



Outdoor Experiential Education -Activity in Small, Rural Communities

The learning experience of children should involve

1. **participation** in civic society so that children can positively contribute to cultural development and social progress.
2. **exploration** of the natural world so that children become conservation conscious on the basis of their own experience of the issues as opposed to learning these things from educational formulae or the manifestos of environmental organisations.

Introduction

Equilibrium's manual on Experiential Education is based on the execution of a single project in which a proportion of the work was undertaken in rural areas. It, nevertheless, contains a detailed section providing safety advice for those working with children and young adults in the outdoors and we recommend it as reading material for teachers and youth workers who are considering taking parties out of the larger towns or cities.

This brief guide deals with the issue of working within or in proximity to small, rural communities without having a negative impact on their day-to-day life. The author is a seasoned traveler and has worked in village environments in a number of countries thus developing an understanding of how to avoid damaging the integrity of self-contained but fragile cultures. Being British, he is also aware of the Countryside Code that applies in the UK as a means of encouraging people to respect both the natural environment and the rural way of life.

Low impact on the community

- Fast moving vehicles on small country roads can be unpleasant and dangerous to local people, farm animals and wildlife. Keep your speed down. Be wary when approaching blind corners or when driving on undulating roads where obstructions may be hidden in the dips. Drive especially carefully in the vicinity of villages and in areas where children or animals (farm livestock or wild creatures) may dash into the road. Villages contain many old people who tend to move slowly and may not hear very well. In addition, village children may be unaccustomed to traffic - be vigilant!

- Have you considered where you intend to leave your vehicle so that it is both safe and unobtrusive? Respect the needs and habits of local people - for example, don't block gateways or other entry points. Don't obstruct narrow lanes. Park at a distance from agricultural compounds where large harvesters / tractors / trucks may need to manoeuvre. Remain aware of the need to move animals from place to place. It pays to check in advance with the local authority or village mayor if there is a suitable medium to long term parking place available.

- You are responsible for your own safety and for that of others in your care. It is unfair and unreasonable for you to cause members of the local community to change their routines or depart from essential activities to accommodate your party. Where animals and machinery are concerned, it is generally highly impracticable to expect workers to stop what they are doing to

make way for you. It is a good idea to check whether there is any major work being undertaken in your chosen venue before leaving home.

- If you do encounter an unexpected obstruction (eg animals on the route ahead or forestry vehicles blocking the path) consider making a reasonable detour or send a capable individual ahead to work out the potential for passing safely. In general, keep out of the way when farm animals are being gathered or moved and follow directions from the herder. Watch for dogs in proximity to livestock. Men working with machinery of vehicles may not hear you approach and it is best to avoid entering a restricted area or "bottleneck" where machinery is operating and the party has to get unreasonably close.
- There are few sounds more pleasant than the laughter of children but loud or prolonged noise irritates both people and animals. It is best to play boisterous games in areas away from homes, workplaces or livestock shelters.
- Bulgarian rural hospitality is legendary and villagers will often go to great lengths to cater for visitors. It is almost inevitable that the style of hospitality will differ from that to which city children are accustomed. It is important that they respond with grace and courtesy to offerings that they may find unsophisticated and unappealing in the first instance. It is a good idea for the children to carry small tokens (perhaps representative of their cities) that they can provide to their hosts.
- By all means invite those local children you encounter to join the fun and games but respect their reticence and shyness and the protective

attitude of their parents / grandparents.

- Not all villagers need belong to the Bulgarian majority and, even among Bulgarians, regional dialects vary. It may be difficult to understand a local person - be patient and show courtesy.
- In isolated regions, urbanites may encounter behaviour that seems eccentric especially among the elderly and people who live alone. The world would be a sad and boring place without human variety, differences in culture and attitude. Laugh with people, not at them!
- Moving around a village, a party will come close to peoples' homes. Members will encounter open courtyards and will be afforded glimpses through windows and open doors. It's admirable to journey with curiosity but the personal boundaries of strangers should be respected. Cameras should be used discretely and no photograph should be an invasion of privacy.
- The party will encounter all sorts of objects in a rural community and frequently their positioning or arrangement in relation to one another may appear random or purposeless. They may appear to have been discarded. They may seem valueless. It is not always safe to make such assumptions. As a general rule, don't tamper with things.
- There are many ways to support the rural economy - for example, as far as possible, buy your supplies from local traders or direct from the producer, use local guides, artists, musicians and craftspeople in your group activities and use local sources of accommodation.

- Discourage nonsense and encourage children to watch their feet when they are at a higher elevation than other members of a party. It is all too easy to knock stones down on top of someone who is following behind. A similar code should apply close to water or a steep drop.

Low impact on animals and the natural environment

- Litter and leftover food isn't only ugly it can be highly dangerous to wildlife and farm animals and can spread disease - so take a supply of plastic sacks with you and dispose of rubbish appropriately. Many villages are now equipped with special containers for refuse but, in some areas, the disposal of waste remains a problem. If in doubt about how or where to leave rubbish, take your litter away with you.
- Never feed animals with leftovers or scraps from picnics. Contrary to popular opinion, most animals will not instinctively reject foodstuffs that are bad for them.
- Respect the integrity and harmony of the natural environment and discourage the children from interfering with features such as rocks, plants and trees. They provide shelter and food for a variety of animals. It is tempting to pick flowers or bunches of foliage especially if they seem abundant but this can affect the process by which nature regenerates and should be discouraged. Remember, the forest floor or grassy hillside is a habitat and what appears like

debris to you may have crucial value to a smaller creature.

- When asked why he climbed Everest, George Mallory replied - "Because it's there." Kids will climb rocks and trees *because they are there*. Such antics demand close supervision for reasons other than the safety of the climbers. Avoid damaging the medium - rock or tree. Remain aware of the habits of birds and animals - nesting, concealment, basking in the sun etc.

- Farm animals can behave unpredictably if you get too close and their clumsiness can cause injury. It is best to give them a wide berth. At certain times, villages abound with baby animals but it is advisable to avoid approaching them without the express permission of their owner. Also, remember that the tiniest and cutest baby may have a large, aggressive parent nearby. Wild animals should never be approached by the inexperienced even if they seem appealing, injured or in distress.

- Avoid crossing cultivated areas or places set aside for regeneration. Follow paths wherever possible. In wet conditions it is tempting to digress from paths to avoid puddles or areas of mud. Don't. Footwear can be cleaned and dried with little effort. However, the expansion of walkways or proliferation of tracks causes severe long-term damage to the natural landscape.

- Use gates and stiles wherever possible - climbing over walls, hedges and fences can damage them and increase the risk of animals going where they can cause destruction or come to grief.

- Don't waste or pollute water. If you've filled a bottle from a spring or public tap and don't fancy carrying it home - put the contents to good use. Similarly, don't waste fruit, nuts and other edible matter gleaned from the wild.
- The pursuit of fun does not really justify setting a fire in the wild and it should only be done if there are no alternative cooking facilities or sources of heat. Many of the eco-trails recently developed have designated picnic areas where fireplaces have been constructed - use them with proper care and attention. Never strip branches from trees (even those that appear dead) - use only wood that has fallen. A fire should be supervised at all time and left only when properly extinguished. Take care with matches and cigarettes at all times.
- Be careful not to disturb ruins and historic sites. Many cannot withstand indiscriminate exploration. Stay on the designated paths and avoid clambering over stonework.
- Nipping "behind a bush" to answer the call of nature may be unavoidable. Wherever possible seek out a natural cavity or pit like a gap between boulders.

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