



BRATHAY EXPLORE

VOLUNTEERING WITH BRATHAY TRUST

27th January 2017

Background

When in July 2015 Brathay Trust was given the assets of BEG it undertook both to develop an expedition programme and to seek to work to realise that programme with volunteers as well as its own professional staff. That turned out to be more of a challenge than was perhaps recognised at the time but Brathay Trust has now evolved an outline plan to run expeditions in the UK and encourage any participants who wish to go overseas and invited anyone with BEG connections to discuss both that plan and how voluntary input should be arranged.

Dave Harvey has been the member of Brathay Trust staff leading this process alongside his other full time duties but it became evident that properly programmed staff time would be required and Gary Houghton will lead the expedition programme from now on. Dave Harvey convened the meeting and led the discussion. Godfrey Owen, Chief Executive and Malcolm Tillyer, Scott Trust trustee with an obvious interest in expeditions and successor activity to BEG, attended together with seven volunteers with varied associations with BEG (Mick Bachus, Laura Calverley, Paul Kend, Roger Miller, Liz Porter, David Scott Langley, Paul Willams). Several other former BEG leaders had expressed interest and in some cases opinions that were taken account of during the discussion.

Mission

To create a collaborative volunteer contribution that

- fulfils Brathay Trust aspiration
- is satisfying to volunteers
- augments the range & effectiveness of expedition provision.

Considerations

Outline Plan

Brathay Trust had considered what elements of former BEG practice and performance might contribute in the first instance to further development of young people on its youth

programme or potentially related in other ways; for example living in Cumbria or being a pupil at a school with which Brathay Trust has existing connection. It appeared there might be up to 200 prospective participants of that kind during the next year. Brathay Trust works with many other organisation and authorities including the National Citizen Service and has engaged with Gold DofE residents (though DofE arrangements make this progressively more difficult).

Incorporation of expeditions into a progressive training programme serves an idea of individual progression that underlies all Brathay youth work. It seems sensible to start with a programme wholly within Great Britain. That minimises the risk, is appropriate for the probable initial participants and plays to current strengths. Brathay Trust has premises not only on the Brathay estate but also in the Duddon Valley that could be used. That would allow taster weekends and a variety of familiarisation with the fells as preparation for full expeditions. It has long been known that many children in West Cumbria never get into the countryside so close to where they live. This would also allow discharge of an obligation inherited from BEG to disburse a Wainwright grant to the benefit of Cumbrian youngsters.

Somewhat longer ventures that camp and live independently can follow (or pick up directly those who are ready), building as far as possible on BEG experience both in the Lake District and in Scotland. D S L has maintained links with Foula and has an expedition plan (presented and discussed at some length) that needs only members and leaders to be feasible in 2018. Successive use of the same contacts and locations over several years, on the Foula model, would be favoured over scattered initiatives. Other Scottish ventures such as canoeing the Great Glen or River Spey, renewed collaboration with Mar Lodge etc were mentioned but are at this stage simply illustrative possibilities that encourage belief that a worthwhile programme is possible.

Also in principle there is the possibility in due course of

- all volunteer led expeditions
- academic contacts for fieldwork
- recruitment of non BH expeditioners (similar to the original apprentices + schoolboys model)
- DofE collaboration
- overseas ventures not dependent on referring aspirants to another organisation

History

There are lessons to be learned from BEG's history, even though at the end it did not enjoy enough voluntary help to preserve it as an independent exploration society. Some of them are that volunteers

- need the satisfaction of helping shape expeditions they lead
- will contribute in other ways as long as it is enjoyable to do so & improves the programme
- want their particular skills and knowledge to be used
- need to determine how much time they will contribute
- benefit from an independent association that can represent their collective views

- want opportunities to flourish as an association, not just individual suppliers of time and talents

It is also salutary to consider why what is now suggested might be able to avoid the fate of BEG. The chief positive differences appear to be that there may be a pool of young expedition members ready to be tapped and much more substantial administrative support and publicity than BEG could latterly afford. BEG in its better days could run a large enough programme to absorb the office costs without unduly burdening any one expedition and it is intended to do so again but the whole enterprise does not now depend on it. On the assumption that leaders fell away because there was nothing to lead and organisation ceased to be possible because there were not the people to do it, this is a reasonable aspiration.

Volunteer Strengths

Hall resource is not infinite and volunteers can contribute to a programme and also support to Gary Houghton as expedition administrator who might otherwise feel rather isolated. That programme would be smaller and probably narrower in scope than it need be if no way can be devised to recruit and use their

- leadership experience
- local knowledge
- specialist or subject knowledge
- contacts
- enthusiasm
- time
- willingness to recruit others & knowledge of suitable recruits

Weaknesses

Volunteers can be difficult because they

- will be dispersed across the nation & so present communication difficulties
- can have stubbornly held ideas that are not in accord either with professional opinion or even an agreed plan
- are not dependent on this organisation & can leave at any time

Opportunities

Above all to organise so as to make best use of the strengths & be ready to counter any weaknesses by creating

- Communication arrangements that can satisfy both Brathay Trust and BEG requirements & interconnections within the body of volunteers. This is likely to require volunteers who can collaborate with the office to organise appropriate social media links.
- Organisational arrangements that give some independent coherence to the volunteer group. Earlier experience suggests this will require a small group of volunteers willing to act as a committee or steering group for the association and collaborate closely with the office at Brathay Trust

- Participative review in which everyone is listened to & all views valued. That suggests consultation sufficiently early to allow contributions to the extent, destinations, aims & content of expeditions, opportunities to convene occasionally to exchange ideas, fostering loyalty and cohesion, and possibly the emergence of specialist sub groups and a formal mechanism for feeding their input to the voluntary committee or administrator.
- Possibly a return to emphasising fieldwork as an expedition objective
- Links with other organisations that can enrich the Brathay offering (on which a start has been made with British Exploring, but no scientific links for fieldwork).
- Clear conventions about financial matters (e.g. volunteer expenses, terms on which leaders participate in expeditions)

Threats

- impatience on either side when matters do not run smoothly
- lack of understanding of or respect for Brathay Trust objectives & methods
- administrative shortcomings

What Next?

This meeting served to suggest that there is scope to create a collaborative arrangement between volunteers and professionals at Brathay that could achieve a very worthwhile addition to youth expeditioning. Inevitably conclusions reached at so small a gathering, lacking real representative substance, leave open substantial questions of feasibility and implementation. Some obvious ones are

- Can enough voluntary leaders really be found when there are so many organisations paying for that service, and if so where are they to be found?
- Is there enough volunteer enthusiasm and time available to fill the roles that development and maintenance of a voluntary body would require and how are those volunteers to be recruited, legitimised and operate?
- Are there really 200 young people who will want to go on Brathay expeditions every year?
- Will the cost to Brathay Trust of sustaining an expedition programme turn out to be sustainable?
- How might a strongly expressed desire whenever possible to include fieldwork objectives suited to expedition participants be realised? Can partner organisations or eminent advisers to help with this be found?

To consider these and other relevant matters and receive a report from Gary on progress in developing an expedition programme it is intended to arrange another gathering at Brathay, probably late in April. Attendance in person and written contributions from any who cannot attend will be welcome. Details will follow