

## Led Outdoor Activities in Canada: An Aspirational Definition

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At the 45<sup>th</sup> Annual International Conference of the Association for Experiential Education in Montreal (Québec, Canada) in November 2017, a grassroots discussion began among Canadian delegates about the need to develop a Canadian gathering of outdoor professionals, educators, and academics. Shortly thereafter, the Canadian Outdoor Summit (COS) planning process began. The COS Steering Committee was formed through a collaboration between the existing Steering Committee for the Canadian Adventure Therapy Symposium (<http://adventuretherapy.squarespace.com/>) and the Outdoor Council of Canada (<https://outdoorcouncil.ca/>). Over a period spanning several years, planning ensued to host the COS event in Gatineau (Québec, Canada) in September 2020. As part of this process, an Advisory Committee of 24 experts from diverse perspectives across Canada was established to guide key COS planning decisions, and seven Working Groups were formed to develop key COS planning priorities further. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 Pandemic foiled planning efforts and after two years of delays due to the pandemic, the COS was aborted. However, the planning process resulted in many positive initiatives and deliverables for the outdoor community in Canada, and a summary is available on the Outdoor Council of Canada website (<https://outdoorcouncil.ca/resources/canadian-outdoor-summit/>). One of those initiatives was to define Canada's led outdoor activity (LOA) sector. Hence, the purpose of this article is twofold: (1) to highlight the process and final deliverable, which was the development of a Definition for LOA in Canada; and (2) to present several options for how this definition can be used to enrich outdoor education and the broader profession, including but not limited to, outdoor recreation, tourism, skill development, personal growth

development, and therapy.

LOA is an intentional term that was selected to help delineate a distinct sector of outdoor activities in Canada with the hopes that this project would further collaboration, research, training, professionalism, and policy development. By defining the LOA sector, it was deemed that other connotations and denotations of the terms *outdoor* and *outdoor activity* would not unduly influence the consensual definition development process. The term LOA has been used effectively in other jurisdictions and countries, such as Australia, to identify and legitimize a particular industry or sector. The essential question that influenced this project emerged at a COS online event forum where a question arose about what the definition of *outdoor* was and who was targeted for inclusion for invitation to the COS. The LOA definition development process spanned several months and involved a process involving the COS network of planners and professionals since this was the first time in recent national history in Canada that there was a national dialogue related to the LOA sector. Table 1 summarizes the six versions of the LOA definition development process. Each version reflected an iterative process with an increasing scope of involvement from Canadian professionals, practitioners, and academics. After each round of feedback received, a subsequent version was created by a small group of editors (co-authors SDR SP, and ASD).

The definition for LOA, which appears below in italics, is the outcome of the final version (6.0) of the development process. It is important to understand the aspirational scope of this proposed definition. This means that those implicated in LOA may or may not embrace every aspect of this definition.

VERSION	PROCESS
0.0	Initially created partly from the Australian definition, partly from the glossary in the Priest and Gass (2018) text, and partly from authors' experiences and expertise
1.0	Adjusted to include more Indigenous, environmental, urban, and school-based content based on feedback from the Outdoor Council of Canada executive, especially the Executive Director
2.0	Decision reached on exclusion of motorized activities and listing of outdoor activity examples based on feedback from the COS Steering Committee members
3.0	Added a French translation, shifted to an aspiration intent, and strengthened the Indigenous and adventure content based on feedback from the Advisory Council for the COS
4.0	Included mobility and adaptive content based on feedback from members of the seven working groups for the COS
5.0	Changed from outdoor <i>pursuit</i> to outdoor <i>activity</i> , continued translation, and attuned wording on the basis of feedback from Francophone academics and Indigenous advisors
6.0	Final version prepared for release and public dissemination

**Table 1:**  
**Summary of the development process of the definition of LOA in Canada**

**Definition for Led Outdoor Activity - v6.0**

The **purpose** of this aspirational definition is to delimit and elevate the adventurous and environmental outdoor sector in Canada that engages in healthy and sustainable activities in the out-of-doors. A good definition will identify the practitioners, participants, and the practices that compose the sector, bolster the preparation of leaders in those practices, delineate Indigenous land-based approaches within the sector, rally support for the sector, communicate effectively with others within and outside the sector, and represent the sector to government and other political entities.

The adventurous and environmental **outdoor sector** in Canada represents a diversity of people, programs, providers, professions, organizations, and their representative associations using outdoor activities in recreation/tourism, education, psychosocial development, therapy, and cultural programs. These include, but are not limited to, a wide variety of private, public, and Indigenous programs (schools, clubs, camps, and others) and roles (guides, outfitters, heritage/nature interpreters, team-builders, teachers, educators, healthcare workers, and others).

Although this ongoing definition is not perfect, it aspires to **identify the key concepts and values** associated with the led outdoor activity sector: nature, adventure, physical exercise, sustainability, harmony, self-propulsion, non-competition, intent, and more. This definition has been through multiple iterations with feedback from hundreds of practitioners and academics across the country with more expected. While it may never be finished, this working definition remains a living document, changing over time and ultimately furthering outdoor professionalism across Canada, while also developing an understanding of how led outdoor activities fit into the outdoor sector.

The **LED OUTDOOR ACTIVITY** is a self-propelled physical pursuit that is harmoniously undertaken in natural settings with adventurous and purposeful intent, where a leader has the competence and legal, moral, and supervisory responsibility for the shared safety, risk management, change, learning or enjoyment with one or more participants.

**Self-propelled** means that the energy to move through the outdoors is usually supplied by humans (of all functioning capacities) but may involve other animal-propelled activities (dog sledding or horse riding). However, humans may also benefit from the use of non-motorized mechanical assets (bicycle gears or ski base sliding and gripping surfaces), the advantage of natural elements (gravity, moving water or blowing winds), and the adaptation of mobility aids (wheelchairs or trailriders). Motorized or gasoline-powered engines (cars/trucks, motorboats, motorcycles, all-terrain or 4x4 vehicles, snowmobiles, helicopters, and other transports) are not included in this definition, although these non-self-propelled methods may be required for safety or rescue and to accomplish access or egress. The advent of electric motors may change some exclusions in the future as these transport methods become fully sustainable and/or provide additional accessibility to special populations with diminished capacity for self-propulsion.

**Outdoor activities**, in this definition, purposefully exclude competitive sports (elite events involving rules and scoring or rigorous training for enhanced performance) and excludes harvesting (hunting, fishing, or trapping), except where this practice is complementary to or interdependent with the activity (fishing on a canoe trip or foraging for medicines during land-based healing). Outdoor activities may be both residential and stationary (camp-based challenge course or Indigenous outpost camp) or involve travel and excursions (school field trips or multi-day expeditions). Examples of these activities may include, but are not limited to:

- Indigenous land-based programs (holistic approaches, living with the land, and traditional journeys through ancestral territories);
- nature study (environmental learning, ecology, natural resources, and human impact);
- skiing and snowshoeing;
- cycling, hiking/backpacking, camping, rock/ice climbing, mountaineering, and caving;

- paddling or oaring (flat, white, or open water), SCUBA diving, snorkelling, and surfing;
- sailing, kiteboarding, windsurfing, hang gliding, and paragliding.

**Harmoniously** refers to environmental, cultural, and socio-economic respect and inclusivity, where the activities are practiced in a dynamic and privileged relationship with nature. Environmental harmony means that the activity conserves and protects against negative impacts on the natural environment and prevents irreparable damage to nature. This involves minimizing any pollution, carbon footprint or terrain degradation. It reflects “leave no trace” travel with “minimal impact” camping and ensures respect for animals, plants, land stewards, and other users. Without protection of the environment, the necessary natural resources for outdoor activities would diminish and disappear. Cultural harmony means that the activities reflect a practice that understands and respects the Indigenous traditional territories, communities, and customs related to the location or route. Socio-economic harmony means program planning and operations have global concern for the broader ecosystems (ecohealth, relationships with local organizations, community services, economic sustainability, climate change, and waste reduction). These ideals are not always realized and may need to be occasionally compromised to achieve and balance with other important benefits (safety, survival, accessibility, and learning).

**Natural settings** are those typically outside the built environment and are also acknowledged to be the traditional territories of Indigenous communities. Nature is characterized by components, processes and products that remain mostly uninfluenced by humans. Natural settings exist on a continuum from urban greenspace, through conservation areas and parks (regional, provincial, or national), to de facto wilderness. Wilderness, as a mindful state of naturalness and solitude, is without notable impact from processes and products generated by modern society. However, a fabricated environment (playground, challenge course, or indoor climbing wall) in an urban location

(backyards, school grounds, or local parks) may also be intentionally employed and some program planning, preparation, or evaluation may take place indoors for convenience.

**Adventurous** refers to the uncertainty of outcome and risk taking associated with outdoor activities. Uncertainty and risks are present to varying degrees in all outdoor activities and can range from discovery learning of the unknown in nature, through route finding the unfamiliar while hiking, caving, or rafting, to coping with the unexpected in remote wilderness expeditions across diverse terrain (mountains, glaciers, rivers, lakes, and oceans). To achieve their purposes, programs may utilize adventurous challenges and environmental immersions. For example, taking sensible risks and resolving group conflicts improve participant intrapersonal and interpersonal skills respectively. Mindful exposure to nature, such as contemplative or meditative experiences, may also present uncertainty and challenge that leads to personal relaxation, restoration, rejuvenation, healing, and holistic or spiritual energy.

**Purposeful intent** refers to the deliberate aim to enable change. Outdoor programs and their leaders may have multiple intentions and may unintentionally realize other incidental outcomes through the change process, but they should always be aware of their primary purpose. These principal intentions to change may include, but are not limited to:

- recreational and tourism programs that typically change the way participants feel, thus benefiting them through joy, fun, and motivation to repeat the activity;
- educational programs that usually change the way participants think, thus benefiting them by gaining new knowledge and skills;
- developmental programs that normally change the way participants behave, thus benefiting them with increased individual functional actions and prosocial capacity;
- therapy programs that intentionally change the way participants resist assistance to change, thus benefiting them by decreasing dysfunctional conduct in their daily lives; and
- cultural programs and Indigenous land-based approaches that purposefully change how participants relate to self, language, tradition, community, land, ancestors, and all creation.

The **leader** role may be played by many people (teachers, educators, instructors, camp counsellors, Elders, knowledge keepers/holders, organizers, supervisors, practitioners, coordinators, facilitators, guides, outfitters, or therapists). Leaders may be professional or amateur, paid or volunteer, and practicing or in-training. Leaders are expected to hold a level of personal competence in the relevant outdoor activity beyond that of the participants and be especially well versed in safety and risk management systems and environmental protection techniques. Some outdoor activities involve groups of people engaged in common adventures with no designated leader (clubs and friends) and these situations or contexts are excluded from this definition and the led sector.

**Competence** of the leader is the combined application of attitude, knowledge, skill, behaviour, confidence, experience, and values to achieve the program purpose and desired participant and societal/community outcomes efficiently and effectively. Participant outcomes may include but are not limited to, both intentional or incidental benefits such as enjoyment, safety, learning, environmental stewardship, health or well-being, interpersonal/prosocial gains, intrapersonal growth, and identity/character development. Societal/community outcomes may include, but are not limited to, both intentional and incidental benefits related to improving economic prosperity, environmental conservation, cultural traditions, extant language, and healthcare costs.

**Legal, moral, and supervisory responsibility** refers to situations where the leader has met the tests for duty of care and standard of care, as well as the additional responsibilities required by the leader's organization (deliver course curriculum, complete equipment checks, and conduct safety inspections). Leaders responsible for supervising minors (students or campers) assume additional responsibilities by acting on behalf of parents and require parental permission

to assume responsibility of these minors during outdoor excursions.

**Safety and risk management** involves the collective systems used to appropriately address objective (environmental) and subjective (human) dangers (perils or hazards) that could lead to an accident if left unaddressed. These systems include those conducted:

- before (planning programs and collecting participant information);
- during (offering remote first aid and modifying planned routes); and
- after any activity or incident (responding to crises and completing trip reports).

The **participant** may also be known by other terms (student, pupil, client, customer, member, follower, and patient). Participants may also

be of any age or gender and come from diverse cultural and ethnic identities. They may or may not have paid a fee for participation in the led outdoor activity. Participants expect to have enjoyable experiences, gain new skills and/or knowledge, and not be injured or harmed. Participants also have a shared responsibility for their own fun, learning, safety, and protection of the natural environment.

This definition of LOA in Canada provides abundant details on the definition of terms. This was primarily because of the substantial feedback received from various stakeholders and groups after each version was created (revised from the previous version). Consequently, each definition version was expanded to incorporate the feedback and perspectives received. Although this definition reflects numerous perspectives and voices from across Canada, it remains aspirational, and it is expected to continue to evolve and change over time.

It is anticipated that this definition will be used in various ways. First, it will be useful for organizations, associations, and school boards as a reference for program and policy development, and since this is one of several mandates of the Outdoor Council of Canada, it is already a useful tool for them. Second, it will be useful for outdoor leadership training organizations and programs as they prepare and revise curriculum. Third, it will be used by practitioners to support program development, such as a key input for a logic model outlining a theory of change (Newcomer et al., 2015). Fourth, we are hopeful that it will be useful for governments and agencies (e.g. designated parks and conservation areas) as they contemplate policy development at the regional, municipal, provincial, and national levels.

Finally, since the details and terms used in the definition are subject to criticism, this leads to a pedagogical opportunity for outdoor educators. For instance, it would be a wise and utilitarian exercise to ask a class of outdoor education students



to critique this definition and provide a rationale for what may be missing, or why a particular element of the definition should or should not be included. There are likely other applications for the LOA definition that are as unique and diverse as the outdoor sector itself.

This definition for LOA is likely one of the first attempts at unifying the diverse perspectives, practices, and professions across Canada through a shared vision of commonalities. The Canadian LOA sector brings many benefits to Canadian society including, but not limited to, increased connection to nature, support for mental health, a potential bridge for Truth and Reconciliation, promoting lifelong healthy living habits, providing meaningful educational programming, and fostering sustainable economic growth for businesses, communities, and society. The diversity of terms used to describe this community of practice in the past has likely increased the risk of fragmentation in the sector leading to reduced public awareness and support from governments.

The authors hope that this definition can showcase the meaningful impact of the sector and encourage the use and distribution of this definition for a wide variety of purposes and applications. The authors intend that this definition's current and future versions will reside on the Outdoor Council of Canada website.

## References

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- Priest, S., & Gass, M. A. (2018). *Effective Leadership in Adventure Programming* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
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