



Media Release

Issue Date: 23 February 2009

Reports in 'The Herald-Sun' and 'The Australian' on Monday February 23rd reflect the understandably heightened concern among some parents about bushfire risks associated with School Camps and Outdoor Education programs. Some camps have of necessity been postponed or cancelled due to damage from the recent fires or the risk of further fires. Many schools have very appropriately and efficiently rescheduled and relocated their outdoor learning programs in a way that is minimising timetable disruption, prudently managing risk and the perception of risk, and maintaining the valuable experiential learning opportunities that these programs provide for their students.

There do, however, seem to be some schools that, due to uncertainty about risk, may be considering abandoning or reducing their outdoor learning programs. We would strongly encourage schools to stand by their commitment to outdoor and experiential learning. The benefits of such programs are enormous, difficult to replicate in the classroom and include some of the skills and attributes that are increasingly essential for students to deal effectively with an ever changing world.

Some of the responses to the bushfires that we have been most proud of during the last couple of weeks – the resilience displayed by so many people directly affected by the fires, the way communities have come together to support each other and the commitment of our volunteer fire fighters, emergency service workers and countless other members of the community – are exactly the kinds of attributes that are fostered by outdoor learning programs.

We are blessed in Victoria with a vast and diverse array of natural environments in which we can learn and play. Whilst the human cost and the shock of the recent fires have been unprecedented, the vast majority of venues for outdoor learning programs remain unaffected. In light of the extraordinary hot weather that created the conditions for the catastrophic fires of February 7th, the Victorian Outdoor Education Association (VOEA), the Australian Camps Association (ACA), the Outdoor Recreation Centre (ORC) and Tourism Alliance Victoria (TAV) have come together to review risk management policies for outdoor activities that relate to extreme weather. The current regulatory frameworks in Victoria for outdoor activities, the ORC's Adventure Activity Standards and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's (DEECD) Safety Guidelines for Education Outdoors, are leading edge risk management frameworks. Both are designed to evolve in line with changing conditions. The outcomes of our current review will be incorporated into those frameworks.

We would encourage Principals and senior staff in schools who are considering these issues to seek advice from land managers (DSE & Parks Victoria) about actual risks in, around and en route to any proposed camp. We would further suggest close consultation with organising staff and outdoor service providers about their risk management plans and contingency arrangements for proposed programs. Further, we encourage decision makers in schools to contact the VOEA on 9349 4311 or the ACA on 9430 2900 to discuss these or any other issues relating to outdoor learning programs or camps. The VOEA can also offer advice on risk management, effective program design and strategies for optimising learning outcomes.

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