

Outdoor Youth Programs Research Partnership

To establish an Australian evidence base for the benefits of structured outdoor and nature-based programs on the wellbeing of young people

Background

Each year in Victoria alone, over 100,000 young people take part in outdoor education camps and nature-based personal development programs. Australia-wide, millions of dollars are invested annually by secondary schools and community youth groups in the provision of outdoor experiences for teens. These range from 1-day activity programs to week-long residential camps, and multi-week outdoor expeditions.

While promising, the benefits of outdoor programs to young people remain largely unknown

The impact of these programs is poorly understood. A recent review commissioned by the Outdoor Council of Australia¹ reported the potential for gains in social, psychological, physical and spiritual health, as well as personal values development and environmental learning. It concluded that outdoor programs may be effective avenues for learning and development.

However, these conclusions are based on limited evidence, often lacking in scientific rigour. Robust empirical studies have been rare. Importantly, no large scale, community-based research has ever been undertaken in Australia to assess the impact of outdoor programs on a broad range of outcomes for young people.

*A **Partnership** of researchers, service agencies, government, corporate, not-for-profit and outdoor industry sectors*

This Partnership brings together key stakeholders involved in the support and provision of outdoor youth programs with leading researchers in adolescent health and wellbeing. The partnership seeks to develop a program of research that will establish Australian evidence of the potential for such programs to promote the resilience, learning and wellbeing of young people. (See Attachment One).

To build research and workforce capacity

The program of research developed and undertaken by the Partnership will provide the first robust Australian evidence of the positive impacts of youth participation in structured outdoor and nature-based programs.

¹ Dickson TJ, Gray T & Mann K for the Outdoor Council of Australia. (2008). *Australian Outdoor Adventure Activity Benefits Catalogue, August 2008*. University of Canberra.

Key Research Questions

The research will seek answers to the following questions:

Does participation in structured outdoor and nature-based programs promote resilience, learning and wellbeing in young people?

If so, which young people show the greatest benefits?

What features of these programs are associated with the greatest benefits?

How enduring are any observed benefits?

A First Step ...

Support is sought from the Partnership to provide seed funding, expertise and practical resources for 15 months (1 October 2009 – 31 December 2010) to undertake and complete four key activities:

Seed funding

Expertise

Resources

for initial work

Oct 2009 – Dec 2010

- Dissemination of findings from recent Australian research investigating the potential of outdoor youth experiences to enhance psychological wellbeing.
- New scoping research to provide the Partnership with early findings and to address practical questions about the best way to collect evidence on the impact of outdoor programs.
- Development of detailed plans for a five-year program of research that will formally address the research questions.
- Submission of proposals to a range of research, philanthropic and corporate organisations to attract core funding for the longer term program of research.

(See Attachment Two).

Guiding Principles

A staged approach is necessary to build a quality evidence base.

To successfully attract the funding required for high quality studies of the effects of outdoor experiential programs, the Partnership must be able to demonstrate to potential funders:

Quality research

Requires a stepped approach, building initial evidence of expertise and feasibility

- that the research team has expertise in each element of the proposed research;
- a scientifically robust, well-designed research plan; and
- initial data to support the feasibility of the research.

Multiple funding avenues

Research funding is highly competitive. While the research team has an established history of attracting large scale research grants, the current economic climate presents challenges.

Multiple applications to a range of potential funders will be required to support the Partnership's longer term research program. The sources and types of funding that will be considered are presented in the Attachment Four.

Policy and practice relevance

A shared goal of the Partnership is to provide new evidence relevant to the Australian (and broader international) context that will inform future policy and practice.

We will seek evidence that outdoor experiential programs can make a difference to the lives of young people. In particular, we will ask:

What programs work?

For which individuals?

Under what circumstances?

This will put partners in a stronger position to advocate for the future allocation of resources, to influence sector-relevant policy and to enhance local practice.

The ultimate goal of the Partnership is to identify effective mechanisms for promoting resilience, learning and wellbeing among youth through outdoor and nature-based programs.

Early dissemination & capacity building

To achieve this goal, the Partnership is committed to ensuring value for investment. The partners will jointly identify the practical outcomes to be achieved across the scoping period (examples in Attachment Three).

*...for future research
...for improved practice*

To ensure early benefits to partners, there will be a focus on disseminating current knowledge, collecting data of immediate relevance, and supporting partners in applying this knowledge within their respective organisations.

An important outcome of the research program will be capacity building for future research and for improved practice across the outdoor sectors.

Getting Started

- Formalise the Partnership
- Establish Terms of Reference
- Identify contributions in the form of cash and practical (in-kind) supports
- Develop an agreed timeline of activities including deliverables and reporting mechanisms.



Contact for more information

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NOTE: due to overseas travel commitments in August-September,
please try email contact in the first instance.

Attachment One: Proposed Partnership Members

<p>Murdoch Childrens Research Institute, the Centre for Adolescent Health, Royal Children’s Hospital and the University of Melbourne</p>	<p>A/Prof Jan Nicholson Ian Williams Dr Craig Olsson</p>	 
<p>University of Melbourne and ORYGEN Youth Health Research Centre</p>	<p>A/Prof Nick Allen</p>	 
<p>Australian Camps Association</p>	<p>David Petherick</p>	
<p>Outdoor Education Group</p>	<p>Kurt Martin Mark Newnham Nick Owen</p>	
<p>Operation Newstart</p>	<p>Phil Wheatley</p>	
<p>People and Parks Foundation</p>	<p>Jenny Holliday</p>	
<p>Department of Planning and Community Development (Sport and Recreation Victoria)</p>	<p>David Strickland</p>	 
<p>Victorian Outdoor Education Association</p>	<p>Tony Carden</p>	
<p>YMCA</p>	<p>Brendan Smith</p>	

The research team 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 will guide the development and implementation of an appropriate and achievable research method, ensure the prompt dissemination of practical research findings, and seek long-term funding from appropriate research and philanthropic sources. Ian Williams will oversee, coordinate and facilitate the day-to-day project tasks of the initiative.

The **Outdoor Education Group, YMCA** and **Operation Newstart** offer outdoor programs to young people. These organisations will play a key role in facilitating practical aspects of the research agenda such as supporting participant recruitment, program delivery, collection of participant data, and school liaison. The wealth of experience within these organisations in working with young people in the outdoors will prove invaluable in helping to direct a relevant, meaningful and feasible research program.

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** will provide critical links to the broader community through the government, corporate, not-for-profit and outdoor industry sectors. These partners will help to ensure that the research questions and methods have relevance to policy and practice, and that new learnings are rapidly disseminated to those who will benefit most from them.

This Partnership will realise a key recommendation from the 2008 Report for the Outdoor Council of Australia:²

“...what this review highlights is the need to establish a strategic interdisciplinary research agenda within which researchers, programs and activity providers, land managers, policy advisors and other key stakeholders may conduct research and evaluation, and then disseminate the knowledge for others to build on.” (p. iv)

² Dickson TJ, Gray T & Mann K for the Outdoor Council of Australia. (2008). *Australian Outdoor Adventure Activity Benefits Catalogue, August 2008*. University of Canberra.

Attachment Two: Phases of the Research Program

Phase One: Scoping Research October 2009 – December 2010

Develop a program of high quality, fundable research to evaluate the impact of structured outdoor and nature-based programs on youth resilience, learning and wellbeing.

The aim will be to demonstrate the Partnership's expertise in this field and collect initial data that will enhance the chances of obtaining long-term funding. This phase will involve pilot research, submission of several funding applications and practical outputs (scientific publications, reports, design of a research methodology and a workshop for partners).

Funding Required: \$90,000

Funding in excess of this goal will enable more rapid progress and a negotiated expansion of Phase One activities.

Phase Two: Effects of Existing Programs 2011 – 2012

Undertake a large study of the experiences of young people participating in existing structured outdoor and nature-based programs.

The aim will be to identify associations between program participation, program characteristics and changes in young people's resilience, learning and wellbeing.

Funding Required: \$250,000

Broad estimate only.
Aim to be >80% grant funded.

Phase Three: Evaluation Study 2013 – 2015

Undertake the first ever study to formally evaluate the impact of structured outdoor and nature-based programs on young people's resilience, learning and wellbeing, using a large community sample and employing a randomised controlled trial design (RCT).

This study will assess whether participation in programs produces reliable changes in young people's resilience, learning and wellbeing compared to young people not attending such programs, and whether these changes are maintained over the longer term.

Funding Required: \$650,000

Broad estimate only.
Aim to be 100% grant funded.

Phases Two and Three will provide opportunities to expand our capacity for additional research through training a team of researchers and graduate students.

By **Phase Three** we will be able to develop and undertake other projects in this field.

At each Phase there will be the opportunity for Partner organisations to separately commission and fund targeted projects of relevance to their sector.

Attachment Three: Proposed Timeline, Activities and Outcomes for the Scoping Phase

Phase One: October 2009 – December 2010

The goal of this phase of the research partnership is **to develop** a long-term **program of high quality, fundable research** to evaluate the potential benefits of outdoor experiential programs on the resilience, learning and wellbeing of young Australians.

To achieve this goal, the following activities are proposed:

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|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publication in the scientific literature of the findings from the researchers' recent work that suggests participation in outdoor programs may enhance young people's mental health and wellbeing. | Submit for journal review by
December 2009 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of a formal research proposal for the major study to commence in 2011. This includes identifying existing outdoor programs and participant groups for the research and identifying key methods for collecting data (including measurement tools for assessing program characteristics and participant outcomes). | Major competitive funding application to be submitted by
March 2010
Submitted to other potential funders as opportunities arise |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparation and submission of funding applications to key research, philanthropic and industry organisations. | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publication in the scientific literature of the researchers' work identifying the elements of outdoor programs that are likely to contribute to promoting participants' mental health and wellbeing. | Submit for journal review by
April 2010 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of research protocols and measurement instruments. | By April 2010 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pilot study to test the feasibility of the research methods across several outdoor programs and to collect initial data. | April – August 2010 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mid-program Progress Report to research partners. | 31 May 2010 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of grant submissions, incorporating pilot study evidence. | July 2010 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis and write-up of pilot study findings. | September 2010 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workshop for Research Partnership members and other stakeholders to review the practical and policy implications arising from pilot study findings. | November 2010 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final Report to Research Partnership | 31 December 2010 |

Attachment Four: Summary of Possible Future Funding Sources

For many potential funding schemes, evidence of *existing* funding from community partners *increases the chances of a successful application*. Some schemes explicitly match the amount of community partners' contributions, which may be in the form of monetary contributions alone, or in combination with in-kind contributions.

The ARC Linkage Project Funding is one such scheme. Contributions, including partner in-kind contributions, count towards the funding level the ARC will match. This scheme also has a higher rate of funding success than other schemes. These features make it a priority target for seeking Phase 2 and Phase 3 funding.

FUNDER/ DATES	NOTES
<p>ARC Linkage March & November <i>Appropriate for Phases 2 and 3.</i></p>	<p>To encourage and develop long-term strategic research alliances between higher education organisations and other organisations, including within industry and end-users, in order to apply advanced knowledge to problems and to provide national economic, social or cultural benefits. Funding is matched to the <i>financial and in-kind contributions from partners</i>.</p> <p>www.arc.gov.au/ncgp</p>
<p>BeyondBlue Various dates <i>Appropriate for Phases 2 and 3.</i></p>	<p>Small grants of up to \$100,000, awarded for an initial 12-month period, which may be renewable. New researchers are encouraged to apply for innovative projects and preference is given where there is <i>demonstrated support from an existing organisation</i>.</p> <p>Large grants of more than \$100,000 per year, which can be offered for up to three years. The <i>availability of partnerships, financial or 'in-kind' contributions</i> are taken into account with applications for large grants.</p> <p>Consortia grants of up to \$500,000 per year to undertake research in Victoria on issues of national significance.</p> <p>www.beyondblue.org.au</p>
<p>Cass Foundation September <i>Appropriate for Phase 2, possibly Phase 3.</i></p>	<p>(Victoria) For research and development in education, science and medicine. Funding <i>in conjunction with government or other public or private organisations</i> preferred.</p> <p>Priorities: innovative; replicable by others; sustainable; likely to provide a substantial benefit to the Australian community; amenable to collaboration; expected to assist disadvantaged groups.</p> <p>www.cassfoundation.org</p>

FUNDER/ DATES	NOTES
<p>ANZ Trustees</p> <p>Various dates.</p> <p><i>Could provide part funding for Phase 1-2.</i></p>	<p>Administers over 40 grant programs; grants can range from \$1,000 to \$5 million. Each grant program has its own guidelines and closing date for applications. Those appropriate for this research include:</p> <p>William Buckland Foundation (applications each January, April, July & October); Alfred Felton Bequest (April, small grants, up to \$10K; September, major grants); Ivor Ronald Evans Foundation (September, fund \$120,000 in total per year).</p> <p>www.anz.com/anztrustees/</p>
<p>NHMRC Research Grants</p> <p>March.</p> <p><i>Appropriate for Phase 3.</i></p>	<p>Highly prestigious. The NHMRC offers a variety of health and medical research funding schemes, including for post-doctoral research fellows, and project grants. The project grants scheme is highly competitive, and would be suitable for funding Phase 3.</p> <p>www.nhmrc.gov.au/grants/</p>

Progress to Date: Expression of Interest to VicHealth 3 August, 2009

We have already taken our first steps towards attracting external funding. VicHealth is seeking research partners to undertake health-related research funded under the Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Projects scheme. We submitted an Expression of Interest through the University of Melbourne for VicHealth to consider supporting our Research Partnership.

The application included a summary of the importance of the research, research plan and members of the Partnership. Should this be accepted by VicHealth, the next stage will be for members of this Partnership to meet with VicHealth to plan the joint application for the ARC Linkage Project. This would seek funding for Phase Two.