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# The Outdoor Council of Canada

Franz Plangger and Albi Sole

Franz Plangger is the Executive Director of the Outdoor Council of Canada. He has spent more than a decade leading experiential education programs with organizations such as Outward Bound, NOLS, Class Afloat and Enviro Wildness School. His journeys exposed him to many different environments, where he felt the power of the howling wind, saw rainbows painted on mountain sides, understood the lifesaving power of words and heard stories carried from generation to generation.

Albi Sole is a founding member of the OCC. He has an extensive resume in mountain guiding, education, research, and community leadership. Highlights include 17 years at the University of Calgary's Outdoor Centre, where he developed Canada's largest public avalanche awareness program. Albi's passion: building long levers to transform Canada into an outdoor nation.

The Outdoor Council of Canada (OCC) is a members-based and not-for-profit organization addressing systemic barriers hindering the ability of outdoor leaders and outdoor programs to reach their full impact. Our mission is to integrate outdoor activity into our national identity. For us, this means that when we will have accomplished our mission, it will be as common sense for 40 million Canadians to go outside on a regular basis as it is a habit for them to carry cell phones in their pockets on a daily basis.

We believe in the importance of this social behavior change, because we recognize that quality outdoor experiences provide many benefits pertaining to healthy living, environmental conservation, education, sustainable economic contribution, increased resilience, Truth and Reconciliation, and positive community ties (Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur, 2018; Outdoor Recreation Council of BC, 2023; Colton, 2022; Chaire de tourisme Transat ESG

UQAM, 2017; Nichols Applied Management Inc., 2018). Outdoor programs provide the foundational introductory experiences in the out-of-doors, which tend to stay with people for a lifetime (D'Angelo, 2023). These same programs provide individuals with the essential skills to continue going outside on their own in a safe and environmentally aware manner.

Using slightly figurative language, outdoor programs deliver magic on the land. The OCC's role is to support the creation of the conditions for these programs to thrive and bring as many people in contact to that magic as possible. OCC members represent thousands of individuals and businesses who bring Canadians outdoors. Success means creating a reality where outdoor programs and their staff are recognized for their true value, the unfair risk perception associated with going outdoors is eliminated, governments invest to develop the sector, and other barriers such as unreasonable insurance premiums are removed.

## Serving the Outdoor Sector

At the time of publication, the OCC was pursuing its mission through two main roles: acting as a certifying body through the Field Leader certification program and representing the interests of outdoor sector (Outdoor Council of Canada, 2023a).

Through the first role of certifying body, foundational industry accepted practices are taught, thus enabling outdoor leaders to deliver safe and enjoyable experiences outside. The first course of the Program, the Field Leader (Hiking), was launched in 2010 (Outdoor Council of Canada, 2023b). In the decades that followed, the OCC has certified more than 4,000 Canadians and built a pool of 125 instructors. Now, the OCC boasts a wide array of courses for contexts such as paddling, equine, winter, and overnight trips, navigation skills, and courses for program administrators (e.g., school principals, camp managers, guiding and outfitting business owners, etc).

The courses are designed to be accessible and affordable, enabling any Canadian wishing to bring a group outside to learn industry accepted practices and deliver quality experiences. The course content distills practices, which have been effectively used by the outdoor sector for more than a century, into an easy to implement set of principles. At the core of the curriculum, you can find two key concepts. The first one is participant-centered leadership. Putting the needs and interests of participants at the forefront is essential to designing positive and safe experiences outside. Doing so informs the role and responsibilities of an outdoor leader (Outdoor Council of Canada, 2023c). The second concept is the event cycle. This cycle presents a structured series of steps enabling individuals bringing groups outside to design and deliver safe experiences. The event cycle allows these individuals to align the outdoor experience with organizational priorities and purpose (Outdoor Council of Canada, 2023c). To help effectively manage risk, the OCC has created terrain matrices for each type of outdoor activity. With these tools, Field Leaders can quickly and easily identify low-risk terrain

and operate in areas where the risk exposure remains within their skill set.

Soft skills are an important element to successful outdoor trips (Priest & Gass, 2018). With its focus on the leader's motivations, aligning trip plans to participant needs, group management techniques fostering communication and engaging in ongoing self-reflection, Field Leader courses support the conditions for the effective use of said soft skills.

Field Leader courses are complementary to first aid and technical certification courses. The courses teach foundational concepts. Many other excellent post-secondary programs and certifying bodies teach intermediate and advanced outdoor leadership skills (Orser, 2023). As such, the OCC meets the needs of the outdoor leader at the beginning of the competence continuum. Concurrently, foundational concepts of any craft remain relevant even for experts. This might be why, as of 2023, Field Leader courses are delivered in more than 13 post-secondary institutions.

The OCC's second role is to represent the interest of the outdoor sector as accomplished at two different levels. One level is called "outward representation", where the OCC engages with relevant national organizations and the federal government with an aim to showcase the great added value of the outdoor sector and advocate for greater support from such bodies. The other level is referred to as "inward coordination", where the national outdoor community is gathered together to promote coordinated efforts, share information, and promote efficient use of limited resources. The outdoor sector is replete with amazing organizations and associations filled with passionate, smart and dedicated individuals. However, the sum total of efforts from this loosely defined collective is disparate and disjointed. All outdoor organizations suffer because few outdoor organizations work together. The message to outdoor programs is clear. Their role is to bring people outside and offer transformational experiences. The OCC's role is to create the conditions for them to thrive, by being omnipresent to serve them. The message to other

types of outdoor organizations is simple. Each organization is usually fantastically effective in one or two areas, and nobody has enough resources to address all priorities alone. The OCC's role is to coordinate efforts so that all outdoor associations, certifying bodies, training programs, and fédérations can accomplish more by working together. We are here to partner!

### **An Organization Informed by Being on the Land**

The OCC's practice is informed by the most powerful praxis known: the concepts implemented in delivering transformative experiences outside. Some of the most eminent academics on the continent of Turtle Island have defined best practices for effective outdoor leadership (Priest & Gass, 2018). Quality outdoor trips stand on a mixed bedrock of competence, leadership skills and ability to foster teamwork within the group. Furthermore, the very nature of being outside means that the land itself shapes the experience. Consequently, everything learned from bringing people outside shapes how the OCC does its work. As an organization, the OCC consistently asks itself how to be a positive role model for the outdoor sector, how systemic actions can support a stronger outdoor community and what skills are needed to better serve outdoor programs.

The land is another important source of inspiration informing the approach. Over 5 billion years, planet earth has developed multiple complex sets of eco-systems. Each system includes different living organisms needing to meet different priorities to survive as a species. A healthy eco-system requires balanced interactions between these organisms.

An example of an interaction between organism which is taught in most schools is the food chain. A less well-known example is the transportation of nutrient and information through the mycelium network below the forest floor (Wohlleben, 2016). These ongoing interactions between organisms, which appear to be distinct and separate, enable the exchange of energy

and information through the eco-system. This ongoing exchange, or in other words relationship, between organisms leads to healthy natural eco-systems.

This eco-systemic concept, and the central importance of relationships, informs the OCC's work on systemic change. We engage with organizations which at first glance may appear to be competitor or unrelated to the outdoor sector. However, we understand that these organizations are part of Canadian society, which is the system we operate within. Thus, we see our role as collaborating to promote the increase exchange of financial resources (energy) whenever possible and sharing information with the aim to benefit the outdoor sector. This means doing the intentional work to turn apparent competitors into partners and strangers into allies. Not only is this approach more effective, but it also offers greater alignment for the outdoor sector considering that healthy natural eco-systems are the necessary infrastructure for quality outdoor activities. The above concepts have inspired a distillation of OCC's values into:

- being of service,
- inclusion,
- intentionality, and
- collaboration.

The OCC sees its role as one of being of service to the outdoor sector. It is a fundamental right for every person living in Canada to have access to nature, no matter what their identity may be. The OCC has a duty to influence systems in ways that promote a sense of belonging outside for all. A transformational outdoor experience is always designed and implemented in a very intentional manner; so are the OCC's actions. One of the most powerful lessons of a challenging outdoor trip is that it takes all members of the group to succeed; collaboration is the name of the game for the outdoor sector.

Finally, in the OCC's view, people bringing others outdoors are amazing individuals. Making a career out of delivering outdoor activities means accepting significant income reductions, and

long working hours. Humbled by their passion, dedication, eagerness to learn and strong will, the OCC could not think of a more honouring task than to serve this community. By leveraging the respective strengths of the outdoor community, and showcasing the great value provided by outdoor programs, The OCC is confident that it has the right ingredients to create a reality where the craft of bringing people outside is valued, respected, and supported in a good way.

### **An Origin Founded on Avoiding Future Tragedies**

In the early 2000s, a terrible accident claimed the lives of two Calgary students on a hiking trip in California (CBC News, 2001). A couple of years later, another accident in British Columbia claimed the lives of seven high school students (CBC News, 2003). These tragedies created a ripple effect within the entire outdoor sector and many programs were negatively impacted. New regulations appeared, some school boards cancelled their outdoor programs, service providers were being questioned about their policies, and outdoor leaders were facing more and more challenges.

In the fall of 2008, the Outdoor Centre at the University of Calgary supported a consultation process with multiple outdoor organizations. This consultation process revealed that, many people across the country saw the need for action, including the creation of national initiatives supporting outdoor programs and a national certification process for beginner outdoor leaders.

On a clear and windy Saturday, a small group of 21 thoughtful committed citizens representing K-12 public and private education, post-secondary education, summer camps, outdoor experiential education, certification bodies, adventure therapy, land managers, and outdoor enthusiasts came together in Calgary to discuss what can be made to change the country. The founders decided to create a nationally incorporated organization called the 'Outdoor Council of Canada'/le 'Conseil Canadien de Plein-air' in order to address the problems seen as universal across Canada.

The first action of the OCC was the creation of the Field Leader Program. After reaching their tenth year of operation, the OCC began actions aimed at broader systemic changes. In 2018, the OCC brought together a collective of leaders in the outdoor sector to design and implement the first ever Canadian Outdoor Summit. This was an epic, national, historic project which enabled the creation of a more unified national outdoor community. The Summit was intended to conclude in the fall of 2020. However, the COVID pandemic brought an extension of the project into 2022 and ultimately forced its cancellation, before an in-person meeting was possible.

From the Summit, a series of frameworks were created by the outdoor community for the outdoor community (Outdoor Council of Canada, 2023d). This project helped the OCC identify and refine twelve distinct barriers for the outdoor sector in our country (Outdoor Council of Canada, 2023e). These twelve barriers can be organized in four broad categories as presented below:

- The context for outdoor activities is often mis-understood (e.g., just for fun and high risk).
- Decision makers and funding bodies do not support the outdoor sector (e.g., fragmented policy framework).
- Working conditions are precarious in the outdoor sector (e.g., high staff turnover rate).
- The outdoor sector is siloed (e.g., no commonly accepted framework to recognize accepted practices).

Today, the OCC focuses its actions on addressing these systemic barriers and creating the conditions for outdoor programs to thrive in Canada.

### **A Structure Leveraging Collective Wisdom**

Being a members-based organization means that individuals who join the OCC can shape actions and priorities. On average in most years, 50 volunteers have been engaged in big and small projects with the OCC. Many individuals have contributed to OCC committees. This includes the

Board which is in great majority composed of people who work for outdoor programs and understand the unique reality of the outdoor sector. Concurrently, the OCC is intentionally and incrementally expanding the skill set of its board to increase effectiveness and to influence the other parts of Canadian society that have little understanding of the outdoor sector realities. The aim is to have a balanced board, who can collectively embody the unique values of outdoor programs while being able to influence policy makers or attract funding.

The Field Leader Program is developed by the Curriculum Committee which is composed of experts from different areas in the outdoor sector. Their role is to identify curriculum content and establish quality control mechanisms for a national certification program. The OCC has a small staffing team which is responsible for operationalizing the priorities set by the Board and the implementation of the Field Leader Program.

### **A Bright Future is in our Collective Hands**

Canada has much to gain from a coherent and resilient outdoor sector. Adapting to and mitigating climate change, fostering sustainable economic growth, promoting mental health, enabling lifelong participation in physical activity, moving towards Truth and Reconciliation, offering meaningful educational experiences, increasing competency in social and emotional skills, and providing resilience in the face of catastrophic natural disasters are all outcomes of high importance for our country. As a collective entity, the outdoor sector provides value in all those outcomes. For this value to be fully provided by outdoor programs, we all need to modify or establish systems enabling the conditions for:

1. Increased participant numbers for outdoor programs in Canada.
2. Better career options for outdoor professionals and increase in career sustainability.
3. Coherent training and competency framework facilitating workforce mobility.
4. Increased outdoor literacy for the average Canadian.

5. Outdoor associations to have the capacity fix problems faced by outdoor programs when the issue at hand is beyond their scope.

When on the land with individuals, outdoor leaders often facilitate experiences where people come together as a group and do amazing things. Now is the time for every outdoor leader, organization, and association to do the same and come together as a sector. Doing so, will lead to a reality where outdoor programs get the support they deserve to thrive.

Imagine if, after the tragic deaths in the early 2000's, Canada had an organized community. This may not have saved the life of those students. Families would still have been torn by grief and disbelief. However, that organized community of practice could have responded effectively and offered comfort and support to the families. It could have reassured Canadians and decision makers that effective accepted practices exist, that outdoor learning is safe and worth the risk. Everyone could have come together to honor the memory of these students by upping the game and making outdoor learning even more impactful and safe.

It will be a long road to achieve a reality where outdoor activities are fully integrated in the national identity. Yet, the future is full of promise. The OCC is moving in the right direction and the potential is there. The only question that matters is: Will we come together as a community of practice, share resources, and support each other to provide transformational experiences to every child in the country? If you are interested in supporting this movement, we encourage you to contact us. Your wisdom, knowledge and expertise are needed to support the change we foster.

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