

# High Quality Adventure For All

## - What Does It Look Like?

by Roger Greenaway

### Overview

This article first describes a process for examining '**images of adventure**' that influence your own particular sphere of interest.

The issue of '**progression**' (outlined below) is explored in greater detail, together with the limitations of using a ladder as an image of progression in outdoor adventure.

In the section '**Total quality - how comprehensive?**' the total impact of adventure experiences on young people is considered. This is followed by '**Whose Adventure?**' which advocates the active involvement of young people in designing and reviewing their adventures. The section '**medium or message?**' recommends sitting on the fence! - "Adventure is a stimulating and flexible medium for many potential messages".

The article ends with '**images For The Future**', that (surprisingly?) have a close affinity with some 'traditional' images of adventure.

### Introduction

Whatever our particular role in outdoor adventure might be, success depends on our ability to bring about *high quality* adventure for *each* young person right from their *first* involvement.

But what is 'high quality adventure'? One person's *high* quality can be another person's *low* quality. And thanks to the diversity of human nature, and to the variety of memories, beliefs, values and expectations that shape each individual's experience (even when doing the 'same' activity), anyone attempting to define 'quality' in outdoor adventure must surely be facing an impossible challenge!

### Key Issues

#### QUALITY

'*High quality* adventure' should be available for *all* young people. What is the point of 'adventure for all' if 'high quality adventure' is reserved for a few? First experiences of outdoor adventure should not be seen as inferior (e.g. 'watered down', 'activities only' or 'taster activities'). The entry point to 'outdoor adventure' should be *high quality* - and seen as such by providers and by young people. So what does 'high quality' at the entry point look like? What is it?

#### PROGRESSION

Progression in outdoor adventure should not only be seen as skills progression - towards harder climbs, bigger rapids and more challenging expeditions. Such a progression would only be experienced by a minority, while the rest drop-out, give up or fail. By promoting a broader view of progression - both within outdoor adventure and beyond it - a great many more young people are likely to sustain an active interest in outdoor adventure and be able to build on these interests in other ways. What should progression for all look like?

But this article is more optimistic. It outlines some ways in which key aspects of quality can be captured and clarified - wherever outdoor adventure is being used to enrich young people's lives and to enhance their growth and development.

Outdoor adventure has massive potential in work with young people. But without a clear conceptual framework that is based on 'high quality adventure for all', there is a danger that 'outdoor adventure' defaults to a narrow conceptual model of progression in activity skills (perhaps influenced by governing body awards and the current nature of 'outdoor and adventure activities' in the national curriculum).

Unfortunately, 'holistic' conceptual models can seem vague and cumbersome. It is therefore important to develop images and share real examples of 'high quality adventure' that are broad, deep, rich, inclusive, accessible and inspiring. This article sets out to encourage and contribute to this process.

### **Images of adventure**

A useful starting point (in defining quality) is to ask colleagues to consider positive and negative images of outdoor adventure (in work with young people). The centre of a circle is used to collect positive images. These can be single words or headlines that depict outdoor adventure at its "best". The outside of the circle is used for placing negative images of outdoor adventure that (for whatever reason) people do not like, or want to move away from. These images may come from past or current practice, and from any perspective, such as those of young people, providers, parents, teachers, the media etc. After discussion, negotiation and adjustments, your colleagues will have created a composite image of high quality adventure (and its opposite).

The outside of the circle might well include some of the following 'negative' images ...

- **"elitist and exclusive values"**
- *macho values*, in particular, have limited appeal, are socially divisive and are not recommended for developing co-operation and teamwork! (even amongst groups that share macho values). Conversely, adventure and play have universal appeal, throughout all cultures and subcultures.
- **"contrivance and artificiality"**
- *theme park*: strap in, shut your eyes, no skill required, no decisions involved once strapped in. This is the archetypal 'Consumer Adventure' - the mirror image of 'Developmental Adventure'. Plenty of satisfied customers, with development left to chance (an outside chance).
- *adventure playground*: a great improvement on a theme park, with more scope for play and self-designed adventures, but it's a man-made environment - where's mother nature?
- **"potted and sanitised"**
- *group problem-solving tasks* with 'adventurous' story lines such as crossing an alligator-infested river on milk crates: plenty of scope for interaction and learning, but what about situations of real consequence and adventure crossing real rivers?
- **"adventure activities only"**
- *one-dimensional approaches* may provide excitement and activity skill development, but without a conscious approach to meet developmental needs, the need for new experience may be the *only* one that is met.
- **"the quick fix"**
- *isolated and expensive one-off experience*: this can often provide an active, exciting and memorable experience, but unless it is accompanied by developmental work before, during and afterwards, the outcomes are left to chance and individual initiative. This may not be a problem unless the funding came from a customer wanting results (e.g. a social work agency) and/or the provider claims to provide personal and social development.

- **"it's good for you"**
- *adults deciding everything*: most definitions of development involve people taking responsibility for their own actions and for their own learning. Therefore, if young people are simply expected to dance to a tune called by adults, developmental outcomes are severely limited. Exactly how responsibility is shared will depend on many factors, but no sharing of responsibility = limited opportunities for development.

The inside of the circle might include these more 'positive' images of adventure...

- **close to nature**
- **play in natural environment**
- **uncertainty of outcome**
- **spiritual aspect**
- **empowering philosophy**
- **young people leading**
- **contrasting worlds**
- **inspired reviewing**
- **purposeful but open-minded**
- **new dimensions**
- **open to all, support for all**
- **learning to learn from experience**



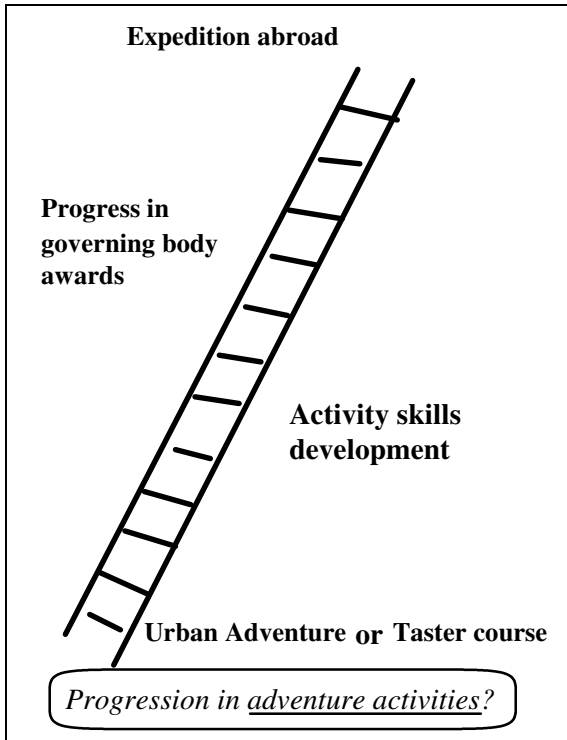
### **Progression in outdoor adventure**

One aspect of quality is that there should be opportunities for *progression*. This is often thought to mean that a young person's initial outdoor adventure should be followed by opportunities for skill development, further achievement and bigger adventures. This has been presented in the metaphor of a ladder, with expeditions abroad at the top of the ladder and with urban adventure on the lowest rungs. Although this ladder metaphor has a compelling logic, it can too easily lead to a view that diminishes the importance of young people's *first* outdoor adventure experience. High quality adventure must be readily and widely available on *all* rungs including the lowest. This is where energies, minds and resources must be concentrated if the goal of adventure opportunities *for all young people* is to be realised.

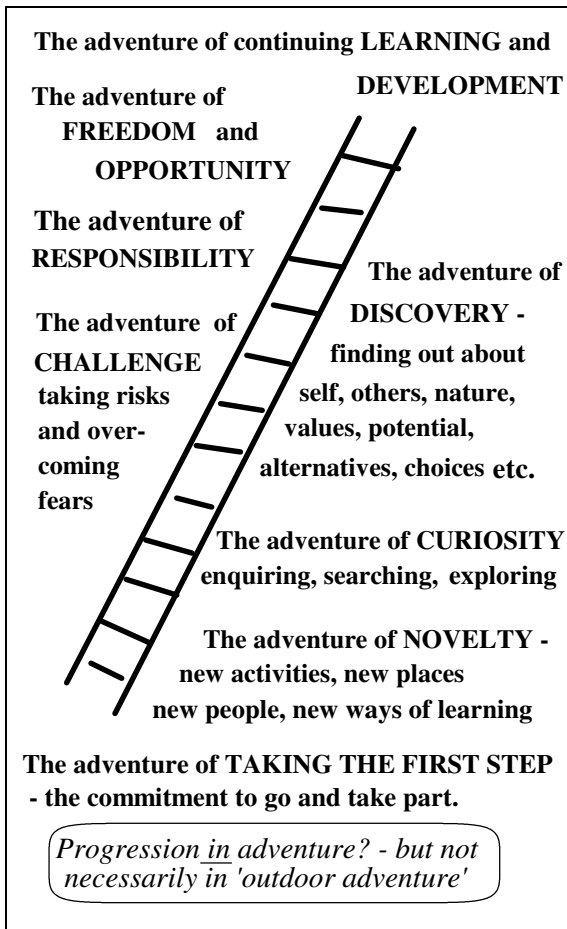
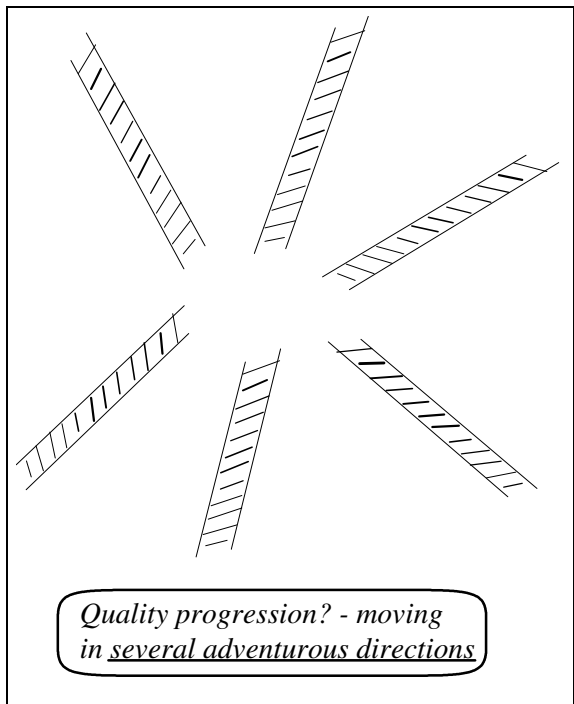
**"The first experience in the outdoors is always the most important. It has to be a positive one to ensure participants are not put off and come back again."**  
 Mohammed Dhalech in 'From Inspiration to Reality' (p.15)

It's important that opportunities for progression exist, but this can all too easily imply that real quality comes later on - *after* these early 'taster' experiences. There should, of course, be adventure right from the start and all the way through. It could even be argued that the experience of adventure actually *diminishes* as people develop their activity skills (the ladder metaphor in reverse). Too much emphasis on progression in *activities* distracts attention away from those young people who choose *not* to progress up the adventure activities ladder, but seek other kinds of progression. After all, managers returning from an outdoor management development course would be frowned upon if their action plans were all about canoeing and rock climbing and contained no goals relating their personal development or to their development as managers.

The diagrams that follow are intended to assist exploration and discussion of such issues about "progression" and "quality".



**"People have to have a sense of the possible in order to take that first difficult step."** Judy Ling Wong in 'From Inspiration to Reality' (p.7)



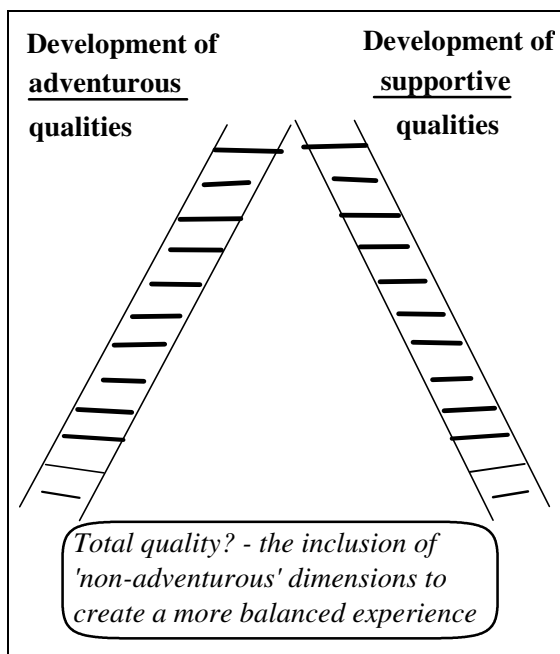
- Some follow-up options**  
(in no particular order)
- join sports club
  - join/start environmental group
  - new project at work or at school
  - voluntary work in the community
  - support and supervision at work
  - co-operative learning in school
  - student-centred learning
  - better attendance and involvement in groupwork
  - individually negotiated follow-up programme
  - better relationships with family, peers, staff, guidance teacher, keyworker, befriender etc.
  - youth action initiative
  - get organised for a special project with friends
  - raise money for new enterprise or charitable purpose
- based on 'Why Adventure' (p.10)*
- Progression from outdoor adventure? - from any point on the ladder*

### **Progression from outdoor adventure**

Given the diversity of young people, the diversity of outdoor adventure provision, and the subjective nature of adventure itself, we must recognise that there are potentially many 'high quality' routes *into, through and after* outdoor adventure. The box listing 'some follow-up options' illustrates some alternatives: drawing on the increased confidence, wider horizons and many other benefits that might arise from outdoor adventure. Underlying all these possibilities is the single principle that if young people are left stranded high and dry after an outdoor adventure with nowhere to go, then however rewarding the adventure has been, it falls short on quality. It is analogous to abandoning someone on top of a mountain without a map, supplies or route card.

### **Total quality - how comprehensive?**

'High quality' should certainly include high levels of support, trust and encouragement - without which adventurous aims are unlikely to be achieved. For many (perhaps all?) young people, it could be this 'other side' of adventure which makes it a 'high quality' experience. The following quotations outline some of the many dimensions that can contribute to the quality and value of young people's experiences in outdoor adventure settings.



### **The other side of adventure**

The *quality* of every adventure depends very much on the perception and previous experience of the 'adventurer'.

Simply *being in a group* may for some young people be a big adventure in itself. Making the adventure even bigger, through adventurous activities, may not always be appropriate. But to try matching the level of adventure to the appetites of the young people involved could mean that the 'other side' of adventure is being overlooked. For example, *the support, friendship and sense of well-being* that adventure can arouse, might be the very experiences which 'unadventurous' young people need.

Adventures don't need to be big threatening events in which the 'weak go to the wall'. The most significant experience of many adventures *in a group* is the experience of *mutual support, working together, or simply belonging*. If the *kinds* of adventure likely to happen are varied so that everyone gives or receives support at some time, then all can experience this 'lift' from others in the group. The physical adventure does not have to be the only source of good feelings.

Adventurous activity may at first appear to be valuable mainly for the 'adventurous spirit' which the experience can arouse. Adventurous activities tend to get linked with more adventurous aims such as: *becoming more confident and positive, becoming more assertive, overcoming difficulties, and breaking new ground*, but the 'other side' of adventure, though less visible, can have just as much impact, and just as much relevance - especially when the experience is suitably reviewed.

This 'other side' of adventure provides scope for aims such as: *developing greater awareness of self and others, making relationships, learning to co-operate, learning to express feelings, and the development of many attitudes and skills other than 'adventurous-looking' ones.*

based on 'The Other Side of Adventure' in 'More Than Activities' (p.60)

### **Trust, responsibility and challenge**

"What is it about the outdoors that encourages us to use it as a medium for work with young people? Is it more than being fun, adventurous and potentially dangerous? Is it just because we enjoy it ourselves? No. There is a greater value - an underlying belief that there is a curriculum built on situations which help young people to build *trust*, to develop *responsibility* and to take on a personal *challenge*."

Dave Parker in 'From Inspiration to Reality' p. 18

### **The adventure of personal and social development**

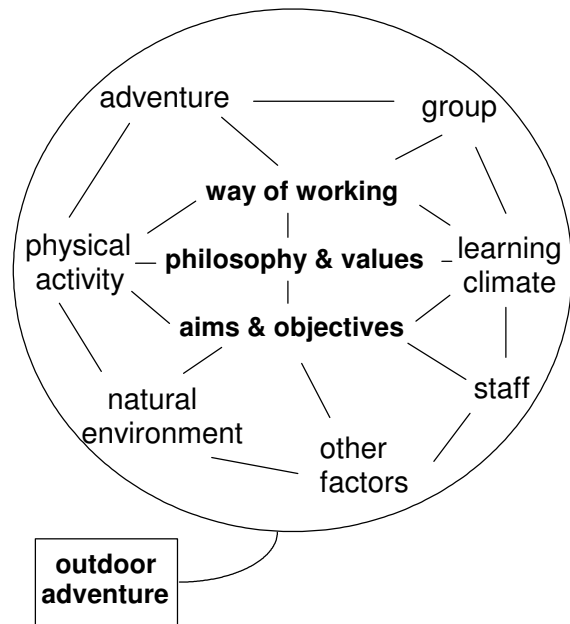
"It is when activity and review are working well together that the real adventure takes off - the adventure of personal and social development. It is an adventure which includes three interdependent elements:

- **new and challenging activities**
- **new group experiences and**
- **new ways of learning**

The challenge is to discover ways of merging these three elements rather than attempting to depend on any one model or sequence as a guide for practice. In the short term, a single element may dominate the experience, but ultimately this dynamic form of education depends on the harnessing and intermixing of these three sources of adventure: *the activity adventure, the group adventure and the learning adventure*."

from 'Reviewing Adventures' (NAOE)

In a total quality approach to outdoor adventure, participants and their mentors will be aware of these other dimensions. The 'ingredients' model opposite provides a more comprehensive view of the various dimensions that may contribute to 'total quality adventure'



The diagram above lists some of the "ingredients" which are found in varying proportions in outdoor adventure.

What most affects young people taking part in 'outdoor adventure' could be any ingredients in any combination. Which ingredients most affect them, and in what ways, will clearly depend on the nature of the event, but will also depend on the young person's previous experiences of the ingredients they encounter. For some young people, the whole experience will be new. From start to finish they might come across any or all of these new experiences:

### **New experiences in outdoor adventure**

"new environments, new activities, new challenges and responsibilities, new values, new ways of working, new staff (or the same staff behaving differently), new expectations and opportunities, new levels of support, new ways of thinking and learning, seeing new sides of others and of self, and having a new kind of group experience - as a member of a group that is going through a whole range of new experiences together."

[The model and text in this column are based on 'Why Adventure?' (p.3)]

## **Whose adventure?**

Imagine a spectrum of opportunities from self-designed, self-reliant adventures through to the 'consumer adventure' of theme parks. 'High quality adventure' is more likely to be found near the self-designed end of the spectrum. This is emphasised in the report 'From Inspiration to Reality':

### **Learners as designers**

"The strategy underlying the project is to support people in designing their own environmental adventures. It was felt that groups would be more likely to continue and repeat the projects if they had generated the idea themselves."

Jessica Knight (p.9)

"Equal opportunities demands the sharing of power by ... [*amongst other items listed*] involving participants in the design of the activity."

Di Collins (p.20)

Young adventurers should also be encouraged to sustain their creative influence when *reviewing* their adventures:

### **Learners creating their own stories**

New experiences will be more valuable if there are also good opportunities to tell new stories.

Many of our experiences tend to get squeezed into ready-made storylines which don't do justice to the experience. People whose "stories" have got into the papers know all too well how their own personal experience can get distorted to fit what the newspaper wants to tell its readers. The new world that activities can open up would be lost or trivialised in a similar way if we rush to squeeze new experiences into clichéd storylines.

Stories are more likely to fit new experiences if they are original and home-grown.

'More Than Activities' (p.15)

## **Adventure - medium or message?**

**"There is a need to move away from dated understandings of outdoor education as being 'good for you'."**

Debra Park and Kevin Pearson in 'From Inspiration to Reality' (p.11)

Some people emphasise the value of adventure in itself - as an alternative to illegal adventures or to a lethargic lifestyle. But however effective adventure might actually be in changing such lifestyles, there remain a great many young people who fall into neither category - and who simply enjoy opportunities for adventure. Such young people already have 'the message' - and may simply lack opportunities and resources to take their natural interest further.

On the other hand, those who advocate adventure as a *medium* rather than as a message, emphasise the *flexible* nature of adventure as a vehicle for working with young people. As a *medium*, outdoor adventure has something to offer *all* young people. The flexibility of the medium can mean that the 'message' may be very different from one person to another.

**"Adventure is a vehicle rather than an end in itself."** Elaine Willis in 'From Inspiration to Reality' (p.5)

One problem with seeing outdoor adventure as a 'medium' or as a 'vehicle' is that it may seem to reduce the outdoors to *nothing more than* a means to an end. Are there not important lessons to learn from and about the 'medium' itself? What about the spiritual qualities of outdoor adventure captured in the writings of explorers and poets? How can something so special be reduced to a 'vehicle' to serve some other purpose?

But it is precisely because of its capacity to inspire, that this 'vehicle' has such potential as an educational medium. Adventure is *both* a medium *and* a message - or, rather, a stimulating and flexible medium for *many* potential messages.

### **Images for the future**

Traditional images of adventure permeate our culture. They have a continuing influence on how outdoor adventure is

used as an educational medium. *Some* aspects of these traditional images could help to breathe back the spirit of adventure into current practice. For example, the fact that many famous adventurers were taking part in *self-designed* adventures, seems to have escaped the attention of many adventure practitioners. Famous adventurers also have these strange habits of making notes and drawings, keeping a diary, taking photographs, making tape recordings and video recordings. With the help of these audio-visual aids they are better able to convey the magic (and meaning) of their experiences to others when they return. These kinds of commitment to the *reviewing* of adventures would certainly add considerably to the *quality* and *value* of young people's experiences of outdoor adventure!

There are clearly some traditions in adventure that could inspire and benefit future practice. But there are other aspects of traditional adventure which need replacing with *new* images - ones that add to the appeal and value of outdoor adventure *as an educational medium for all young people*.

One of the key indicators of 'high quality adventure' is that providers *and* young people have a "more than activities" perspective. We should therefore encourage the finding, developing, publicising and rewarding of practices that cross disciplines. We need more *pictures of practice* that illustrate holistic and integrated approaches to outdoor adventure that are both *attractive* to a wide range of young people and are *effective* in achieving a wide range of purposes. These pictures of practice should demonstrate that *all* young people can find inspirational routes *into, through* and *beyond* their outdoor adventures.

**"What is needed is people who do not just lead the activity for its own sake, but who can provide other experiences relevant to the young people's lives"**

Judy Ling Wong in 'From Inspiration to Reality' p.7

The research review 'Why Adventure?' contains many such pictures of practice - where boundaries have been crossed

and young people have benefited. The recipe for successful practice often turns out to be a focused but multidisciplinary approach. To conclude, here is one picture of practice that illustrates some of the points made above.

### **Dreams Come True**

The story telling engaged the young people at their first meeting, and encouraged them to write to 'Trapper Phil' themselves. They asked him, "*Is Isobel's Dream true?*"

His response arrived in time for the next group meeting: "*The dream may be true, but how do I know I can trust you?*"

He then set them a number of tasks, such as: "*Draw portraits of each other and tell me what your Indian names are.*"

Over the next month letters were exchanged between Trapper Phil and the group. The programme which evolved provided the group with the skills to unravel the mystery, and prepare for an overnight camp.

The group received a map, and set off on a forest trail which led them to the edge of the loch. Trapper Phil was on an island close by, sitting by the bothy, smoke coming from the chimney. The group recognised the scene from the Dream and raised his attention by singing a tribal chant.

Around the fire that night he told them the final part of the story, which revealed the remaining clues. The treasure was eventually found at dawn on the morning of the summer solstice.

Part of an account of work with young people 'at risk' in 'Going Places' (p.8)

In the project described in the box headed 'Dreams Come True', "all the elements of a structured programme existed: a priority issue, a target group, a planning session, a progressive design. Life was breathed into these bare bones by the creative use of an adventure theme. It involved the energy and creativity of staff and young people throughout the adventure." ['Going Places' p.8]

We need a system for encouraging and publicising more such creative uses of the outdoors if we want our dreams and inspirations to become a reality. Without the sharing of more such pictures, we can't expect others to understand what we mean by 'high quality adventure' nor understand why we believe that such quality will help to make our dream of *adventure for all* come true.

#### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge the influence and inspiration of the Foundation for Outdoor Adventure, especially Elaine Willis and Roger Putnam, and those who attended the Millennium Seminar in June 1996. However the views expressed are my own, and should not be taken to represent the views of others.

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Willis E., and Russell D. (Eds.) (1995) *'From Inspiration to Reality: Opening up adventure for all'*, Foundation for Outdoor Adventure.

[The Report of a conference to explore equal opportunity issues as they relate to young people's involvement in outdoor adventure. The conference was jointly organised by the National Association for Outdoor Education (NAOE)\* and the Foundation for Outdoor Adventure with the support of a grant from the Sports Council.]

\* The 'NAOE' has evolved into 'AfOL' and now IOL. See <http://www.outdoor-learning.org>

#### **Author's Notes**

Dr. Roger Greenaway is a training consultant and author of books about reviewing. Through 'Reviewing Skills Training' he promotes methods of work that enable people of all abilities to use their experiences as a major source of learning, development and empowerment.

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