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RESEARCH IN OUTDOOR EDUCATION: OUR PLACE ON THE PORCH¹

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In *A Yaquie Way of Knowledge*, Carlos Castenada talked about a person's "place on the porch"; that is, the constellation of skills, knowledge and past experiences that serve to define who we are to both ourselves and others. My message today is simply this: What is *our* place on the porch and is it where we want to be? Let me address this questions from two, perhaps overly simplistic, angles. But before doing that, let me digress a bit and state forthright that I believe the most important job those fortunate enough to participate in this Research Symposium have is to help define where research in outdoor education is and where it needs to go. Historically, we are pretty good at the former but not so effective at the direction-setting end of things.

This is an old story, and many of you have heard me harp on this before, but we have not really done it yet. It is difficult to imagine having a better situation in which to do some strategic thinking and planning than being at Bradford Woods surrounded by some of the best outdoor educators in the business. Having now worked in several organizations involved in different aspects of research, including private industry, academics and the federal government, my perception has been that those programs with a research plan that was both tactical and strategic invariably had a better chance at long-term success than those that did not.

Let me get back to our porch. From my perspective, defining our place on the porch involves understanding where we are (i.e., our body of knowledge and past contributions to society) and where we need to be going (both in the eyes of our colleagues in other disciplines and within our own perception).

Working in a Natural Resources faculty, it is now becoming clear, sometimes painfully, that the "coin of the realm" is both an established body of knowledge and recognized contributions to various sectors of society. This leads me to think that we need to be able to fully articulate answers to questions such as, "What does education in the outdoors really do?" "Who does it really help?" and "What social ills does it help address?"

We all have our own individual ideas about this, but are there some commonalties in how we address these issues? Furthermore, how can we facilitate this understanding among not only ourselves, but, just as importantly, other institutions and disciplines? With these questions in mind, I believe there are two factors we should consider:

1. Outdoor education and recreation provide society with one of the few ways large numbers of people experience the natural environment in very real, direct ways.
2. It is still true that for a substantial proportion of the public, summer camp, the outdoor laboratory, or the field trip was a powerful and positive event in the life and something "good" happened from it. (You could say that about visiting the dentist, but most of us would not voluntarily choose that as a way to spend our educational resources.)

So, what should we be concerned with as we think about some potential long-range research strategies? Consider, if you will, the following recommendations for research strategies, as shown in Table 1.

¹This article is an edited version of the transcript from Dr. Ewert's videotaped presentation at the Symposium.

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TABLE 1
Recommendations for Future Research Strategies

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- Integration within and outside of disciplines
 - Mainstream our efforts
 - Visibility and distribution of findings
 - Link up with larger efforts, organizations, and problems
 - Capitalize on the linkage between human development and natural landscapes
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Integration: By its very nature, outdoor education involves a variety of disciplines and educational opportunities. While research efforts have historically often been unidisciplinary, our future efforts should emulate the complexity of the problem and involve a multitude of scholarly disciplines.

Mainstreaming: Unless our research appears more often in well-recognized research outlets, the information our scientists generate can be marginalized and not fully utilized or recognized.

Visibility and Distribution of Findings: Organizations and centers such as the Coalition for Education in the Outdoors and Bradford Woods can act as clearinghouses for information. ERIC has traditionally played this role, but its effectiveness drops off as one moves away from educationally-focused institutions. Distribution costs will always be a problem, but they are not usually insurmountable with some creativity and concerted effort.

Connecting with Larger Efforts: Outdoor education research has traditionally used the effect of the camp (or similar experience) on the individual as the dependent variable. Our challenge for the future will be to demonstrate how the life-changing experiences our programs offer can also impact larger issues such as crime, families under stress, and health related issues. In addition, there is an entire host of natural resource issues that involve human perceptions and behaviors, such as global climate change, timber harvesting, energy use, waste production, and environmental concern. How can outdoor education impact these larger issues?

Capitalize on the Human Development/Natural Linkages: Natural landscapes can have a powerful effect on humans. Outdoor educators have known this for years and our research suggests this to be the case. For example, improved self-concept, reduced length of hospital stays, and lower recidivism rates are all examples of positive impacts. Outdoor education is ideally situated to capitalize on this interaction, something few other disciplines can emulate or even envision from a systematic perspective. But, we know little about this human development/natural landscape linkage.

THE TRIP TO ABILENE

In business and professional training programs the "Trip to Abilene" is a metaphoric statement implying that a group is heading toward a particular goal even though nobody really wants to go there. But, of course, nobody bothered to raise the issue. So I would challenge you, the participants of the Third Biennial Symposium on Research in Outdoor Education, to consider where we are going and how we should get there. You may not agree with the previous ideas, but we need to work together and lay out a potential game plan. Where should we be allocating our precious and scarce research resources? How can studies be developed to build on one another? What social ills can we target with our powerful outdoor education experiences? And finally, what types of endeavors should we collectively get involved in that will be meaningful for the society of which we are a part, beneficial to our students, and fulfilling for us as practicing researchers?