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## Strengthening the Foundations of Outdoor Education

Anderson B. Young  
*SUNY Cortland*

Leo H. McAvoy  
*University of Minnesota*

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## STRENGTHENING THE FOUNDATIONS OF OUTDOOR EDUCATION

Anderson B. Young and Leo H. McAvoy

Third Biennial CEO Research Symposium

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With the publication of the proceedings of the Third Biennial Coalition for Education in the Outdoors Research Symposium, and with plans underway for the fourth symposium in 1998, it is appropriate to record the background and purposes of this initiative. In essence, these research symposia are an extension of the Coalition's commitment to communication for the enhancement of education in the outdoors. We seek to strengthen the field of outdoor education and to empower those associated with it.

The Coalition for Education in the Outdoors was established in 1987 as a means of improving communication among those involved in outdoor and environmental education. Ironically, one of the strengths of outdoor education—its interdisciplinary nature and its pursuit of multiple aims—is also one of its weaknesses. This multi-faceted nature of outdoor education has segmented the field into interest areas. For example, there are a host of national associations that meet the needs of educators in the outdoors. Among them are the Association for Experiential Education, the American Camping Association, the National Recreation and Park Association, the Alliance for Environmental Education, and the North American Association for Environmental Education, to name a few. All do good work. Many have parallel programs in other countries and at the state or provincial level. Each of these organizations has done much to serve the needs and interests of its members, and each tends to give primary emphasis to particular dimensions of education in

the outdoors. Unfortunately, the proliferation of organizations makes it almost impossible for both individuals and organizations to keep track of the full range of developments in outdoor and environmental education.

The Coalition for Education in the Outdoors was created as an information clearinghouse to enable individuals and associations to keep in touch with one another. CEO is not an individual membership organization, but a collection of nearly a hundred associations, businesses, agencies, and educational institutions involved with outdoor education. The Coalition seeks not to duplicate services of existing organizations, but to extend the reach of those organizations. It has done so principally through its quarterly magazine, *Taproot*, which reaches hundreds of subscribers, and secondarily through conferences.

CEO's research symposia are an extension of its networking mission. Most national and state outdoor education organizations are practitioner-oriented. While each tends to understand the importance of research and includes programs and services related to research, few have been able to sustain and nurture an ongoing research community. For this reason, the founders of CEO established a research committee that would help the Coalition to advance the philosophical, empirical, and theoretical bases of outdoor education. That committee, first chaired by Camille Bunting of Texas A & M, organized the inaugural symposium in 1992 and laid the foundation for the two that have

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Anderson B. Young, Ph.D., is professor and chair of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the State University of New York at Cortland. Leo, H. McAvoy, Ph.D., is professor of Recreation, Park, & Leisure Studies at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN. Correspondence should be directed to Anderson Young, Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies: SUNY-Cortland, Cortland, NY, 13045, (607) 753-4941; fax (607) 753-5982; younga@sny-corva.cortland.edu

followed, as well as for the ongoing work of CEO in the area of research and scholarship.

To advance the philosophical, theoretical, and empirical bases of outdoor education, these symposia have three subordinate aims. First, as reflected by these proceedings, the symposium marks an opportunity for scholars to present their work to one another and, through the proceedings, to the larger community of outdoor educators. Second, the symposium is designed to build a sense of community among those interested in outdoor education research and scholarship. Third, the symposium provides a forum where participants can explore other means of accomplishing their research and scholarly aims for outdoor education. Each of these subordinate aims merits some elaboration.

These proceedings, like the first, include a group of research reports and essays on a wide variety of outdoor education-related topics. Several papers discuss the state of current research in various theme areas, such as corporate programs, ethics, therapy, spirituality, group development, school-based programs, and natural resources. Also included are research papers on gender issues, environmental education and interpretation, self-concept, wilderness values, personality and adventure program participants, and career development in outdoor education. The proceedings, like the symposium itself, reflect the diversity of outdoor education. They are a group of papers—and it was a group of people—that would not have been published or gathered by any single outdoor or environmental education organization.

Although these proceedings are an important product of the symposium, the less formal communication at the symposium is an equally important, though less tangible, outcome. The participants at the symposium reflected the diversity of outdoor education. As mentioned above, this symposium attracted a group of people that would not have had the opportunity to gather at the meetings of any of the many fine professional conferences throughout the year. The symposium was structured to be highly interactive and supportive. Participants sought each other out for help in the design of future studies. Research partnerships were formed. In essence, the symposium cultivated a sense of community and cooperation among its participants.

Third, the symposium also provided a forum to address areas of ongoing concern to researchers and scholars in the field. Topics under continuing discussion included the relationship of outdoor education to (1) ethics, (2) spirituality, (3) public schools (4) natural resources, and (5) therapy.

Researchers, like their other colleagues in outdoor education, represent a diversity of backgrounds and interests. They come from different academic backgrounds and write for different literature sources. Through these biennial CEO research symposia, we are able to present some products of their work in a single proceedings, and, equally important, we are building a research community that can only help to strengthen the field of outdoor education and the people and environment it serves.