

A Century of Being Prepared

by Rob Ridley

Those of us lucky enough to work in the outdoor education field know very well that outdoor experiential and environmental education goes beyond the teaching of science and principles of the physical world. While those outside the field think of these connections to the curriculum first and foremost (and there are indeed some opportunities here), we know that *everything* we teach can be done so from an environmental perspective.

No matter the subject — be it math, science, language, art, health, drama, music, the industrial arts, business, drafting or others — experiential and environmental connections can be made. By its very definition, experiential education can provide the perfect conduit for developing knowledge about such subjects.

As I have said, we in outdoor experiential and environmental education know this already, but do we know what company we keep in the field?

In Ontario, we have school boards that run outdoor education programs, conservation authorities, provincial and national parks and many competent private providers as well. But there are more — many more, in fact — that are not recognized as the great providers they are of outdoor experiential and environmental education. Ironically, they are in some cases amongst the first outdoor education providers in this province.

Take, for instance, the Girl Guides of Canada and Scouts Canada. In Girl Guides young women of every creed and colour, of every aspect of life, from urban and rural communities, and from young children as Sparks to young adults as Pathfinders and Rangers, learn to be confident and experienced leaders in our community through experiential and often outdoor education opportunities.

Scouts Canada as well, completely co-educational for the last decade, allows

children and adults alike, from five-year-old Beavers to 26-year-old Rovers, to participate in programming tailored to their individual needs through membership in small groups.

Both these great organizations are trying to develop the youth of Ontario in four key ways: physically, socially, mentally and spiritually.

The founder of these movements, Robert Stephenson Smythe Baden-Powell ("that's Powell as in toll, not Powell as in towel"), developed them based on previous programs, such as Ernest Thompson Seton's *Woodcraft Indians*. Seton, a prolific writer and artist, was raised in the Lindsay and Toronto region, and a huge portion of the natural science and campfire connections in the current programs can be attributed to him. Seton's "Laws of Woodcraft" were a model for Baden-Powell's "Scout Promise" and "Scout Law."

Scout Promise:

*I promise to do my best,
To do my duty to God and the Queen
To help other people at all times
And to carry out the spirit of the Scout Law.*

Scout Law:

*A Scout is helpful and trustworthy
Kind and cheerful,
Considerate and clean
And wise in the use of all resources.*

All Scouting programs are designed to promote these ethics. Men and women of all walks of life and of all cultures are welcome to be members. This inclusion goes a long, long way to supporting the social development of the youth involved. Tolerance, understanding and the true meaning of citizenship are key components of the programs offered.

Kurt Hahn, founder of Outward Bound and father of many other adventure-based educational opportunities, refers to the successes of Seton and Baden-Powell numerous times.

Scouts Canada is celebrating its 100th birthday this year, proof that scouting remains prevalent today. Not surprisingly, and perhaps necessarily, scouting has adapted with the times. There are Rover Crews that meet only online since their members are all at different universities. There are Venturer Companies that have taken on vocational education such as emergency medical services or fire fighting. And there are badge programs that Baden-Powell never would have thought of, such as computers and space exploration.

This past summer, I was honoured to be involved with the management team for program at the Canadian Jamboree north of Montreal. Youth — 7,000 of them — from every Canadian province and territory, as well as seven other countries, participated in one of the most enjoyable and exhilarating outdoor education opportunities ever.

There was no marking of tests and no rubrics . . . and yet every single person participating walked away from the event with a lifetime of memories and life skills well beyond the circle of their friends and neighbours who stayed at home this summer.

These youth spent over a week outdoors, cooking for themselves, sharing, challenging each other, building friendships, learning patience and getting more physical activity than some youth their own age get all summer long.

Programs were challenging and educational, and yet, if you ask any one of the youth participating, they would each tell you first and foremost that they were fun. High ropes, zip lines into the mountain lake, canoeing, fly fishing, canopy walks, biking and so much more. The program was active and popular. It is interesting that towards the end of the Jamboree the activity being sought after the most was 1907 Badgeworks — that is, traditional Scouting, Scouting from 100 years ago. This is indeed a compliment to the founders of the movement.

In his 1897 poem, “The Feet of the Young Men,” Rudyard Kipling wrote,

*Who hath smelt wood-smoke at twilight?
Who hath heard the birch-log burning?
Who is quick to read the noises of the night?
Let him follow with the others,
for the Young Men’s feet are turning
To the camps of proved desire and known delight!*



The social and spiritual learning that occurs around a campfire or under canvas, in my mind, far outweigh any day trip.

As an educator, I must admit that seeing the youth demonstrate the development we are looking for is the most rewarding thing of all. To see them giving each other a hand on the high ropes, to see them unafraid to sing as loud as they can around a fire, to see them not only understanding but living environmental awareness at camp, to see them act not only as individuals but as a massive group is an incentive to continue to offer such programming.

Partway through the week, as I stood outside the program headquarters with another program team member from the national office, a young Scout came up to us and asked politely if either of us had lost a \$20 bill. He had found it close to where we were standing. When neither of us claimed it, he asked what he should do with it. This in itself was Scouting at its best, but when we brought him to the lost and found and put it in an envelope with the location it was found and the finder’s name (in case it was not claimed) it was even more amazing to see that it was put into a pile of other envelopes that had found money in them as well.

Education in its finest hour . . . and available to all. Baden-Powell would be proud.

Rob Ridley has been teaching environmental education for almost 20 years and is currently the Field Centres Coordinator for the Peel District School Board. He has been involved at all levels in Scouting for the last 15 years as an adult.