

# *active*

education

## Why Adventure Calls!

**Awakening The Spirit Of  
Exploration In Students**

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# Why Adventure Calls!

## Awakening The Spirit Of Exploration In Students

**Y**ou might have seen the Crossing The Ditch documentary on Nat Geo Adventure or read about the courageous Tasman voyage in the newspaper a few years ago, yet the truth behind the adventurous lives of James Castrission and Justin Jones is much more than just fulfilling a challenge and telling a story. Their love of adventuring and exploring the world's great outdoors runs much, much deeper in their veins. These two adventurers, who are both in their late twenties, are the perfect example of young adults who have been positively shaped by outdoor education and their experiences in unfamiliar wilderness. This further emphasises the very importance of outdoor education and its direct impact upon building well-rounded, courageous and confident young adults.

James and Justin became friends at high school through their shared love of exploring the outdoors in and around Sydney, NSW. As James recalls, the first time he got a proper taste for being outdoors was through the cadets program,

which is where he met and befriended Justin. Together they embarked on their first journey into what they describe as the 'real outdoors', and they absolutely loved it. It was that shared fondness of adventure and exploration that sparked their friendship, and they are still adventuring together some 15 years later.

It is rare for people to remember their entire school life but there are always some activities that seem to stand out. And it is often these 'stand out' memories that have had the most influence on students and who they have become in years to follow. For James and Justin, outdoor education well and truly made its mark. As James recalls, "At the end of year ten we did a two-week mini-expedition that had an element of bush walking and bike riding, and even though it was extremely cold and snowy in the Blue Mountains, I just loved every moment of it. Through the growth I felt as a human being and the connection to the environment, I really learnt about my boundaries and what I was capable of doing. And



I was also able to share the experience with my best friends." The thrill and satisfaction of camaraderie and cooperation should never be underestimated. It is highly unlikely that all students will choose to become professional adventurers, however, no matter what path they choose, their ability to work with others will always be vital and respected.

Looking back upon this particular Blue Mountains expedition, which is likely to have been the very experience that sparked a lifetime passion, James says "The biggest thing it gave me was self-confidence and belief in myself. I understood that I could push my body quite far, a lot more than I thought I was capable of. The more I challenged myself, the more I learnt about myself." This is the precise focus of outdoor education programs and it must always be remembered that the main objective is not to learn to

read a map or take a compass bearing, but for the by-product of these experiences to shape well-rounded, emotionally sound and resilient students. And it is the students who experience and thrive in outdoor situations who push themselves further in the many facets of life to follow.

However, the adventures did not stop once James and Justin left school. As James and Justin point out, there are so many adventures to be had all around us; and you do not have to go to far-flung corners of the world. James and Justin look fondly upon the many adventures they have undertaken through the Blue Mountains, a range easily accessible from the city of Sydney, where they live. Teachers should encourage young adventurers to make the most of the tracks and national parks that are close to where they live. There they will find the unbeatable

feeling of getting out there that will give context to their lives. It is easy to become self-absorbed and only think about the problems that you are directly experiencing, but when you are outdoors exploring and being challenged, your level of social awareness is raised and your life is put into a much more realistic perspective.

The biggest and most challenging expedition to date was in 2008, when James and Justin became the first two people in the world to kayak across the Tasman Sea from Australia to New Zealand. They expected the journey to take 35-40 days but packed enough food for 50, just in case. The journey actually lasted 62 days, and by the time they arrived on New Zealand's shores they were sleep deprived, starving, had endured severe ocean storms and had been tormented by sharks.

James and Justin trained for two years



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prior to the Tasman expedition but they only became aware of the true danger of their mission when experienced kayaker Andrew McAuley died in late 2007 while making the exact same voyage to New Zealand. To this day, McAuley's body has never been found. "Seeing him get so close to New Zealand, and then it all going so horribly wrong, really knocked us about. He [McAuley] was an amazing adventurer, and he got so close but yet he was still so far away. It made the dangers of our trip extremely real," Justin recalls.

James and Justin were advised not to continue, on the premise that something might go wrong. They became acutely aware that if they did not get things right there could be serious consequences. "We were highly emotional about what happened and we thought about giving it away, but then we referred back to the years of planning that we had done. His approach was very different to the approach we had set out in our risk-management plan. We put the emotion aside and looked at our plan with rational minds. We came up with our approach for a reason, and it included the risk levels we were happy to take on. So we stuck to the way we had

been planning on doing it, and we realised that our planning would allow us to get across."

Expeditions of this nature are more often more emotionally challenging than they are physically. In the lead-up to the Tasman expedition, the pair trained for 30 hours a week for around nine months. However, they always knew that within ten days of being out at sea it would become a battle within the mind. After paddling halfway across the Tasman Sea in 17 days, they became stuck in a giant whirlpool in the middle of the ocean. For two whole weeks they went around in circles, making the second half of the expedition a total of 45 days to reach New Zealand. They were getting no more than three hours of sleep each night, and while they were stuck in the whirlpool a storm that lasted four days hit them. "We could not do anything. After four days with no sleep I hit the lowest point in my life. I was punching the cabin walls, and I was actually trying to break my hand. I was hallucinating, and for the first time in my life I lost control of myself," says James. "Two hours later we realised that we couldn't keep fighting the storms and the whirlpool. We decided to head back towards

Australia to try and catch some prevailing winds. We slingshot ourselves around a big current that was about 150km in diameter, and started heading south. It was lateral thinking, and we got through it."

James and Justin believe that outdoor education is about 90 per cent planning and ten per cent execution. It is imperative that teachers and group leaders spend a lot of time planning, working through risk-management strategies and addressing all the issues they might be faced with while they are out there. As James explains, "By ensuring that a solid risk-management plan is in place and that the environment is well controlled and monitored constantly, students will be able to work through a whole range of different outdoor pursuits. If the environment is safe and controlled, students are free to explore and push themselves beyond boundaries."

Teachers should also spend time helping students prepare for the mental and emotional challenges they will face when they are outdoors in unfamiliar territory. "The great thing about outdoor education is that you can challenge students in a controlled environment. The most effective training we have done is actually with the Australian

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Army – they put us through food- and sleep-deprivation exercises. There were army officers around us, and they pushed us to the absolute limit, to the point of exhaustion, collapse and hallucination. But being in that controlled environment with experienced people around us, we really learnt a lot. When we were faced with the situation out on the Tasman Sea, we were then able to deal with those issues by ourselves,” says Justin. Teachers should push students to their limits when they are in that controlled environment, so that students know how to face the situation when they are by themselves. If they are familiar with the situation, and they know to what level they need to (and can) push themselves to, then they will be in a position to tackle the challenge on their own.

In October this year, James and Justin will become the first two people in the world to trek unsupported from the edge of Antarctica to the South Pole and back. They will bravely make the journey on foot without the assistance of a support team. During the adventurous voyage they will travel over 2200km pulling 160kg sleds through one of the harshest environments on Earth. It is estimated that the journey will take just under three months. After attributing their success

in crossing the Tasman to their meticulous planning and training, they have been preparing for their upcoming expedition for the past eighteen months, including a two-month stint in the Arctic circle. Training in around the Sydney CBD includes running for hours while dragging tyres through various tracks and trails to simulate what it will feel like when they are pulling their sleds across the ice. It is this level of physical training that will also prepare them mentally.

“Mental training is very closely related to physical training. The more times you can put your body in a situation where it is being pushed outside its comfort zone, you get more and more confident and your mind becomes stronger and stronger. You learn where your boundaries are mentally and how you can push them physically,” says James. “The most important thing is living the journey – being dedicated to the journey and believing in it 100 per cent. When you go through the highs and the lows, it really feels real. If you don’t do all the planning and preparation, and you have other people do it for you, you will not understand all the work behind it and you will not feel a sense of ownership over the journey.”

The story of James and Justin is not only

a story of adventure, dedication, personal growth and achievement, it is largely a story of experience and fun. And it is stories of this nature that remind us that all students, of all ages, must be encouraged to adventure and continue to place themselves in situations that are outside the realm of their normal reality. This is where school outdoor education programs become so crucial in the development of well-rounded students, especially for those who do not have the opportunity to embark on these kinds of adventures in their own spare time. All students must be given the opportunity to realise that their limits are self-imposed and to learn to overcome the emotional and mental challenges that accompany all the tasks that life will throw at them. Students need to be able to define their role in a team and understand their own strengths and leadership capabilities. It is only through these broader contexts and raw experiences that students will begin to develop a true view of the world around them. It is these essential benefits that are the reasons why adventure continues to call. ■■■

To follow James and Justin’s Antarctic adventure, visit [www.casandjonesy.com.au](http://www.casandjonesy.com.au).

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