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Foreword: International Perspectives in Outdoor Education Research

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FOREWORD

International Perspectives in Outdoor Education Research

To begin, let me introduce the starting point for this issue of *Research in Outdoor Education* (ROE); the 7th International Outdoor Education Research Conference (IOERC). The 7th IOERC was hosted from July 4–8, 2016 at Cape Breton University (CBU), on Unama’ki (Cape Breton Island) in Nova Scotia, Canada. This IOERC showcased the breadth of international perspectives in outdoor education research, as more than 150 researchers from 17 countries lived and learned together.

The IOERC series, with 7 conferences down and the next one being organized for November 2018 in Australia, aims to build on the social, cultural and critical dimensions of research and theorizing in diverse outdoor traditions. This includes the fields of education (both learning and teaching), recreation, place studies, sustainability/environmental studies and therapeutic applications of nature and adventure. Thus, it serves as a natural fit with the Coalition for Education in the Outdoors, the network served by the publication of ROE.

The focus of the IOERC series is squarely on outdoor education research with a particular emphasis on sociological and critical perspectives. The IOERC has never had keynote speakers, so as not to prioritize any one person’s research over another, nor has it ever engaged as a tradeshow or fundraising mechanism for an association. It has no constitution, no ongoing constituency, and no financing is provided. It relies on an academic institution to be the host and previous IOERC conferences were hosted by Buckinghamshire-Chilterns University (UK) in 2002, La Trobe University (Australia) in 2004, the University of Central Lancashire (UK)

in 2006, La Trobe University again in 2009, the University of Southern Denmark/University of Copenhagen (Denmark) in 2011, and the University of Otago (New Zealand) in 2013. With a change in hemisphere for each conference the IOERC typically takes place every 2–2.5 years. The 7th IOERC at CBU, was the first time the conference had been hosted outside of Europe or Australasia.

The discussion about the need for an IOERC began in 2001 when a group of outdoor education researchers gathered at the Iron Bark Centre in Victoria, Australia. Their original vision “was built on a perceived need to see the outdoors develop as a significant discipline which engage[s] with and is informed by social, educational, cultural and other theoretical frameworks” (Humberstone, 2009, no page numbers). Essentially, the vision was to “foster the development of its critical dimension”, because outdoor education had tended to float about in “splendid isolation, perhaps similar to leisure studies around 20 years ago” (Humberstone, 2009, no page numbers). One might ask why a critical and reflective forum is necessary for outdoor education research. The answer is complex and connected to how scholars and their institutions perceive the “discipline.” Even characterizing outdoor education as a discipline is contested. Some suggest outdoor education is a field of study; others argue it is simply practice and programming. A full discussion of this tension is available in Dymont and Potter (2015) and Potter and Dymont (2016).

The theme of the 1st IOERC conference was, “*Whose Journeys: Where and Why?: The ‘Outdoors’ and ‘Adventure’ as Social and Cultural Phenomena: Critical Exploration of Relations Between Individuals, ‘Others’ and the Environment.*” The introduction to the 1st IOERC conference proceedings states:

The outdoor sector provides, makes available or engages with outdoor adventure experiences for a variety of purposes including, education, youth and social work, management development, therapy, leisure and recreation. In most cases, but not all, these experiences occur in ‘natural’ environments. Consequently, diverse outdoor traditions have emerged not only in relation with specific geographical landscapes, but also as a consequence of particular cultural, social and political contexts. Furthermore, ‘old’ romanticised ideals of outdoor leisure are becoming re-constructed though the demands of ‘mass-market’ consumers for ‘authentic’ adventure. Arguably, much outdoor experience, particularly that

concerned with forms of outdoor learning, is rarely subjected to critical analyses where it may be located within broader theoretical frameworks and diverse schools of thought. (Humberstone, Brown, & Richards, 2003, p. 7)

With the 1st IOERC providing a forum for critical discussion on adventure and the outdoors, delegates saw a useful reason to continue with these principles and focus. Thus, the 2nd IOERC was concerned with “*Connections and Disconnections: Examining the Reality and Rhetoric: International Perspectives on Outdoor Education Theory and Practice*” and the 3rd IOERC began to examine diversity of perspectives, as themed “*Diversity in Theoretical and Critical Views of Outdoor Education.*” The 4th IOERC, returning to La Trobe University, revisited critical aspects of the field extending from 2002, with a title “*Critical Reflections, New Directions: Outdoor Education Research and Theory.*”

As the first step away from the UK-Australia rotation in conference location, the 5th IOERC was themed “*Different Places, Critical Perspectives and New Possibilities*” and the 6th IOERC, once again removed from the conventional UK-Australia alternation, offered a theme of “*Future Faces: Outdoor Education Research Innovations and Visions.*” Over the first six conferences attendance grew steadily, in 2013 attendees numbered 140 from 24 countries, and many more people shared their current research versus simply attending (Brown & Boyes, 2013). Based on the success and themes of the first six IOERC, and the interdisciplinary and multi-themed nature of outdoor education research, the IOERC academic committee chose to proceed with the 7th IOERC without a dedicated focus/theme. Thus, it would welcome all presenters who could broadly enhance the understanding, practice, and research of outdoor studies.

So that is the backstory of the IOERC; this special issue is the proceedings of some of what was shared at the 7th IOERC itself. This issue of ROE contains four articles presented at the conference, plus an additional two that I believe can speak to an international audience. In the first article, Root, Snow, Belalcazar and Callary explore the transition of a local school yard into a more naturalized space. Using photovoice techniques and interviews with children of various ages (pre- and post-naturalization) they offer some thoughts on engagement with nature, physicality and movement, risk and overall student wellbeing.

In the second article Breault-Hood, Gray, Truong and Ullman scope the research literature on women and girls in outdoor education, with specific interests in future work on body image. As a systematic review, this article offers comprehensive coverage of an important topic in outdoor education research and it is quite clear that developments have been made from 1980 to 2018, but much more work can, and should be done.

The third article by Gray, Mitten, Loeffler, Allen-Craig and Carpenter, a truly international group of authors, further examines the gender divide in outdoor education. Gray et al. offer a retrospective commentary on women's contributions to outdoor education, in terms of defining moments. The impetus for their work was a distinct lack of women's voices, "an invisibility cloak," at a previous IOERC.

Finally, Wigglesworth and Heintzman investigate the perceived life significance of a winter outdoor education course. As a qualitative retrospective with alumni, some of whom took the program more than 40 years earlier, this study explores some of the long-term effects of outdoor education practices in higher education—although with a unique Canadian winter context.

The final two articles, although not presented at the 7th IOERC, have great relevance to an international audience. Both deal with universal concerns of research methods, and both engage with large global outdoor education providers to test these methods. Jostad, Sibthorp, Butner, Rochelle and Gookin work with some of the fundamental issues surrounding the quantitative study of outdoor adventure education (OAE). Based on data collected at the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), they present and advocate for the use of a dynamical systems theory approach towards modeling quantitative data. They recognize this as only one approach, but believe it to be able to meet the challenges of understanding OAE experiences in a complex setting with many moving-parts. Bobilya and Faircloth present work from the North Carolina Outward Bound School (NCOBS) using a mixed method, retrospective pre-and-post design to survey student course impressions. Once again, they provide ample justification of the difficulties in understanding OAE experience outcomes, and working with NCOBS sought to expand upon aspects of other instruments.

In closing, I hope you find this collection of articles to be an enthralling read, and one that may open your eyes to the "world" of possibilities in outdoor education research. If you are seeking further reading from the 7th IOERC, please look for two other resulting special issues in *Pathways: The Ontario Journal of Outdoor Education*, Spring 2017, 29(3), and a forthcoming volume of the *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education and Leadership* (January 2018). Thank you to all of our reviewers (for the

original 7th IOERC abstracts and this special issue). Thank you to Tim and Garrett, the regular editors of *Research in Outdoor Education*, for supporting this special issue offering international perspectives. Thanks to Cornell University Press, as we worked through this volume quite quickly during a time of transition.

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