

THE VALUE OF OUTDOOR ADVENTURE ACTIVITIES AS PART OF THE ENVIRO COURSE AT GOLDEN GATE HIGHLANDS NATIONAL PARK

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Golden Gate Highlands National Park offers environmental education courses of varying composition and duration for a wide age range. These courses, termed 'Enviro Courses', consist of two major components; informal lessons and adventure activities. The latter are described and their value as part of the course assessed.

INTRODUCTION

In 1979 through the persistence and foresight of a previous Park Warden of Golden Gate, Mr. L.J. van Zyl, the first five schools attended the fledgling Environmental Education course, then unique within the National Parks Board. Seven years later a total of 262 school and other groups have attended the Environmental Education course, now called the Enviro Course, which is conducted by two permanent and two student members of staff. During 1987, 74 schools will attend the course which is close to saturation point for the facilities presently available. The interest shown in the course is such that its growth to double the present number of groups is not an unrealistic expectation. A broad spectrum of age groups attend ranging from Std. 2 to trainee teacher level. The main interest groups, however, are Std. 4 and 5.

The following *modules* are offered:

Geomorphology, Grassland Ecology, Water Ecology, Bird Studies, Bushmen, Nature Conservation and Soil Science.

The following *adventure activities* are offered:

Rock Climbing, Abseiling, Horse Riding, Canoeing, Pistol Shooting (for high schools only), Orienteering, a Night March, the opportunity to sleep out in a cave and swimming in a natural rock pool.

DESCRIPTION OF ADVENTURE ACTIVITIES

Rock Climbing

The pupils are encouraged to climb a slope of about 10m to begin with. A safety rope is attached to the climbing belt and a safety helmet is worn. The technique of belaying is taught and specific safety precautions are stressed plus advice and instruction on how to climb and which techniques are to be applied under various conditions. The more adventurous participants are encouraged to attempt the more difficult slope of about 38m. Rock climbing is usually carried out as a prelude to abseiling.

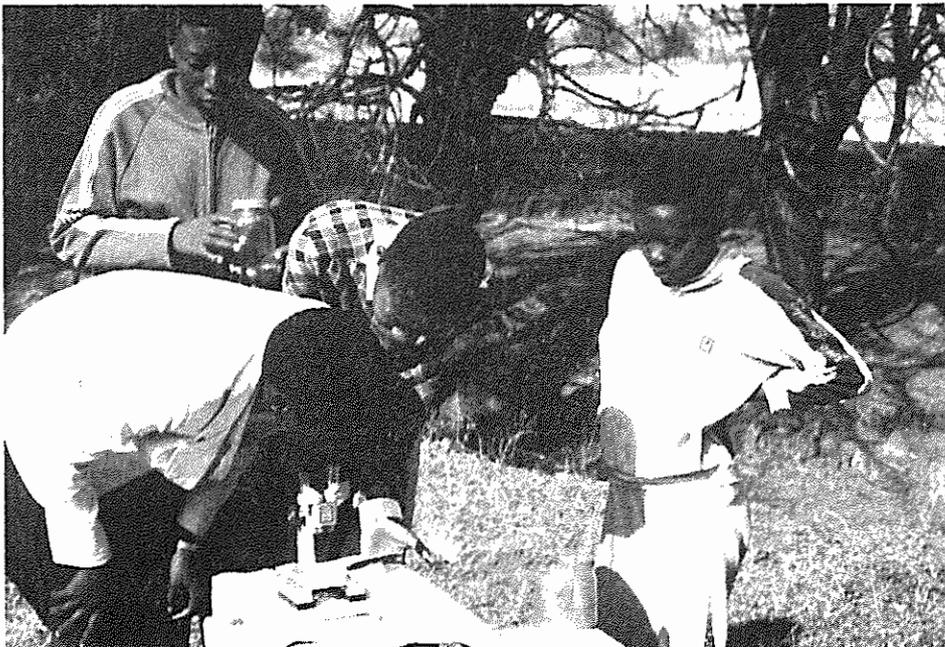


FIGURE 1

Insects collected during the water studies are examined closely with a microscope. Such fieldwork makes it necessary for at least part of the studies to be done under controlled conditions either in a work area or in the field.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The course has been designed to offer a balance between recreational activities and informal lessons where the pupils are encouraged to become actively involved in the learning process. A maximum of 60 children may be accommodated at one time which makes the ratio of instructor to participants 1 to 15, facilitating the personal contact aspect.

Once the schools have booked a specific date for their stay, a list of subject choices is posted to them from which they choose a combination of lessons and activities best suited to their needs and the time available.

Abseiling

This is a method in which a climber uses ropes and other equipment to descend a rock face safely. The accent here is on the correct use of equipment and techniques. The abseiling site is easily accessible to the large numbers of people who use it. Two slopes are presently used at Golden Gate; a 10m high rock, with a slope of about 60°, used to initiate pupils to the technique and a vertical slope of 38m used to allow high school pupils to try a little more demanding descent. It must be stressed that no pupils are ever forced to participate in any of the outdoor activities offered at Golden Gate!

Horse Riding

Groups of about 12 pupils are accompanied by a groom and instructor on an outride. A brief introduction

to horse riding and some basic instructions are given prior to the ride which is taken over mainly flat ground. A canter is seldom reached as the horses maintain a steady walk interspersed with bouts of trotting. Experienced and inexperienced riders are separated so that each may enjoy the ride at their particular level. Safety helmets are recommended.

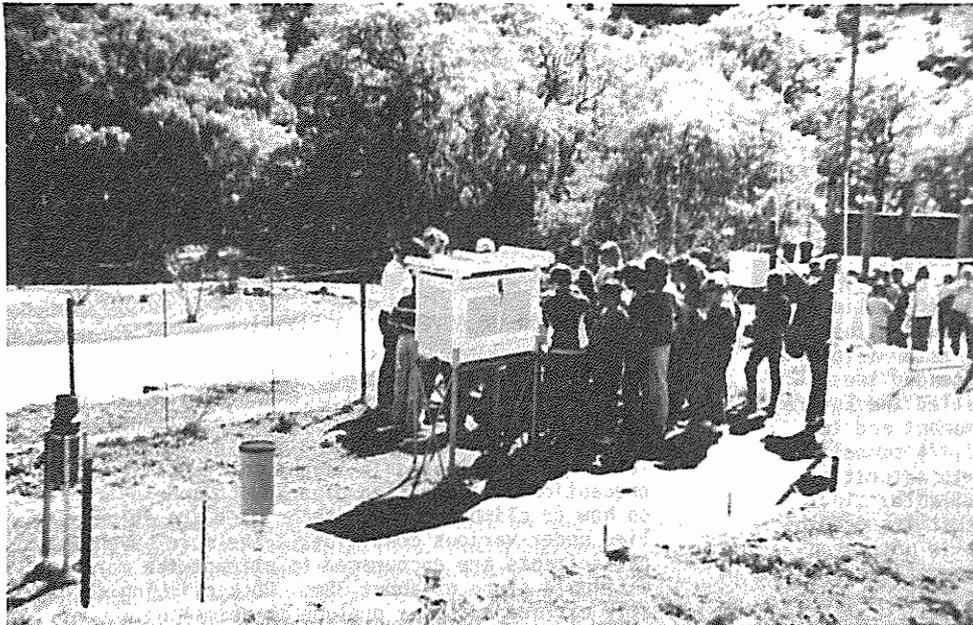


FIGURE 2
When studying the abiotic part of the environment, the weather station can be used with both primary and high schools as this primary school is doing.

Canoeing

The participants are issued with life jackets, equipped with a whistle and instructed on basic safety drills such as what to do if the canoe overturns and the use of the paddles. Open 'Indian' style canoes are used with two to three children per canoe. The activity is carried out on a large dam and a spare canoe is kept on shore for any emergencies such as the instructor having to help any overturned canoes. However, if the children do manage to overturn a canoe, it is normally their task to bring it back to shore without the assistance of the instructor.

Pistol Shooting

.22 Calibre target pistols are used on a 15m range in this seldom-requested activity. Only high schools are allowed to participate and before proceeding to the range, a comprehensive lecture on firearm safety and the rules governing the use of firearms on the range is given. No more than two people are permitted at the firing point at any one time and the remainder of the group is kept well behind. The accent in this activity is on safety and the correct use of firearms. The instructors are very firm when dealing with any breaches of the safety rules. The students are only allowed to shoot after passing a simple proficiency test.

Orienteering

Basic instruction is given on the use of the magnetic compass before participants set off on a predetermined course which must be completed by following a set of clues at specific points in the veld. Each clue gives a compass bearing as well as the next point to aim for e.g. 240° - an exotic plant (Willow tree). The roughly circular course is approximately 3km long with nine clues along the way. Children are divided into groups of two to three and set off at intervals of about 10 minutes, which gives the group in front time to disappear from view. The instructor then follows their progress using binoculars. An added element of competition may be included if the time taken for each group to complete the route is noted. A set of tasks may also be included so that the groups are forced to go to each point and collect different objects, ensuring that all the points are visited.

Night March

The name seems to suggest something along military lines which this exercise definitely is not intended to be. The children are split into groups, each accompanied by an instructor, on a walk through an area which is selected carefully and walked beforehand by the instructor. Fences, unnatural lights and

noise are avoided if possible. Dangerous obstacles such as cliffs and deep dongas are also avoided. The children are encouraged to walk without torches (although at least one torch is taken along for emergencies). At a point they stop and are then encouraged to stretch out in the grass out of touching distance of each other and be as quiet as possible. The clean air of Golden Gate makes studying the stars that much more attractive and this can be used to full advantage. Vehicles equipped with spotlights are sometimes used to add a different dimension - a drive through the game area prior to the night march.

Cave Outing

The groups are given the opportunity of sleeping out in a cave during the summer months, which for most children is a unique experience. They must supply their own sleeping bags and sleep on a floor covered with straw which serves as insulation and softens the sleeping surface. The cave currently in use is equipped with 'bush toilet' facilities. The experience of sleeping out in the wilds plus the braaivleis followed by a campfire concert is usually the highlight of their stay at Golden Gate. A system of keeping 'night watch' at the fire, as practised by the Wilderness Leadership School, works well with most age groups.

THE VALUE OF ADVENTURE ACTIVITIES

Rock Climbing and Abseiling

- With the children spending a short time at Golden Gate and with the instructor, a situation of trust needs to be developed as soon as possible. By showing the child that something difficult can be accomplished and fear can be overcome by following instructions, this trust can be rapidly established. Pupils are also encouraged to trust others as they have the opportunity to help each other with safety procedures during the activity.
- Much may be learnt about the individual characteristics of the children which may in time be used by both instructor and teacher in their specific tasks.

- Personal limitations may be probed by the children under circumstances which are controlled and where pupil safety is of paramount concern.
- Through rockclimbing individuals are encouraged to think their way out of difficult situations.
- Fears may be overcome with encouragement from instructors.

Horse Riding

- Most children in modern cities never have the opportunity to get close to such large creatures, even less to ride on the back of one.
- Horses have evolved naturally and have also been bred for certain characteristics which are easily demonstrated. They are good examples of a simple stomach herbivore and also resemble zebra very closely. The pupils are able to see firsthand the adaptations the horse has developed for its particular feeding habits. The broad, mobile top lip and well-developed jaw muscles plus the eyes set high and wide on the head for better visibility while grazing are some of these adaptations. The droppings may also be used to show the relative inefficiency of the digestive system and the need for such a large belly.

Canoeing

- Teamwork is encouraged as it is necessary for both paddlers to co-operate so that the canoe moves in the desired direction. This activity is not as simple as it might seem.
- A sense of responsibility is engendered with the inevitable skinking of the canoes and the retrieval of them by the crews.
- Safety is once again emphasized and safety drills rigidly enforced.
- The dam in use at Golden Gate is an excellent example of a standing water community with related organisms which can be observed from the canoes. Habitation by animals such as Clawless Otters is evident from their holts.
- The dam has copious quantities of mud, rich in benthic organisms which are useful when explaining energy cycles amongst others.

Pistol Shooting

- The participants overcome their personal fears

regarding firearms and for some an overwhelming curiosity is satisfied while respect is maintained. This is especially important for the aspects of safety and discipline which are enforced at all times.

Orienteering

- The children use their powers of observation and increase their awareness of the environment in their search for the clues.
- Teamwork is encouraged as all the members of the team must agree on decisions made.
- By carefully choosing the teams, quieter and less aggressive children may be given the chance to prove themselves.
- The groups are out on their own and have to sort out their problems with no immediate adult help.
- It should be noted that during the initial orientation talk which precedes each group's course, general advice on what to do if snakes are encountered is given. The instructor is seldom very far from the groups during the compass route and a whistle given to each group should summon him/her at short notice.

Night March

- The children have to rely on senses other than those used during the day and have the time to get used to night sounds and the dark.
- Once again a situation of trust is established in that the instructor is instrumental in allaying the children's fears.
- In areas such as Golden Gate where game is relatively accessible, night sounds such as owls and jackal may be used as examples in the explanation of animal communication.
- The clear visibility of the night sky opens up a new world of stars and planets which can sometimes consolidate what has already been learnt during previous outings.
- The quiet tranquility of the night is an ideal setting for discussion on basic philosophies and ethics of nature conservation, something not easily accomplished under normal circumstances.

FIGURE 3
Abseiling down the 'nursery
slope'.



Cave Outing

- The whole atmosphere of adventure goes to make this trip an unforgettable experience and the 'night watch' as explained previously can further enhance this.
- The instructors sleeping out with the children are given the opportunity to do personal counselling especially with identified strong personalities and leaders within the group. It is also an opportunity to exchange ideas and opinions about conservation on a personal level.

OUTDOOR ADVENTURE ACTIVITIES AND THE ENVIRO COURSE - SUMMARY

- The outdoor adventure activities serve as a break between the lessons, where attitudes and awareness are developed, and free time. Recreation is in effect used to achieve the same objectives as the lessons - even though this sometimes takes the form of incidental learning.
- The activities and lessons are blended in such a way that the learning experience is associated with the adventure aspects which serve as an anchor in the child's memory, keeping incidents and lessons in their minds for a longer time.
- The 'teachable moment' is a concept widely discussed but under our circumstances it means using the environment and experiences whether during a lesson or an adventure activity, by being flexible and taking advantage of the interest of the children. Some examples are: During *rock climbing* and *abseiling*, many species of lichen and other plants well adapted for living on the rock face are encountered and may be discussed during the activity.

The *compass route* takes the participants through many differing habitats. The pupils can thus

associate slope aspect with the specific plants and animals seen. All these may be discussed afterwards during a feedback session.

Horse riding and *canoeing* allow the children to experience two different environments by allowing access to the animals in those environments. One may approach Eland much closer on horseback than on foot, which is not uncommon on outrides, and even waterbirds become tolerant of the children invading their habitat in canoes providing a reasonable amount of silence is maintained.

The *cave outing* and *night walk* take the children into a different world in which the adaptation of daytime senses is a very necessary part of survival. Sound is much more than just noise and may give the position of animals away, tell one how they are moving, etc.

- The outdoor activities programme is an ideal way of demonstrating how the environment may be used so that it is not harmed or damaged. This is important when emphasizing the use of natural areas as recreational areas.
- The balance between activities and lessons offers teachers the opportunity to see the future leaders such as prefect nominees under widely differing conditions.
- This is an ideal time for teachers to involve themselves in the activities as an integral part of the Enviro team, which shows the children a totally different side to the teachers, something not normally seen under classroom circumstances.
- A quarterly newsletter is sent to all those who initiate correspondence as well as to those requesting it. Through this letter we hope to maintain an interest by giving small projects and recommending reading material, all relating back to what was covered here at Golden Gate.

● **Tydskrif Nr. 8** sal op 'Omgewingsopvoeding en Museums' fokus. Sluitingsdatum vir bydraes is 30 April 1988.

Tydskrif Nr. 9 sal op 'Omgewingsopvoeding, Diere- en Botaniese-tuine' fokus. Sluitingsdatum vir bydraes is 30 Augustus 1988.

Artikels wat betrekking het hiermee of oor enige ander aspek van omgewingsopvoeding word verwelkom.

Stuur aan: Die Eeredakteur, Posbus 4746, MMABATHO, Bophuthatswana.

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