

## **Creating the next generation of outdoor enthusiasts, one student at a time: *The Outdoors Tomorrow Foundation teaches students how to thrive outdoors***

By Douglas Paton

In his last year of high school, Neil Turner decided to try out a relatively new physical education program focused on outdoor recreation called Outdoor Adventures (OA), which was developed by the Outdoors Tomorrow Foundation (OTF). “After 18 years of school, having something other than athletics to get you out of the classroom while still providing the opportunity to learn was exciting,” said Turner.

Outdoor Adventures was led by Scot McClure, who taught students skills like tracking deer, hunting, fishing, and boating. However, McClure didn’t simply have his students read about these activities; Outdoor Adventures is all about hands-on learning. For example, as part of their unit on tracking, McClure set up a fake blood trail to recreate what you might see in the wild when you’re tracking an animal, like a deer, that you’ve wounded, but haven’t killed.

“What really affected my life was going fishing on Fridays,” said Turner. “One Friday, Scot handed me a fly rod, I caught a bass, and I was hooked.” Like many kids, Turner had been exposed to the outdoors growing up. He spent time on the lake with his family, mostly waterskiing and fishing. “I was an outside kid,” he said. “I have a lot of memories fishing off the dock.” But something about fly-fishing at the pond in high school changed everything for Turner. Fly-fishing never really left his mind, and when the opportunity presented itself, he moved from actively running a chain of restaurants to being the director of operations at Tailwaters Fly Fishing, a fly-fishing store and travel company in Dallas, Texas.

### **Being an Outdoor Educator**

It’s not hard to notice Scot McClure’s, OTF Director of Education, enthusiasm for the outdoors – even over a video call, it’s almost infectious. He’s been involved with OTF since the early 2000s and cares deeply about the organization’s mission.

One of his favorite stories involved a senior who needed a physical education credit to graduate. The principal contacted McClure to see what he could do. When the student showed up, McClure immediately recognized him. “Everybody knew him,” he said, “He had long black hair and wore black clothes. His mom had given up on him. He hated school. He walked into my classroom; he was cussing the principal and me, and I just said, ‘Come on in. I’m glad you’re here.’”

Eventually, they got to the fishing unit. No one had shown him how to fish before, and something clicked when he learned how to fish in OA. “He couldn’t wait to get to class,” said McClure. “He was so excited to talk about fishing. He walked into my class one Monday morning. He goes, ‘Guess what I did this weekend? I went and bought a rod and reel.’ And then he started showing me all these pictures, all the fish that he was catching over the weekend.” McClure stayed in touch with that student throughout college, mostly about fishing. “That’s the

beauty of Outdoor Adventures,” McClure said. “We target kids who aren’t involved or interested in anything and find a way to get them interested in and excited about something new. Then they go off on their own and keep doing it.”

When McClure started working with OTF, Outdoor Adventures was in a handful of schools in Texas, where the program originated. Today, it’s in more than 1,600 schools in all 50 states, and one in Canada. Across the board, OTF reaches more than 160,000 students yearly from kindergarten to 12th grade.

“Based on Texas alone,” said McClure, “We know that we have thousands of kids going on their first hunt or catching their first fish in our class. We have sporting clay, archery, and fishing teams nationwide that are being created because of Outdoor Adventures.”

Outdoor Adventures integrates with a school’s physical education program. Unlike academic subjects with specific criteria, PE can involve nearly any activity that teaches physical skills, such as engaging the arms, legs, and hand and eye coordination. “They’re thinking of activities like volleyball, baseball, golf, and tennis,” said McClure. “We turn that around and say, try archery, fishing, backpacking, hiking. We make those standards work.”

### **“Urbanizing” the Outdoors**

Expanding can be straightforward because Outdoor Adventures aligns with the standards of every PE class in the U.S. and Canada. Often, what happens is that a donor steps up and offers to sponsor the program in their local schools. “We’ve added over 30 schools in New York City, because of one donor,” said McClure. The program is growing rapidly, particularly in urban areas like Brooklyn, partly because kids don’t have the same access to the outdoors as they might in rural areas.

“When someone says, ‘You can’t teach wildlife conservation in New York City,’ I say, ‘Yes, we can,’ because the wildlife conservation unit is not all about hunting,” said McClure. “It’s about wildlife conservation. Believe it or not, there’s wildlife in New York City! They have a lot of fishing opportunities in all the stocked ponds around the city. They get that message and love it because it’s brand new to them.”

It’s also adaptable. The entire curriculum – all 360 lessons – can be taught indoors and outdoors. At the primary level, that flexibility is key.

### **Using Outdoor Activities to Expand Educational Experiences**

Mary Driemeyer is a PE teacher in St. Louis, Missouri. She first noticed the impact of outdoor activities in her school when she started an archery club. She knew that at least some of the kids in her school were interested in outdoor activities and wanted a way to introduce students to more of them.

“They have the notion about hunting,” said Driemeyer, “But they don’t understand the benefits.” Outdoor Adventures plants the seed for her students to understand the benefits of the outdoors better.

Driemeyer noticed, among other things, that “the program opens up conversations at home.” Even students from non-hunting households become interested in outdoor activities because of the program and its commitment to science and facts. Students better understand hunters’ and anglers’ role in conservation and the ecosystem’s overall health.

Perhaps, best of all, is how Outdoor Adventures levels the playing field in PE for all students. “It’s about offering kids more than just team sports,” said Dreimeyer. The program encourages everyone to explore new things and find new passions. “I hope more mainstream programs get exposed to Outdoor Adventures,” said Dreimeyer. “It’s a great expansion of physical education.”

Scot McClure expresses a similar sentiment, “I was working with a hundred students annually at my school, and the thought that I could impact a thousand students annually filled my intrinsic drive to change kids’ lives,” he said. “I had no idea we would be impacting 160,000 annually now.”

While the impact can be hard to measure, McClure says he loves seeing how an outdoor activity can follow a former student through their lives. “It’s so funny,” he acknowledged, “I have a student who now works in a fly shop, but I didn’t know it. I walked in and there was Neil [Turner]. I said, ‘What are you doing here?’ And he said, ‘The first time I touched a fly rod was in your class. Look at me today.’”

