

## 1.0: An overview of outdoor learning

**Outdoor learning is a term that covers various approaches to engaging with the outdoors for learning and developmental purposes.**

Outdoor learning can be, and is, applied in different contexts and interpreted in numerous ways. School-based practitioners, for example, may have different views to instructors working in outdoor adventure settings, while personal and organisational definitions may vary again depending on the country where it is taking place. The specific intention of outdoor learning programmes will vary accordingly, leading to different outcome goals and ways of achieving them. Central to all of them is the role of the practitioner, whether regarded as a facilitator, instructor, teacher, coach, educator, therapist, tutor or guide. All of these identities place the practitioner at a critical point in the process where they can act as a catalyst, accelerating the journey towards desired outcomes. One of the outdoor practitioner's key roles, therefore, is to facilitate learning.

Experiencing the outdoor environment first-hand is what makes outdoor learning unique as an approach. However, the use of outdoor learning in different contexts means that it is necessary to acknowledge the role of the indoors and technology as well. As the scope of this guide embraces the field of outdoor learning it adopts a broad interpretation<sup>1</sup>:

**'Outdoor learning is an umbrella term for actively inclusive facilitated approaches that predominantly use activities and experiences in the outdoors which lead to learning, increased health and wellbeing and environmental awareness'**

## **In this guide the term 'outdoor learning' embraces an approach to teaching and learning that:**

- » Involves being outdoors as a central part of the experience.
- » Strives to be inclusive and accessible.
- » Seeks to engage with the outdoor environment as a place where experiences are transformed into knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours.
- » Always respects the environment.
- » Is often cited as being both memorable and fun.

## **Outdoor learning can include:**

- » A challenging, adventurous element.
- » A residential component.
- » Physical activity.

Outdoor learning may include recognised activities with an adventurous component that are also undertaken for recreation and leisure, such as canoeing, climbing, hill walking, camping, orienteering or sailing; outdoor activities purposely designed for their educational impact, such as fieldwork, curricula subject lessons, forest schools, trails, bushcraft, initiative challenges and rope courses; and the use of the outdoors as an experiential environment for both cognitive, non-cognitive and therapeutic development. Such experiences may occur at or close to a school, club or centre site, at a distance from that site or during a residential or expedition experience in the UK or abroad.

Outdoor learning is primarily an approach to teaching and learning through these and other similar activities and through broader experiences in the outdoors. The most noticeable outcomes are achieved when outdoor learning is designed as a frequent and progressive activity relating to broader learning that links to everyday experiences in a specific setting (such as a classroom, youth club or community hub) and to real-life experiences beyond. However, it must not be forgotten that the experiences are often hugely memorable in themselves and, more often than not, highly enjoyable, having merit as experiences in their own right.

## The relationship between outdoor learning and outdoor recreation

Outdoor recreation – which can lead to informal learning – can be the main reason that many people access the outdoors beyond school<sup>2,3</sup>. In the UK, outdoor recreation is often seen as distinct from outdoor learning and is generally regarded as activity undertaken voluntarily for relaxation or pleasure. While outdoor recreation for some involves more ‘extreme’ activities with a higher degree of objective risk, it also includes a wide range of outdoor activities that are traditionally used in facilitated outdoor learning contexts e.g. walking, climbing, high ropes courses, mountain biking and paddle sports. The coaching, guiding or facilitating of these experiences forms a significant part of the outdoor recreation economy, and many practitioners work in both recreational and facilitated settings, often introducing participants to lifelong participation.

Other outdoor activities used in more informal contexts, such as gardening and nature watching, are also significant recreational pastimes which can be facilitated with the help of community volunteers, coaches and guides. There is, therefore, a clear link between learning and recreation that provides opportunities for practitioners to encourage and foster connections for their participants that enable greater access to the outdoors for its benefits.

### See also:

- 1.1 How people participate
- 1.2 The benefits of outdoor learning
- 1.3 The context for outdoor learning
- 2.0 Understanding quality in outdoor learning
- 3.0 High quality outdoor learning in practice
- 4.0 The outcomes of outdoor learning

### References

- 1 Anderson, N., Harvey, D. and Crosbie, J. (2021) *Describing Outdoor Learning*. Horizons (94)
- 2 Natural England (2019a) *Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment: Children and Young People report*. London: Natural England.
- 3 Gordon, K., Chester, M. and Denton, A. (2015) *Getting Active Outdoors: A study of Demography, Motivation, Participation and Provision in Outdoor Sport and Recreation in England*.

