

Outdoor Youth Programs Research Partnership: Executive Summary

Aim: To establish an Australian evidence base for the benefits of structured outdoor and nature-based programs on the skills, health and wellbeing of young people.

Rationale: Each year in Victoria alone, over 100,000 young people take part in outdoor and nature-based programs, ranging from 1-day activities to week-long residential camps, and multi-week outdoor expeditions. Australia-wide, millions of dollars are invested annually in these programs. To date, there is little robust evidence about the benefits of such programs.

The Partnership aims to address this gap, by establishing a program of research that will provide quality evidence of the extent to which outdoor and nature-based programs are associated with reliable improvements in the resilience, learning and wellbeing of young people. Specifically, it will aim to provide new knowledge about what programs work, for which young people, in terms of which outcomes.

The results will enhance the capacity of government and the outdoor sector to make decisions about the future allocation of resources, to influence policy and to enhance practice. The program will also build capacity in the research sector for expanding quality research in this field.

Research Activities 2009-2010: The first 15-month phase of activity concerns scoping research and capacity building. The research team will collect description data and develop and test a research protocol for evaluating the impact of outdoor youth programs. This will provide the foundations for securing funding for the longer-term research program (2011-2015).

Short Term Outcomes (subject to level of Phase 1 funding) will include: development of a study design protocol that can be used in subsequent work; descriptive information about the nature of programs currently being offered and their participants; documentation of the state of international knowledge in the field; and submission of 1-2 papers for publication in scientific journals. A workshop for Partners and key stakeholders will review the policy and practical implications arising from this work.

Partnership Members: include

- the Outdoor Education Group, the YMCA and Operation Newstart who offer outdoor programs to young people;
- the Department of Planning and Community Development (Sport & Recreation Victoria), the People and Parks Foundation, the Victorian Outdoor Education Association and the Australian Camps Association who support the provision of outdoor programs and provide links to the broader community through the government, corporate, not-for-profit and outdoor industry sectors, and
- researchers from the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute (MCRI), the Centre for Adolescent Health, Royal Children's Hospital, the University of Melbourne and ORYGEN Youth Health Research Centre.

Significance: Outdoor and nature-based programs represent one of the most promising and cost-effective avenues for delivering whole-of-community youth wellbeing initiatives. This research will undertake the first studies in Australia (and amongst the few internationally) to determine the long-term impact of these approaches and their potential for universal prevention and enhancing the skills, health and wellbeing of young Australians.