

Double standard

Pubs and clubs open for business but outdoor education on hold

Outdoors NSW & ACT is urging the NSW Government to reconsider a statement made by the Premier on the 11 August, stating school's extra-curricular activities, excursions and overnight camps are not acceptable during a pandemic[1], yet pubs, clubs, restaurants and brothels can remain open; a double standard causing detrimental effects to the health and wellbeing of our young people, not to mention the State's economy.

Lori Modde, CEO of Outdoors NSW & ACT, the state's peak body for the outdoor education industry explained making such a blanket statement is not only unfair, it's illogical and short sighted.

"I applaud the Premier for her efforts in protecting our State against COVID-19, we are certainly doing better than some when it comes to stopping the spread, and we respect her priorities putting our citizens safety first. However, her recent statement condemning outdoor education is unfounded and certainly shows zero consultation has ever occurred with our industry.

"What we know about COVID-19 thus far indicates it is more highly transmissible in indoor environments, especially where there are high concentrations of people, so that leaves me to wonder - where is the logic in keeping pubs, clubs and restaurants open, but our sector, operating in the great outdoors, naturally socially distanced in the fresh air, are to remain off limits to our key clientele?" stated Ms Modde.

Dr Phil Humphris, General Practitioner at Kildare Road Medical Centre who holds a Masters in International Public Health and has undertaken extensive humanitarian work in Ethiopia, the Middle East, and Sudan as a Director of Medecins Sans Frontieres, having first-hand experience with SARS, Ebola and Malaria, concurs with Ms Modde's point of view and continues on to explain "while there are still gaps in the knowledge of transmission patterns for COVID-19, the epidemiology of outbreaks and transmission shows ventilation appears to be particularly important. The lack of exchange of air in indoor environments is thought to increase the risk of transmission.

"In relation to outdoor education, the biggest concern is for overnight camps, where large numbers of people are living and congregating in enclosed environments; however if these risks can be mitigated by strict control measures and a COVID-Safe plan, I see no reason why they should be halted unless there is widespread community transmission," explained Dr Humphris.

Peter Griffiths, CEO of the Australian Camps Association said the Outdoor Council of Australia gave the sector a COVID-19 Management Plan in early May 2020, and since that time, each and every provider in the outdoor sector has been ready.

"Outdoor education providers are in the business of risk mitigation, safety is the cornerstone of our business, it's not something any of our providers are flippant with. Each of our facilities has comprehensive COVID-safe plans and procedures in place to allay concerns about the risk of transmission, in fact, we're safer to visit than your local restaurant!" said Mr Griffiths.

Graeme Janes, CEO of Christian Venues Association explains some of the COVID-Safe procedures the facilities have put in place include pre-screening processes working in partnership with the schools - plus a second screening upon arrival, increased usage of PPE, hand sanitizer in ingress and egress, perspex screens around food serveries, more frequent cleaning rotations throughout communal and high-touch areas, invested in prototype tent with divisional walls, plus regular COVID-Safe training.

“But a lot of requirements that have been newly implemented by restaurants have been part of our day-to-day business practices since inception, for example, the collection of guests' names and their details, plus rolling out activities in small groups. That all said, we are all well-equipped and prepared to have our clientele return to us,” exclaimed Mr Janes.

Another area of concern for the outdoor sector, is if the government continues to halt access, what ramifications that will have on the health and wellbeing of young people throughout NSW? Outdoor education and recreation have a tremendous and essential role in achieving and maintaining physical and mental health, it is also critical to the normal development of children and youth.

“The consequences of halting outdoor activities for all are impossible to measure, however logically we know there are very real lasting, if not permanent, negative outcomes if people do not have access to the great outdoors,” furthered Dr Humphris.

A multitude of studies show time spent in nature is consistently linked to objective, long-term health outcomes. A 2018 paper by Marsden Jacob & Associates estimated \$508 million was saved in lifetime healthcare costs by people participating in outdoor pursuits in NSW alone[2]. The Outdoor Youth Programs Research Alliance (OYPRA) reported from their nine-year study, the sharp rise in the youth anxiety and mental health challenges can be improved through participating in outdoor programs[3].

Tom Mulvaney, Psychologist and Co-Leader of Policy at the Australian Association for Bush Adventure Therapy is seeing the dramatic impact of the pandemic on the wellbeing of children, young people and families, and also the sectors now limited ability to mitigate that impact.

“What we've been seeing in young people is the increased risk of loneliness and isolation at this time. Access to the outdoors obviously facilitates physical health outcomes, but also facilitates connection to other people, to the world around us, which ameliorates loneliness or isolation.

“There's a lot of evidence to support young people spending time in nature directly, but there's a stronger evidence base for those therapeutic outcomes being enhanced when a person's time in nature is guided by a professional. Guided time in nature has positive outcomes for young people who experience stress, depression, anxiety, social anxiety, relationship issues and so many of those clinical presentations that are on the rise as this pandemic progresses.

“We need to keep people physically and mentally well through a system that caters for safe, stable and connected time in the outdoors. Going outdoors is one cost effective and safe way to support physical, mental and social wellbeing and prevent longer-term ill health. We need to capacitate this as soon as possible to avoid long term, potentially irreversible impacts,” concluded Mr Mulvaney.

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[1] <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/cluster-linked-to-sydney-s-tangara-school-grows-source-of-outbreak-a-mystery-20200811-p55kjm.html>

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/breaking-news/coronavirus-cluster-at-a-sydney-girls-school-could->

be-linked-to-retreat/news-story/f640a816b92c88cdf9018eba75cb2549

[2]A Marsden Jacob Report, New South Wales Nature-Based Outdoor Economy, key estimates and recommendations (a copy of the report can be provided upon request)

[3] <https://www.outdoorsnswact.com.au/wp-content/uploads/Outdoor-Youth-Programs-Research-Alliance-Research-Findings-Summary.pdf>

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