

Editors' Note

Research in Outdoor Education: Looking Back and Moving Forward

Lisa Meerts-Brandsma
University of Utah

Sharon Todd
SUNY Cortland

This special issue marks the reboot of the Coalition for Education in the Outdoors (CEO) Biennial Research Symposium, which welcomed back 171 attendees following a hiatus during the COVID-19 pandemic. The 15th biennial symposium was held in February 2022 and once again allowed researchers, practitioners, and students to spend a weekend together building relationships and discussing education in the outdoors while sequestered in an isolated camp setting. CEO has been lauded as a small, friendly, affordable gathering and is known for fostering conversation and building a sense of community among researchers and graduate students via plenary-style sessions, a tradition that continued even as the 15th symposium presented unique changes. For the first time in its history, the venue changed from Indiana University's Bradford Woods to North Carolina's YMCA Blue Ridge Assembly Conference Center, and a virtual component was included to allow 107 people to attend from a distance. Yet the emphasis remained on the in-person gathering that allowed 64 attendees to connect with one another as often occurs in outdoor education.

Prior to the inaugural CEO symposium held 30 years ago, outdoor education was characterized as a creative, diverse, but highly segmented field. Many specialized organizations successfully served their members' needs in the spheres of experiential education, organized camping, nature interpretation, conservation education, and environmental education, but missing was cooperative networking at a national level and the ability to create one unified voice for outdoor education. Subsequently, more than 40 national leaders met at various conferences in 1986 to brainstorm the creation of a professional coalition that "would unite outdoor associations, institutions, businesses, and agencies to better serve both professionals and consumers in the outdoors" (Bunting, 1987a, p. 1). As a result, the Coalition for Education in the Outdoors (CEO) was established in 1987 at the State University of New York College at Cortland (SUNY Cortland).

Instead of duplicating the efforts of existing associations, CEO hoped to facilitate communication among them via a newsletter, conferences and institutes, and an inter-organizational forum. A second phase of planned services included publishing an annual research journal,

directory of outdoor entities, referral service for grants, and news releases (Bunting, 1987b). In its first year, more than 20 affiliate agencies, businesses, and associations contributed to the Coalition's financial and organizational base (Young, 1988). In October 1987, the New York State Outdoor Education Association, SUNY Cortland, and CEO co-sponsored the Coalition's first national conference in Cortland. Titled "Outdoor Education Across America: Weaving the Web," more than 500 participants from across North America attended the gathering's 130 educational sessions (Bunting, 1988). Starting in 1994 and ending in 2016, CEO also published a practitioner-oriented magazine called *Taproot: A Journal of Outdoor Education*, which featured a variety of articles, book reviews, and a comprehensive resources section. In 1990, the Coalition created a Research Task Force. Its first research symposium was held at Indiana University's Bradford Woods in 1992 with the aim of assisting outdoor educators in advancing the philosophical, theoretical, and empirical bases of outdoor education. Deemed a success, the symposium has been held biennially ever since.

Since its inception, the purpose and hallmark qualities of the CEO Research Symposium have remained the same. The 15th Biennial CEO Research Symposium was small enough to offer sessions in a plenary format and retained the informal and highly interactive atmosphere that people valued from the start. It attracted scholars and practitioners from a wide variety of academic disciplines and outdoor education professional settings, maintained its loyal attendance, and drew researchers from across the country and around the world eager to present and discuss their findings on a diversity of relevant topics. Dr. Corliss Outley, professor at Clemson University and founder and director of the Race, Ethnicity, Youth and Social Equity (REYSE) Collaboratory, gave the keynote address, "Stand Up! Race, Freedom Calls and Outdoor Education," which can be viewed online.

During her keynote, Dr. Outley reminded the CEO community to challenge the narratives we hold about outdoor recreation and remember that much scholarship and research has been designed and written from the White perspective. She emphasized that outdoor education practitioners need to build relationships outside their existing boundaries. Within our classrooms, we need to go beyond our regular sources and elevate and praise the work of Black outdoor educators. We also need to look at how to build capacity and support Black communities, which, for the CEO community, could include increasing outreach to presenters and attendees from Black-serving outdoor recreation organizations for the next symposium.

Beginning in 1992, CEO also published a peer-reviewed journal titled *Research in Outdoor Education (ROE)*. *ROE* initially featured papers presented at that year's symposium, but eventually moved to being an outdoor education journal under contract with publishing companies. Although its latest publishing partnership ended in 2020, back issues of *ROE* are now available to the public through Open Access on SUNY Cortland's Digital Commons. While long-term solutions are being investigated to continue disseminating *ROE*, the Coalition's Research Committee pursued and implemented a short-term solution in conjunction with the *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education and Leadership (JOREL)*. *JOREL* agreed to dedicate and publish a special issue composed of papers that were submitted for review from the 15th Biennial Research Symposium. You are seeing the results of that effort in this issue. A complete book of abstracts from the 15th biennial symposium and each prior symposium is available via the Coalition's website.

We are pleased to present this special issue of *JOREL*, guest edited by Andrew J. Bobilya, Lisa Meerts-Brandtsma, and Jayson Seaman, which includes seven regular papers that were presented at the symposium and subsequently submitted for review. They are ordered with a glance to the past and then a look ahead to the field's pressing concerns. The issue begins with a paper by Daniel et al. entitled, "The Life Significance of an Outward Bound Expedition: A Retrospective Study up to 50 Years Later," in which the authors asked Outward Bound participants to reflect on the importance of their outdoor education excursions. The findings support previous research

that showed how significant outdoor education can be for participants and do so by considering the long-term or lasting implications of an expedition. Daniel et al. used the Significant Life Events (SLE) framework and noted that many participants reported taking their course during an important stage in their lives, such as during their formative years or after a major life event, and that they made sense of their experiences over time as they connected it to other reference points in their lives.

Next, Schafer et al. wrote "Understanding Hikers' Behavioral Intent toward Leave No Trace in Great Smokey Mountains National Park," a paper that looked at an essential outdoor education practice that has existed since the 1990s, Leave No Trace (LNT), and its effectiveness in an eastern U.S. national park. They stressed the importance of resource preservation, especially as outdoor recreation participation rises, and offered recommendations based on their findings as to how LNT can be better implemented.

The third paper, "Backpacking Veterans: Exploring Sense of Belonging, Happiness, and Stress-Coping," written by Ilagan et al., advances research on the role of outdoor education for veterans at universities, a population who may especially benefit from the sense of belonging that outdoor education can foster. In this mixed-methods study, they also examined the impact of a three-day backpacking trip on happiness and stress, and asked participants to reflect on why participation on the trip may have impacted the three targeted variables. Their study emphasizes an important point for the CEO community to consider, which is how education in the outdoors can serve a broad range of communities.

The focus on how outdoor education can be a space to connect with diverse communities continues in the fourth paper, "Indigenous Storytelling, Cherokee Traditional Ecological Knowledge, and Place-Based Education," written by Kinch et al. In this study, the authors considered how a relationship could be built between an indigenous community and middle-school students who attended a program designed by the Cherokee members. Research on how to build relationships with communities that have been marginalized both within and beyond outdoor education should continue to be a focal point as practitioners heed Dr. Outley's recommendations.

The fifth paper, "Youth Outdoor Recreation Experience, Race and Socioeconomic Status: Explaining Connection to Nature and Future Career Interest," written by Lackey et al., also considers how outdoor recreation can be a space for diverse and marginalized people. Their research question focused on the types of experiences youth have that foster their connection to nature and interest in outdoor recreation careers with the aim of understanding how to recruit a more diverse outdoor recreation workforce.

The sixth paper in this special issue, "Overview of the Current Landscape of Outdoor Academic Programs in Higher Education," written by Turner et al., took a census of academic outdoor programs. They stressed the importance of understanding the state of our field so that we can better know whether it is growing or shrinking, examine the impacts of changes in higher education on outdoor programs, and to address the need for outdoor recreation professionals as participation in outdoor recreation flourishes.

Finally, the special issue concludes with a paper by Rabinowitz et al., "The COVID-19 Effect: Examining Organizational Resilience in Outdoor Adventure and Experiential Education." While our hope is that we do not have future pandemics, the reality is that the COVID-19 pandemic made it painfully evident that organizations need to consider how to prepare for the unexpected. They found that organizations that reported higher resilience before the pandemic achieved a new normal more quickly. But perhaps the more significant outcome of their study is a caution and reminder that outdoor education is susceptible to a range of crises, including economic, extreme weather, wildfires and more. As we forge a new normal, it will be important not to forget the important questions raised over these last two years.

We hope readers enjoy the articles in this special issue and give thought between now and CEO's 16th Biennial Research Symposium (which will be held January 12-14, 2024, at the YMCA

Blue Ridge Assembly, Black Mountain, NC), to the topics raised through these seven studies along with the 15 other studies presented at the 15th biennial symposium and the conversations that arose from the symposium. We know outdoor education is impactful and yet we have many questions to address, from how to manage outdoor recreation growth, to how to become a more diverse and inclusive field, to how to remain resilient in the face of a variety of pressures. We look forward to continuing this conversation in person in two years, and hope you will join us in North Carolina! A formal call for abstracts for the 2024 symposium will be available at the Coalition's website by May of 2023 and via various listservs. Finally, we want to thank the *JOREL* Advisory Board and Editors for supporting the publication of this special issue, an initiative that represents the kind of partnerships upon which the Coalition was founded.

References

- Bunting, C. J. (1987a, Fall). Historical development of The Coalition for Education in the Outdoors. *CEO Newsletter*.
- Bunting, C. J. (1987b, Fall). Proposed services. *CEO Newsletter*.
- Bunting, C. J. (1988, Spring). Coalition's first co-sponsored conference. *CEO Newsletter*.
- Young, A. B. (1988, Spring). A message from the CEO Chair. *CEO Newsletter*.