

Outdoor education in our National Parks – for the few or the many?

Private school opens outdoor campus in the Cairngorms

JAMES HAMILTON

IT is a new centre that aims to give students a real breath of fresh air.

Kelvinside Academy in Glasgow has opened a new Wilderness Campus in Cairngorms National Park, thanks to a generous six-figure donation from former rector, John Duff.

The launch of the campus is part of a wide-ranging educational strategy implemented throughout the school since the appointment of rector Ian Munro two years ago, which seeks to add genuine breadth and innovation to the curriculum.

The 36-year-old, who is the youngest headmaster of any HMC independent school in the world, said: "We are indebted to John Duff. His generosity will play a defining role in the education of our pupils for generations to come."

He added: "A growing body of educational research provides a clear rationale for working with youngsters in the outdoors. Doing so brings the curriculum alive, it aids an understanding of the natural environment and related issues of sustainability, and it supports the development of confidence and resilience through adventure and expedition. Indeed, I believe a significant part of learning and growth should happen outside the classroom."

Situated in Strathdon, just two miles from the Lecht Ski Centre, the campus will give pupils year-round access to mountain ranges, glens, forests and rivers. A full-time head of outdoor learning, Bex Currie, has been appointed to head up the campus.



■ Kelvinside Academy pupils will take part in a range of activities at the school's Wilderness Campus in Cairngorm National Park.



■ The adventures are said to help develop confidence.



■ The base for outdoor activity was funded by donation from former rector.

I was struck

by the contrast been this story in the Herald last week and the story the week before about the children from the east end of Glasgow who had never seen the sea ([see here](#)). While Kelvinside Academy has set up its own outdoor centre in what used to be the Allargue Arms Hotel at Corgarff ([see here for planning application](#)) in the Cairngorms National Park, Glasgow City Council, has just one outdoor centre left at Blairvadich ([see here](#)), in our other National Park, to cater for its THIRTY-SEVEN secondary schools .

Scotland, in the 1970s, had a legitimate claim to have the best outdoor education provision in the world. The Regional Councils led the way and in Strathclyde the aspiration was that every primary and every secondary school child should have a week in an outdoor residential centre. Residential outdoor centres sprang up all over Scotland – many in what are now our National Parks – and Moray House became a world leader in outdoor education training. These aspirations for outdoor education were still strong at the turn of the century. I remember discussing within SNH, when I was on their Board, how a good measure for the new Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park would be if every child living in the Clyde conurbation spent a week in the National Park at some point during their time at school.

We are now miles from those aspirations. The abolition of the Regional Councils resulted in many Council outdoor education centres being closed on grounds of affordability, a process which has continued to this day. The West Dunbartonshire Council Centre at Ardlui, in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park, was closed in 2015 to save £110k, despite public protest, removing the opportunity for children in the poorest part of the National Park to immerse themselves in the outdoors on their doorstep.

The collapse in Council provision has been accentuated by tighter regulation following the Lyme Bay canoeing disaster – this increased costs for adventurous activities and made it much more difficult for teachers, who are under all sorts of other pressures, to contribute – and the ideology that private provision is better. While a number of private outdoor centres have sprung up to “replace” what has been lost, what they offer is often significantly different to what the council run centres do: short taster sessions and activities in manufactured surroundings (obstacle courses and the like) rather than adventurous activities like a kayak trip across a sea loch or down a river. Council Centres such as Blairvadach continue to be exemplars in that respect.

There have been a number of notable initiatives against the tide. In a few cases Outdoor Education Centres have been saved by voluntary effort, the former Fife Council Centre at Ardroy, at Lochgoilhead, in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park being a good example – saved by hundreds of hours of unpaid labour by dedicated individuals. And then there are brilliant initiatives like Backbone which have been training up people from Black and Ethnic Minority Communities to help people from their communities to enjoy the countryside. In the big schemes of things, however, most children have nothing like the opportunities they had 30 years ago to experience the great outdoors.

These changes have been accompanied, and partly justified, by a change in ideology. For the last ten

years its no longer outdoor education which is important but outdoor learning:

curric

Vision and rationale

Vision

Our vision for outdoor learning in Scotland is that:

- all children and young people are participating in a range of outdoor learning experiences which are clearly part of the curriculum
- schools and centres are providing regular, frequent, embedded outdoor learning opportunities for children and young people to learn outdoors throughout the year
- teachers and educators embed outdoor learning in the curriculum so that outdoor learning becomes a reality for all children and young people

Outdoor learning just happens to be much cheaper – there are now even people who advocate outdoor schools for children because it would save the costs of providing proper buildings ([see here](#)). It appears that our National Parks have partly bought in to this change in ideology. Back in 2010, our National Parks joined with SNH to launch an initiative on Outdoor Learning in Our National Parks ([see here](#)) and both Parks have produced a number of resources for teachers while the LLTNPA has a dedicated Outdoor Learning Team ([see here](#)). Despite this – and some fantastic efforts from the individual staff concerned – there has been a lamentable lack of progress to achieve the Scottish

Government watered down vision for Outdoor Learning. The evidence – the children from the east end of Glasgow who have never seen the sea. Instead of a week in the outdoors, many children now get nothing.

While our National Parks were never resourced to provide outdoor education – and the closure of centres is not directly their responsibility – they could have been making a powerful case about trends in who has been getting out to the countryside and the impact of cuts on this. It should not be too difficult for example to collate the evidence on the impact of the closure of outdoor centres and to present this to Councils and the Scottish Government. While not quite brave enough to do this, at least the CNPA in their Partnership Plan recognises there is an equality issue about who is able to access the National Park and has devised some initiatives to tackle this.

Whatever efforts individual staff members within the LLTNPA have been making in this respect, however, have been greatly outweighed by other processes for which the LLTNPA has been responsible. As Planning Authority it has consented for over 1000 camping places to be replaced by luxury lodges and chalets, which effectively exclude a significant proportion of the population from the Clyde conurbation, and now through the camping byelaws are excluding this section of the population further – for those young people lucky enough to enjoy a few days in an Outdoor Education Centre its now much harder to follow this up by going out and doing it yourself. Moreover there have just been two applications from Duke of Edinburgh and Scout expeditions to camp in permits zones this year and the camping byelaws appear to have caused a collapse in the number of expeditions to the National Park. Its not worth the hassle of trying to apply for free places: there was no mention of this in the LLTNPA's first annual report to Ministers on the impact of the byelaws.

What needs to happen

Equity of resource provision and access to nature is something that all our Public Authorities and the Scottish Government should be thinking about as they celebrate 2018 the Year of Young People:

A global first, the Year of Young People 2018 will provide a platform to showcase the personalities, talents and achievements of Scotland's young people.

On the Scottish Government website there is nothing about the resources that would be needed to enable EVERY Young Person in Scotland to fulfil their potential. I am reminded of Jimmy Reid's comment to the effect that every tower block in Govan was crammed full of people who could have been great composers, writers, artists, athletes etc but never had the opportunity. We are denying the opportunity for many young people to experience or enjoy the outdoors.

So how about our National Parks leading the call for an Outdoor Education Pupil Equity fund – in addition to the £120 million Pupil Equity Fund the Scottish Government is contributing over three years to close the attainment gap – to close the gap between Glasgow City Council and Kelvinside Academy? Private schools recognise the importance and value of outdoor education and its time this was properly resourced once more in the state sector – with our National Parks providing the obvious places to do this

And how about the LLTNPA, in order to make a real contribution to the Year of Young People,

agreeing to abolish permit charges for every young person under 21 and allowing supervised expeditions to camp anywhere in the management zones without permission? That would be a good first step towards abolishing the socially discriminatory byelaws entirely.

Category

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Tags

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Author

nickkempe

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