



Speakers' Corner

More than just a job...
Training for a career in the
outdoor industry



Roger Sell

When the editor asked me if I would like to step up onto the virtual soapbox of Speakers' Corner it did not take me much trouble in deciding what I would write about. I manage an outdoor centre and instructor training programme in the grounds of the River Dart Country Park and paddlesports play a major part in the activity portfolio of my centre. My gripe is one that I suspect a lot of other centre managers will sympathise with and is perhaps an area that colleges, instructor training course providers and national governing bodies of respective sports need to consider more when designing their course programmes.

For many people the idea of being an outdoor instructor is a glamorous image of doing adventurous activities all day, everyday and being the envy of your friends and peers. Having worked in outdoor education since leaving school, including spending time in every position of responsibility from general multi-activity instructor to centre owner I know that this image is very misguided.

I consider working as an outdoor instructor to be one of the most

rewarding careers you can have with the 'great-outdoors' as your classroom. You will have opportunities to share your passion for the activities with very often young people and in doing so enriching and in many cases changing their lives. Being an outdoor instructor is more than a job, it is a vocation and even then to truly succeed in this career path you need to have passion for what you are doing. It is definitely not a nine to five job.

At several times during the year we advertise for new staff and we get applicants of all different ages and from a variety of backgrounds. Some are fresh from college having completed a course in outdoor education and others are embarking on a career in the outdoors as a complete change following a successful (and often more lucrative!) career elsewhere.

Now to my gripe: Many potential instructors (this is directed mainly at newcomers to the industry) look great on their CV and have all the required qualifications but are then let down by either their expectations or understanding

of the industry or their lack of any training in what I would call 'fundamental life skills'. If whitewater kayaking is your chosen discipline and you were employed as a multi-activity outdoor instructor you would be expected (and need to be self-motivated to do so) to put as much passion into all the other activities that you teach as you do your favourite. The current system of training practised by many training centres does not support this as it instead encourages students to intensively prepare for a qualification so that they can get their piece of paper and then they move on to the next one. As an employer I am far more interested in the passion that someone has for an activity or sport - how often do they participate in their own time, do they keep their personal skills up-to-date etc.

I find many course graduates are lacking the basic skills that are so essential to the everyday running of a centre. Things like the repair and maintenance of equipment. There are now lots of different types of course available to train students to be outdoor instructors and the majority of them have got really



good reputations and produce high calibre graduates but there are others who spawn graduates with the right qualifications but none of the skills that as an employer I would be looking for. With so many instructors out there, if you are already in the industry or considering making it a career then you need more than ever now to make yourself as employable as possible and that may mean 'filling in the gaps' missing from your training as well as 'getting out there' and keeping up your skills and learning new ones whenever and wherever possible. Finally - a very important and serious point. A career at the 'workface' of the outdoors industry as a multi-activity instructor is one that relies on your health and to a large extent your mobility so you should always consider some additional skills training in case you were to ever suffer from a debilitating injury or illness that would prevent you from working in the outdoors. The 'it'll never happen to me' philosophy is

not good enough. Besides, gaining additional skills for example computing, will make you much more employable for a small centre where everyone 'multitasks'.

When choosing your training programmes you should be asking:

- In the case of private centres - does the course provider offer employment to course graduates - in other words how do they rate their own course?
- Are the management & tutors actively involved and respected in their chosen disciplines - do some research?
- Does the course provide training in the widest possible range of activities to improve employment potential? - For example not having a caving qualification and experience would handicap you if you were trying to gain employment in an area where all the centres run caving as an activity.

- Does the course provide training in the repair and maintenance of equipment?
- Does the course imbue you with a good understanding of the outdoor industry and what an employer will expect from you?
- Before signing you up do they discuss whether a career in the outdoors is suitable for you and is it what you expect it to be?

Roger Sell and his wife Clare run CRS Adventures Group based at the River Dart Country Park in ninety acres of woodland within the Dartmoor National Park and on the banks of the River Dart - for those familiar with the river it is just below the popular loop section on the river right bank. The CRS Adventures Group also includes the Dart Training Group, which runs an intensive instructor training centre. For more information see www.darttraininggroup.co.uk or contact Roger on 01364 653444 and he will be more than happy to advise you on a career in the outdoors.