

by Geoff Cooper
& Andy Robinson

Aesthetic approaches in Outdoor Learning

“We know quite enough facts now, what we are still miserably retarded in is in our emotional and aesthetic relationships”

John Fowles – The Blinded Eye.

We often use a narrow definition of aesthetics in the UK which relates to a sense of beauty gained through the arts or nature. Here it is used as a broader concept to encompass feelings, perceptions and understanding that arise from emotional experiences in the outdoors. With ever tighter government controls over formal education and emphasis on business models and content-based learning, aesthetic approaches have been side-lined. It is now more difficult for young people to have access to art, drama, dance and outdoor education as part of the school curriculum and the closure of many youth services in the UK means that these fields of learning are not always available through non-formal education.

But why are aesthetic approaches important?

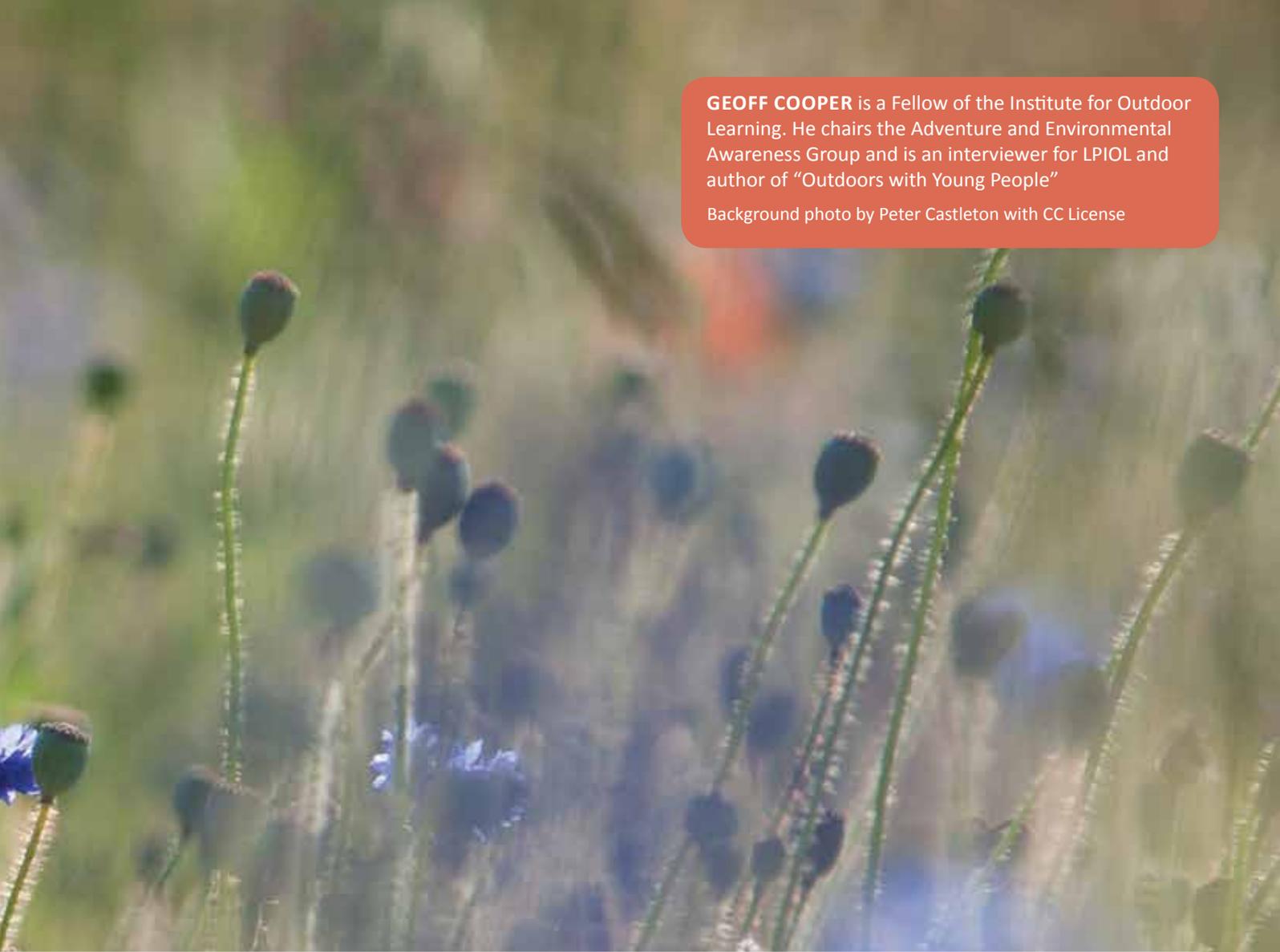
A simple answer is that we are emotional beings and aesthetics are essential in our personal development and our awareness of others and nature. These experiences can provide different ways of learning and may appeal to young people who struggle with traditional classroom learning. They can motivate, inspire and encourage creativity. There is a complex interplay of emotions and thoughts from being and moving in the outdoors. Sensations arise from fresh air, the wind on our faces, the smell of the earth, birdsong, the sound of running water, our heartbeat, movement of our bodies and the beauty of the landscape. Adventurous activities can

further challenge us physically and mentally and lead us through a range of emotions. We become more responsive and can make personal connections to nature which are enjoyable, memorable and reduce stress.

We live in a world where we are bombarded with information and there is constant pressure to absorb and process it. The digital age has brought many benefits but also brought stress through promoting competition, commercialisation and an emphasis on self-image. Time in nature frees us from the noise and pressures of everyday living. It allows us to slow down. Through sensory experiences we can appreciate that we are part of and not apart from nature. It can open our minds, leading to curiosity and creativity.

A shifting position in the UK

In the last few years the recognition of the role of aesthetics in the natural environment sustainability agenda, has come to the fore. Natural England’s strategic research group has clearly signposted that affective experiences in and of the natural environment are a crucial element in developing nature friendly behaviours. As well as significant investment in Learning for Sustainability by the Scottish Government, more recently DEFRA has published its 25 year environment plan and committed funding to delivering more affective outdoor experiences through schools. See *Perspectives* in this issue for more details.



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A European project

IOL is a member of the European wide network known as the European Institute for Outdoor Adventure Education and Experiential Learning (EOE). This year EOE has succeeded in its application for a 2 year Erasmus + project on “Aesthetic Approaches through Outdoor Learning”. This involves outdoor education centres in five partner countries- Germany, Slovenia, UK, Finland and Poland.

Aesthetics for being or for a purpose?

The “kick-off” meeting for the project was held in April at the bsj Wolfshausen Centre near Marburg in Germany. At the meeting there was a lively discussion on the nature of outdoor aesthetic experiences; should they stand alone or be directed towards particular outcomes? This can be related to a longstanding debate on whether education occurs for its own sake or whether it is directed towards a purpose. Most Western governments have adopted an “instrumentalist” model where formal education is designed for “employability”, to meet the requirements of the labour market. Outdoor educators often have a more open approach to their work by adopting broader outcomes related to personal and social development.

It was agreed that to engage outdoor practitioners across Europe the project would focus on developing approaches that lead to an “increased awareness of self, others and the environment” with an overall goal to improve the wellbeing of students.

Encouraging good practice

During the meeting the partners shared examples of aesthetic activities they have used in their own centres and the group had the chance to try out some of these. It was decided that each partner would plan a day of training to support further dissemination using the themes of:

- Pure nature- using senses to arouse feelings, memories and emotions.
- Artistic responses to nature through for example, poetry, dance, art, song, stories.
- Approaches to nature using digital technology.
- Aesthetic approaches as part of traditional adventure activities.

Following this, methods and activities will be trialled, evaluated and a handbook and web based material produced. There are also proposals for a youth exchange using aesthetic approaches in Finland in summer 2019. Further insights and debate will be available at the UK Outdoor Learning Sector conference in November 2018.

Outdoor practitioners are in a strong position to develop aesthetic approaches which engage a range of learners, allow them to make personal connections with nature and encourage them to lead healthier and more enjoyable lives. ■