

## **Social welfare through wilderness**

by Jo Roberts

Working outdoors with people is not only good for the soul, but increasingly it is being recognised as a benefit that improves social and personal well being, addresses ongoing costs to social and health care and ultimately can save money. Why? Because the evidence of this being an effective therapeutic environment with long lasting effects is growing across Europe.

Working with other organisations such as The Pan Parks Foundation, we are exploring ways of demonstrating how the protection of unique and heritage wilderness areas in Europe can have a ripple effect in social capital for governments, alongside local communities. We are tying together how we will benefit people, alongside our primary goals of protecting landscape and biodiversity. It is a critical approach in this era of financial austerity where environment takes the last seat on the bus of employment and economic concerns, if at all.

The Wilderness Foundation, both in the UK and South Africa, alongside Wild in the USA, are partner organisations. Our history in delivering work in the outdoors is starting to be as old as the hills now. The Wilderness Foundation originated in South Africa in the 1950s and was founded in the UK in 1976. Over 50,000 have experienced our experiential journeys into the wild.

Our aim is to preserve the world's last remaining wild places by raising awareness of their intrinsic value and highlighting their essential role in maintaining the health of our environment, our communities and ourselves. We achieve this through a programme of wilderness- and nature-based projects that address a spectrum of social issues, from youth crime and vulnerable youth leaving care, general mental and physical wellbeing, building peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland, as well as facilitating youth leadership development. In South Africa, wilderness, employability enhancement and poverty are aligned together to produce some remarkable outcomes for people and Nature.

Our work recognises and is addressing the widening gap in both people's connection to nature and the amount of time people spend outdoors in an increasingly urbanised society in the UK and the world in general. In fact, a myriad of surveys now show that children are now living lives with almost no connection to Nature at all. Richard Louv, talks about the lifestyles of some children as living in 'well meaning, protective house arrest'. This is particularly acute in the USA and the UK.

Alongside nature-deficit disorder in children and adults alike, we are experiencing the largest urban population in the history of humanity, with population increasing dramatically on a global scale. There is recent evidence (1) linking urbanised living to mental health problems and other issues, such as social disengagement, a sense of lack of belonging, lack of healthy activity, sustainable skills and/or employment readiness, particularly in young people. These have far reaching consequences for health services and national and local economies.

In this complex world, our wilderness work and journeys remain simple and deliberately unstructured, well planned, but safely managed. Based on years of experience with a mix of client groups we see

evidence of increase in social and personal skills, confidence, self awareness and reflection. Respect for self, others and the natural world are key outcomes. An environmental ethic of 'Leave No Trace' runs throughout our programmes – and participants can experience the peace and wonder of beautiful outdoor spaces for the first time.

Most of our work engages groups across the UK, including Scotland and Northern Ireland. We make extensive use, with minimal impact of course, of the wildest parts of Europe and South Africa where we can find using sea, mountains and rivers as home for our programmes. Currently we are exploring options with the Pan Parks Foundation, such as Majella in Italy and potentially Estonia.

### **Case Study : The TurnAround Programme**

Since 2002, following the example of South African partners engaged in nature-based youth work, and closely following the death of Damilola Taylor ( a young Nigerian teenager who was stabbed in Peckham,London) we began to explore the best way to affect highly vulnerable young people in the UK, so that they could gain essential skills: the confidence to make good choices, envision and set goals, become self sufficient and take emotional control, self care, feel supported by a community, and understand the meaning of healthy relationships. Of interest to Government and decision makers, was our focus on preparing these young people, who are often out of education and training, to be employable and to sustain themselves and future families.

Based on our research, we launched TurnAround in 2007 and have entered our fourth cycle with very positive results.

TurnAround is a 9-12 month programme incorporating two wilderness trails, personalised weekly mentoring by adult volunteers drawn from local communities, monthly personal development and nature-based activity workshops, apprenticeships and work experience support, as well as individual and group therapy where required. Each young person has a personalised care plan and family support is given as and when needed. To date we have worked with two age groups – 14-17 year olds and 16-20 year olds. We seem to work best with the hardest to reach young people, often the ones that everyone else has given up on. Current research we have conducted over the past few months in response to the recession, (3) has evidenced that there is a need to include 13-15 year olds in our programmes. A new Lottery funded programme commences in October for this age range.

Participants on TurnAround are currently referred to us by Youth Offending Teams, Leaving Care Teams, youth agencies, individual families and school exclusion units. Most youth we work with suffer from antisocial behaviour, anger management problems, poor communication and social skills, learning difficulties, violence and knife crime, drug and alcohol abuse, and have very little family support.

Our success is due to our highly personalised approach and the intergenerational aspect of our work; mixing our participant youth with a wide range of adult mentors, professional staff, and volunteers who contribute life experience, role modelling, general support and expertise, help build aspiration, and offer kindness.

However, it is the immersion in wild nature that is the most long lasting, memorable and strength building element of it all. Four years on, young people still talk with deep pride about their long journeys into the mountains, how the group managed itself and their environment, learned to work with what Nature threw at us, rather than fighting against the storms. We also learned to care about each other in a way that a hotel conference room could never compare against. It gave back a human element of mutual cooperation and at times a spirit of survival.

Since 2011, we are working more with young people who have been in care as families could not cope with their circumstances. These young people display more exaggerated emotional problems, including issues of belonging, identity, taking personal responsibility, poor social and practical skills and a deep sense of rejection, often linked with anger. In many ways they are our most vulnerable participants and one of our most successful groups to evidence self-efficacy and confidence growth whilst being engaged. Their attachment and connection to nature is more evident and powerful – Nature does not judge, or reject, or manipulate. It is tough but straight forward and if you treat it with respect you come out fine. It is such an anti-thesis to the abuse they have experienced from humans.

All work is monitored and evaluated extensively by Essex University. The outcomes, for example from TurnAround 1 in 2007, demonstrated significant increases in self-esteem and mood whilst part of the programme, and 80% of graduates continued on into further education and employment, with 80% having no further contact with the police. We continue our relationship with most graduates and measurement is over three years to evaluate long term effect. (2)

There is much more work to be done to build up the evidence required to persuade Governments that Nature has a social benefit value as well as simply being a value such as ecosystem services. We are seeking further funding to conduct even more comprehensive research into all work taking place across Europe to measure and evaluate how best Nature cures much of our social disease.

If we can achieve this, we create an agenda of understanding for the need for wilderness protection, in a world where decision makers' primary goals are for people. Hopefully, through our work, the ultimate beneficiaries will be the wild places that people will protect and value for future generations because they 'get' the intrinsic value and the economic benefit together. They may even have experienced them themselves.

***The importance of wilderness in addressing growing social and urban issues will be one of the major topics when WILD10, the 10<sup>th</sup> World wilderness Congress, convenes in Salamanca, Spain, October 2013. For info [www.wild10.org](http://www.wild10.org), and to participate, [info@wild10.org](mailto:info@wild10.org)***

## References:

- (1) 'Social Defeat: Risk Factor for Schizophrenia?' Selten, J.P. Cantor –Gracie, E. (2005). The British Journal of Psychiatry, 187 (101-102)
- (2) Two peer reviewed reports from Essex University on TurnAround 1 and 2 are available and the review document for TurnAround 3 is currently underway.
- (3) Review of current need in Essex of TurnAround mini and extended programmes. Available on request.

## **About the Author:**

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She has been Chief Executive of the Wilderness Foundation UK ([www.wildernessfoundation.org.uk](http://www.wildernessfoundation.org.uk)) since 2004. As Social Anthropologist her work focus is a rural communities and how wilderness trails can link to peace and reconciliation.

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