

**25**  
YEARS



**NZOIA**  
*Excellence in Outdoor Leadership*

# **NZOIA** – *the early days*

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I was asked to write about the early days of NZOIA (New Zealand Outdoor Instructors Association), but memories change as we try to bring together past and present into a coherent story. What I remember has definitely been influenced by new perspectives, new understandings, and an ongoing passion for a style of outdoor education, which inspires people in a positive and life affirming way. I declare this at the start because someone is bound to want to challenge some aspects of my story.

One of the things I loved about the New Zealand brand of outdoor education when I first arrived at OPC (now the Sir Edmund Hillary Outdoor Pursuits Centre) in the late 1970s was the fun everyone seemed to be having. Instructors at OPC were eccentric and passionate, and while most did not have a formal qualification, they were highly skilled at getting the best out of their groups. We'd take groups onto Mt Tongariro in the mist, snow, and pouring rain, or raft down the river on leaky inner tubes in tee-shirts and shorts and arrive back at the centre bedraggled but happy. Where I'd been working in the UK, everyone had a qualification and there were rules about everything even to the point where students had to wear long trousers so their legs didn't get scratched. Such rules did not encourage the passion the OPC instructors exuded everyday, nor did they allow instructors to change plans to fit in with the needs of the students.

Times were changing though and whilst OE (overseas experience) was blooming in New Zealand, there were undercurrents of trying to bring it in line with what was happening overseas in order to reduce incidents and accidents. It became inevitable that some sort of qualification was going to be introduced.

Pete Dale, who was working for the Hillary Commission, suggested that outdoor instructors create their own organisation and qualifications before standards were imposed on them.

The OPC trust board and the Hillary Commission agreed to help fund the set-up of an organisation. Grant Davidson was asked to write the outline for a qualification scheme and after a couple of years of disagreements, compromise, and negotiation, NZOIA, along with its qualification scheme, was up and running. The aim was to have a professional association run by outdoor instructors which would train and assess fellow instructors and provide a qualification which could be trusted by employers - but most of all, it should 'promote excellence in outdoor instruction'. It is a credit to Grant that key elements of the scheme remain unchanged.

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For the first few years, it ticked along with a group of volunteers working hard to co-ordinate courses, manage finances, and promote the value of qualifications to instructors and teachers who had been working for years without one. Some courses ran smoothly, others a bit more chaotically with assessors and assessees waiting at different venues and no cell-phones to quickly sort it out. Gradually, the reputation

of NZOIA and the standard of its qualifications grew. Despite differences, an amazing sense of collegiality developed with most members meeting annually for a series of workshops followed by a party and then a heated debate at the AGM. NZOIA was vibrant, responsive, and valued. For volunteers to achieve so much in such a short time was incredible.

There have always been tensions though with MSC (Mountain Safety Council), EONZ (Education Outdoor New Zealand), SFRITO (now Skills Active), and other groups. At times, I've thought that it would be good if all these groups could work together to present a more united outdoor education sector; but with mergers, comes compromise. So, on other occasions, I've been a radical opponent of working with other bodies especially when it's meant a loss of input from professional instructors, more bureaucracy, and reducing the assessments into a series of outcome statements which undermine the holistic nature of working in the outdoors.

To be an outdoor educator/instructor requires more than being able to teach a skill and run a safe session. Yes, they are important, but it's also important to help students learn about living well, caring for each other and the planet, and inspire them to be curious about and engaged with the world. These attributes are not easily measured, but NZOIA and all its members should fight hard to retain, and explicitly embed, such elements in all of its courses and assessments, so that OE can remain dynamic and relevant for the future.

A photograph of a person in outdoor gear standing in a narrow, mossy canyon. The person is wearing a red backpack, a white helmet, and dark clothing. They are standing on a rocky path next to a river. The canyon walls are covered in green moss and are very close together, creating a narrow passage. The lighting is dramatic, with bright light coming from the top of the canyon and deep shadows in the crevices.

Limiting assessments to the teaching of technical skills undervalues the learning opportunities of the outdoors and the work of most outdoor instructors. OE is not about measuring technical competence or restricting learning to pre-determined outcomes, and NZOIA should be more than that, too.

My hope for the future of NZOIA is that it continues to promote learning ahead of compliance and defend the quality of its free-thinking individual members and not buy into social and political agendas which devalue the knowledge and attributes of educators/instructors. In addition, it should recognise the passion, skills, and enthusiasm of its members and champion the value of spontaneous and fun programmes, which encourage students to live responsibly in, and feel positive about, the world - a world we all depend on. If it can achieve that, then NZOIA should have another vibrant and exciting 25 years.

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*Daniel Clearwater (NZOIA Instructor)  
Wilson's Canyon. NZOIA ran its first  
Canyon 1 Assessment in April 2012.*