

# HISTORY OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

F E GRAVES (Teachers Centre Johannesburg)

Outdoor Education in one form or another is currently enjoying considerable attention. Under various guises such as 'environmental education', 'ecological education', it has entered the curriculum of many schools. Those who motivate it claim that it has many positive features such as a unique instructional climate where children learn the meaning of things and develop an appreciation for verifiable knowledge. Facts are **used**, not just stored and, through heightened sensory awareness, children are said to learn and acquire knowledge, attitudes and skills derivative from a real and tangible world.

In social terms, children are encouraged to work in groups while exhibiting individual differences. Adventure and versatility of material make the experiences even more attractive.

However, **outside** the classroom requires skills over and above those required **inside** the classroom of both the teachers and pupils. That excellent organisational and management skills are required is self-evident — but what is less evident is the need for wide perspectives, integrative strategies and above all, clear objectives. The United Nations Environmental programme was initiated to improve programmes, curricula and teaching materials worldwide. Workshops were organised and various emphases, ranging from physical fitness to social studies, explored. South Africa had its own World Environmental Conference in 1982 with the stress on interdisciplinary approaches.

Faced with Biology and Geography pupils enthusiastically extolling the virtues of outdoor experiences, the History teacher felt like a Cinderella. Because pupils were able to select subjects earlier and earlier in the curriculum, there came a distinct threat to survival unless the subject History could offer similar attractive experiences. The consequence was the 'historical tour'. Unfortunately, much of what passed on tour was best described as 'hysterical'.

The misconception held by pupils and teachers alike was that exposure to places where 'history happened' would, by some mysterious process of osmosis, instil 'historical attitudes'. Pupils have been dragged off to battle sites, museums, cathedrals, monuments. Flitting like butterflies, their attention has been drawn rather to the bizarre, macabre or quaint. The time concept has been distorted as they were presented with a jumble of events which all happened in close proximity spatially though not in time. Thus, annually, hundreds of pupils, for instance, 'do' the Natal battlefields. A typical itinerary makes a mockery of any true historical thinking as pupils 'drive past Majuba' (1881) to visit Blaaukrantz (1838) and Chieveley (1899) before calling in on Isandhlwana (1879) and Blood River (1838)! Small wonder that the most memorable features are often the escapades the pupils got up to!

The British Schools Council Project on 'History Around Us' sought to introduce pupils to historical method by exposing them to tangible evidence such as castles, parish registers and the like. The focus is narrow and again the absorption in minutiae can become dominant to the detriment both of the discipline of History and to

the broad perspectives envisaged for environmental education.

Clearly, some re-evaluation of approach, strategy, objectives is necessary especially with the growing emphasis on technical and vocation-oriented training. 'History' in school appears to be at risk on the issues of relevance and reality. Outdoor education tends to be viewed as separate from the in-school learning and compartmentalization occurs or else 'History' becomes a snippet in the experience. Hence, Treverton school boys who are studying Langalibalele's Nek as an area, 'do' Langalibalele's Rebellion and, because there happen to be Bushman shelters in the area, spend an hour or two on site looking at San implements and lifestyle. In this way, the outdoor experience, in its anxiety to provide an integrative encounter with an area runs the risk of too many items on the menu for effective digestion!

The demands of parents, expectations of pupils and strictures of buses (re: numbers) and school finance are forcing teachers to act in terms which are educationally unsound. No teacher, **in** the classroom, would dream of approaching the subject disciplines (even integratively) with the lack of clarity regarding objectives, structure and activities which is evident in so many so-called 'educational' or 'history' excursions.

Well, structured and conceptualised, the outside-the-classroom activities in History can provide for the affective and cognitive development of pupils and contribute to their moral and social development. Such experiences can provide children with a wide variety of methods of acquiring information and processing it. The experience is real, exciting and interesting. Serving the needs of **all** children, the approach is particularly successful with those who need to work independently, those who are creative and imaginative or those who work less successfully in the conventional climate of the classroom.

The needs of the discipline 'History' do not have to be neglected in favour of the shallow 'guided tour' approach nor the deeper yet often unduly particular approach of the 'History Around Us' mode. What is required is a better understanding of the ways in which the needs of pupils, History and Outdoor Education can most successfully be blended to the benefit of all and detriment of none.

In essence, visits for the purposes of **studying** History outside the classroom should be viewed as using teaching strategies most successful for a particular component in the syllabus in the same way as one would opt for a drama strategy or the use of media. Understanding, expertise and training are as necessary for **this** strategy to work as any other.

Present practises are often caricatures of the discipline History, which serve neither the intellectual nor social needs of the children. In the following issues, various aspects will therefore be delineated:

- (i) Areas of congruence in the goals of History (at school) and Outdoor Education.
- (ii) Resources available for teaching History outside the classroom and their use.

- (iii) Teaching strategies which can be employed, e.g. structured itineraries, preparatory work, planning.
- (iv) On-site and en-route activities.
- (v) Evaluation and follow-up.

It is my intention to be frank in my criticism of practices which do not further the cause of History or our children's education. South Africa is rich in historical sites which too often are subjected to 'animal in the zoo' approaches. Empathetic understanding, the use of evidence, the development of skills such as analysis, or comparison are neglected. At best the child gets a dose

of histrionic, hero-cult- oriented verbiage **using** sites to suit current political or social climates. At worst, he is left to wander misdirected or undirected and 'learn all about' an event, person, group which happened to have 'been there'.

Our children and History deserve better!

Detailed references on outdoor education and History will be given after each following article. A Bibliography on 'History Outside the Classroom' is to be found in the M Ed **Thesis of this title** (F E Graves 1982, Rand Univ).

---