

IN PROFILE

In this issue, Horizons speaks to Luschka van Onselen, a Wilderness Therapeutic Practitioner and Chair of the IOL Bushcraft Professional Practice Group

Jo Barnett: Welcome to Horizons, Luschka. May I start by asking what is your current role in outdoor learning?

Luschka van Onselen: My current job title is Wilderness Therapeutic Practitioner and I work with young people with special needs or behavioural needs, usually on a one-to-one basis or in small groups, using bushcraft and Forest School style engagement as tools. It's about developing their soft skills such as perseverance, persistence, confidence and self-esteem. I'm also a Beach School practitioner. Living on an island, the Isle of Wight, you'd think that every child goes down to the beach, but actually no. I've currently got a group of 14-year-olds who've never gone crabbing, so we're just crabbing for six weeks because they absolutely love it, and it's their hook to engagement with learning! Recently I have become the Chair for the IOL Bushcraft Professional Practice Group which has the ultimate goal of enriching and supporting the bushcraft community.

Jo: Where did your love for the outdoors come from?

Luschka: I have memories of my grandmother taking me bird watching in the incredible botanical gardens in Mpumalanga, South Africa. It had a raging river and waterfalls, and it was just the most incredible place. We spent a lot of hours ticking off birds from the Roberts Birds of Southern Africa book. I was a very depressed teenager and I often say I think she saved my life, so I think that's a big part of my love of the outdoors. Being outdoors was such a South African way of life, just exploring the incredible nature, scenery, forests, beaches and mountains. Before South Africa, I lived in Windhoek, Namibia, and I remember my dad coming home from work and piling us all into the VW Kombi and we would just go - there was no real destination. We would wake up in a dry riverbed or next to a cliff-face full of Love Birds. There are many memories of our family of five stuffed into one of those old-style triangular four-person tents like sardines and I always ended up on the floor somehow! My earliest memories are of dust, and wandering around a tribe of people who were all painted red - the Himba - when we lived on the northern Namibian border. Being outdoors and being a wanderer have just always been a part of my life.

Jo: When you think about your career, what are you most proud of?

Luschka: I love what we've built here on the Island. I started working in the outdoors with Wood Learn Forest School in 2019, just before the whole world descended into the Covid-19 pandemic. We managed to work through much of it with vulnerable people or with people who really needed to be outdoors, such as key worker children. I would say I'm proud of what we've built because all through the upheaval, we consistently hosted after-school and home education sessions, which provided opportunities for people to engage with each other in a different way. We saw real growth and development in so many young people, things like children who had no friends or who were too scared to leave their houses and too afraid to engage with others; so anxious that on arrival they weren't able to leave their cars. And then by the end they're independent, confident young men and women, who have developed connections with nature and each other. We worked with one boy who was so afraid of the dark that he would leave twenty minutes into the session because the trees were forming shadows. After a while, he was even attending night-time sessions or dark sessions like late afternoon in the winter. He saved up and sent me some flowers to say thank you for helping him with his fear, but all we did was provide an opportunity.



These experiences always offer small pockets of pride; it's individual achievements that I hold very dear. I'm also really proud of being the first female Chair of the Bushcraft Professional Practice Group. When my own daughters were small, I spent a lot of time teaching them about inspiring women like Amelia Earhart and Jane Goodall, or other women who were pioneering. I never really thought I'd be the first one to do anything. In my home, and in my four walls, it's something I really am quite proud of because to my children it's an equivalent achievement by their mum.

Jo: What would you say is the most significant thing that you have learned in your career?

Luschka: We are always learning and yet so much of what we are learning our ancestors already knew. Things like old wives' tales and nursery rhymes have their foundations in elements of truth or science, and yet we're only relearning those things now. The learning that has been the most significant for me is that we are so connected to nature. I think about all the things we don't know yet - like what's in the depths of the oceans or even about uses for the plants that we've relegated to being just 'weeds'. I think the moment that you think you know everything is the moment you start to become irrelevant.

Jo: So, what would your top tip be for someone starting a career in the outdoors?

Luschka: Invest in good clothes! The days I've come home with my feet all wrinkly because my socks or shoes have leaked! Now I have the most comfortable pair of fleece-lined builders' boots and they're fantastic. Spend more on woollen socks or the better waterproofs or just invest in quality. It might feel painful in the short-term, but in the long run you'll be so grateful for it. If the coming winters are going to be anything like the last one, you'll be wet often, so invest in things that make the day-to-day easier.



Jo: Looking ahead, what do you think is important for the future of outdoor learning?

Luschka: We need to find ways of working together for the benefit of our communities. Collectively funding and collating research is going to be really important going forward as we justify our work to funders and decision-makers. Getting behind projects such as Nature Premium is going to be essential. We're now looking at a generation of parents who weren't outdoor children themselves. Parents cannot teach and share what they do not know. We need people in positions of power to make outdoor learning happen for our young people. This is increasingly important as young people are at a critical point in our history and technology is part of that. I see many teenagers who are at breaking point and something needs to be done for them. Trying to make a global change as individuals is going to be nearly impossible, so we need to collaborate to increase our impact on society.

Jo: And finally, what's next in your calendar?

Luschka: I'm currently halfway through becoming a qualified therapist, so I've just started my one hundred hours of placement. It is all very office-based, which I've been finding quite challenging, but I'd like to combine my outdoor work with more intensive therapy work because I think the two combined can be powerful.

Jo: Thank you, Luschka, for sharing your fascinating outdoor learning career and thoughts with us ▲

