can threaten. Challenge can be sterile without uncertainty of outcome and many feel that the darker side cannot be evaded without corrupting the ideal and purpose of adventuring. In a holistic view of adventure the attractive and threatening elements are in balance and harmony as yin is to yang.

Adventure – the word outcrops everywhere in the landscape of outdoor education. My thesaurus tells me that it is synonymous with:

- escapade
- exploit
- quest
- venture
- exciting activity
- exploration
- voyage.

The senses of 'exploration' and 'voyage' will resonate with outdoor educationalists but most would add a need for uncertainty of outcome. A routine voyage on a commercial ferry would rarely qualify as adventure yet the same journey by different means, in a small dinghy for instance, certainly would.

In politics and business, an 'adventure' is something to be avoided; the term is a pejorative one. In the narrower field of outdoor education, adventure is usually regarded as a core asset, something to be applauded and promoted yet, in modern life, the same term seems to be applicable to playing a computer game or tasting a new flavour of yoghurt.



Real adventure – imaginative instruction gives a great session on a very wet day.

One of the most important ingredients of a memorable adventure is the combination of some uncertainty of outcome and the possibility of significantly adverse consequences in the event of an unfavourable result. Many computer games can grip the player but failure carries few consequences – and one can always switch off the machine. The need for commitment, a degree of inescapability, is another desirable ingredient.

Adventure education and outdoor education are often used synonymously alongside other terms such as outdoor

learning and the recent introduction of 'out of classroom learning'. Drawing boundary lines is not necessarily productive but some of these umbrella terms cover a very broad range of worthwhile undertakings from a visit to the botanical gardens through to a three-week kayak expedition along the coast of Greenland. It is a topic of debate whether all such activities are equally worthwhile or whether the component of adventure is one to be valued above others.

Using broad classifications may give a misleading impression of the degree to which children are given the opportunity to engage with 'real' adventure. If a walk in the park is officially regarded as offering many of the same benefits as a more laborious adventure, such as canoeing the River Spey from source to mouth, then it becomes increasingly difficult to justify the effort, the expense and the intrinsically greater risks of the more challenging option. Why not save on the travel and staffing costs and do the whole thing in the classroom via virtual reality?

Simon Knight and Dave Anderson comment:

With self-esteem as the goal, Government-sponsored Outdoor Adventure has a much narrowed focus and in fact loses its adventure agenda altogether. The necessity for esteem-generating guaranteed success results in the abolition of potential failure. What's left is outdoor banality, boredom within the 'comfort zone'. In circumstances of constant success, young people also derive an unrealistic opinion of their abilities. Failure is an important rendezvous with reality and acts as a spur to improve oneself next time.

My own working definition of real adventure includes the following key features:

- some uncertainty of outcome and content – we do not know quite where it will lead;
- wild, dramatic or unusual settings that are part of nature;
- an active rather than a passive engagement with the activity;
- an intrinsic level of challenge. Problems to be solved in order to reach the desired outcome and the undertaking feels 'difficult' but not 'impossible';
- direct and immediate consequences attach to completion or non-completion – we might get cold or wet, tired or hungry if we do not succeed;
- participants have personal responsibility for the outcome – 'we did it ourselves';
- speaks to the soul – how can anything so life enhancing do otherwise?

Although solo adventures are an impressive part of the canon, most adventure education takes place through small groups – big enough to give interaction but small enough to not be monolithic and to give everyone a chance to contribute to the outcome. This gives an added dimension of group working, which many would add to the list above.

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Exceptions to the list can certainly be identified. I was once taken on a journey crawling through the flues and chambers of a huge (and fortunately disused) iron smelter that seemed highly adventurous, a kind of urban caving that was emphatically not part of nature. However, my enthusiasm for adventure would be tempered if it became a predominantly industrial activity without the magic of sunrise, stars and the sweep of wild country.

If we revisit the spectrum ranging from the kayak expedition to the botanical gardens we might regard the range as representing, at one end, in the kayaks, the characteristics of adventure listed above. At the other, we see an approach that is more specific, and more recognisable as having affinities to classroom learning, so that we might regard it as an outdoor classroom with for instance an intention to teach about conifers or Linnaean classification. A comparison of key features might be as listed in Table 1.1.

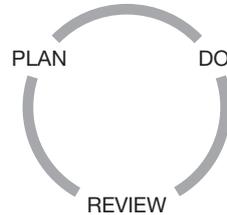
Table 1.1 Comparison of key features

Outdoor classroom	Adventure education
Defined content and outcome	Some, possibly large, uncertainty of outcome and content
Settings that are part of nature	Wild, dramatic or unusual settings that are part of nature
Engagement with the activity may be passive	An active rather than a passive engagement with the activity
Problem-solving may be needed in order to reach the desired outcome	An intrinsic level of challenge, presenting problems to be solved in order to reach the desired outcome
Consequences are likely to be experienced at a later time	Direct and immediate consequences attach to completion or non-completion
Participants have personal responsibility for their own learning	Participants have personal responsibility for the outcome
Speaks to the intellect	Speaks to the soul

It is useful to decide where a particular activity lies on the spectrum between the two limits depicted in the table. I of course recognise that inspired teachers may make involvement in the outdoor classroom both active and inspiring!

Outdoor education is usually strongly aligned to experiential learning and we often see two different approaches to 'processing' the outdoor experience. One camp asserts that 'the mountains should be allowed to speak for themselves', that if an adventure experience is sufficiently real and intense, those taking part will inevitably take on the most relevant lessons. In this approach, the leader is primarily a guide and technical resource.

In contrast, the other school of thought advocates much more intervention in the learning process, with leaders facilitating the identification and transfer of learning from the outdoor experience. This is done by means of reflection, review, and reapplication, in line with the learning cycle described by Kolb and others. This is usually done by rolling through an iterative loop of Experiencing – Reviewing – Concluding – Planning, or in its simplest form:



Most outdoor education includes a significant component of facilitation, but many practitioners feel it to be important that facilitation does not eclipse the opportunity for real adventure. A balance must again be drawn.

Comparison with other fields

The perception of risk in adventure activities does not always tally with the reality, even for those who take part. Knight and Anderson further describe a phenomenon that will be recognised by every outdoor leader who has worked with kids:

Parents are understandably concerned about their child's safety – but perceptions and reality often diverge. Listening to children's stories develop on the minibus going home, you would think that death had been but a whisker away – parents' jaws must drop when they hear the child's version of events. But here's the secret: outdoor adventure has the potential to be dangerous but is in fact very safe. Because of the potential for accidents workers have always assessed risk with a view to being safe.

There are enough uncertain variables to make it very difficult to compare overall safety in outdoor education with that in everyday life. Official accident statistics are often based on figures relating to death, because a fatality is a definite statistical event that must be reported under law. This means that national statistical records tend to be much more reliable for deaths than for, say, serious injury. Prepare for a gloomy interlude.

Every year in Great Britain about 13,000 people are killed in accidents of all kinds. More than 3,500 of the total are as a result of road traffic accidents, which are the most important cause of accidental death for those under 45 years of age, and more than 4,000 occur in the home or in the garden. Of the total number of accidental deaths about 1,000 are children.

By making a number of assumptions, it is possible to make an analysis which indicates that the level of risk of death for young people during a day of adventure activities is roughly the same as that for an average day in the rest of their lives, in and out of school. The risk of death, by any cause, for a particular child on any given day is about 1 in 5 million.

Stepping back to a wider view, the annual rate of accidental death during planned out-of-school activities is about three or four per annum from a population of 10 million British

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children. It should be remembered that the underlying risks of say, illness or road traffic accident still apply during these out-of-school activities and the fatalities that do occur during outdoor sessions may be unconnected with the activity itself.

These figures give no support to a view that outdoor education is an unreasonably dangerous activity. Serious accidents may happen, but in the broad picture, the level of risk is very similar to that in everyday life. Practitioners would argue that the benefits are inestimably greater.

The Department for Education and Skills in a recent memorandum to a House of Lords' Inquiry into the Government's Policy on Risk Management commented:

Educational visits of a less naturally hazardous nature – the huge majority – are also thriving. These are mainly cultural and sporting activities. They carry their own risks, of course, and these are safely managed by thousands of teachers and other school staff for curricular purposes. While millions of pupils take part in such activities every year, the chances of a serious incident are very low indeed – about 0.5 in a million. We know of only 26 accidental deaths of pupils from schools in England since 1997. (All but one of them occurred on-out-of-classroom activities, only one of those – the recent tragic death of a 14 year old pupil whilst caving with his school in North Yorkshire – on a higher-hazard activity.)

Tom Price was one of my predecessors at Outward Bound Eskdale, and a man with a unique ability to get to the essence of a thing. Two of his statements seem particularly apposite:

Anyone can make adventure training safe by taking all the adventure out of it.

The best safety lies not so much in the avoidance of danger, but in learning how to deal with it.

My opinion is that the combination of these two ideas is strong persuasion for the need to have risk, or, more exactly, the active management and balancing of risk and opportunity by participants, at the centre of outdoor education.

Perhaps we need to see the right to adventure as a fundamental human right. The safety argument, at times, seems all pervasive and it is not impossible to imagine a future time when anybody engaging with anything other than a trivial level of risk will be seen as betraying the norms, or even the laws, of society. Do we really want a society which out-laws adventure?



Chapter summary

- Adventure is life enhancing.
- Rampant risk aversion threatens its continued availability.
- There is a spectrum Recreation : Adventure : Misadventure.
- Outdoor activities teach the key skill of risk management.
- Leaders must be skilful at balancing risk and benefit.
- Outdoor learning includes a wide range of approaches.
- Uncertainty of outcome and dramatic environments are two central features of adventure education.
- Out-of-school outdoor activities for children are no more dangerous than everyday life.

