

An Organizational History of the Association of Outdoor Recreation & Education (AORE)  
By Ron Waters

Disclaimer: The thoughts and opinions expressed here are that of the author and do not necessarily reflect that of Association of Outdoor Recreation and Education (AORE) or its members.

### **Preface**

The Association of Outdoor Recreation and Education (AORE) shouldn't exist. The feisty little organization should have been lassoed and taken over by another organization a long time ago. Or if that wasn't possible, it should have been taken out back and shot. It certainly would have saved me a heck a lot of heartache over the years.

Somehow whenever things got really bad - and there were times when things really got bad - leaders would emerge, calmness and sanity would prevail, and the organization would fight its way back. But before those times, before those periods of stability, the organization was often perched precariously on the edge of organizational oblivion.

In some of its weakest moments, snake oil salesmen would appear, their traveling medicine shows in tow, woo the association's members with wonderful and fantastic promises, and lead them blithely into the wilderness. Then they would disappear. After some aimless wandering, the organization would eventually find its way back on track and trudge on.

It is a fascinating history, quite unlike any other professional association. It has had more starts and stops and twists and bends than the plot of a Sherlock Holmes mystery.

Which, of course, makes it interesting to write about - and that's what this humble paper is all about. But it's also about something else. There are some lessons to be learned from AORE's history, lessons that might help as new leaders step up to the plate. It also may be of help to others out there in the world, energetic and full of hope, who are bent upon that same thankless task of starting their own organizations. So, perhaps, it might do some good. At the very least, I hope it provides some good reading.

### **The Non-association Era**

In AORE's early incarnation, it was a non-association. A non-association? Yes, indeed. A series of outdoor conferences were held without the supervision and intervention of an organization. How did it work? At each conference, there were always several individuals who were willing to plan and host the next conference. These were full-blown conferences with banquets, evening programs, workshops, and published proceedings. It was, to put it lightly, exhilarating. There was no one in control, no elected president, no constitution, no board of directors, no rules and regulations, just excited and committed individuals in the field who believed in common goals and were willing to make the conferences happen.

While this may seem to some as naïve and reckless, you must understand the outdoor education field was young at that time - and naïve and reckless. It was a wild and hopeful time, a time of great experimentation with types and styles of programming, and a time when everything seemed possible.

The non-association era was preceded by informal networking between programs starting in the 1970's. University outdoor programmers would get together informally at regional and national

conferences such as the Association of College Unions, National Intramurals-Recreational Sports Association, National Parks and Recreation Society, etc. However, it wasn't the best situation. The aforementioned organizations were focused on other matters and outdoor recreation was largely an afterthought. At the same time, there wasn't a real impetus among those in the outdoor field to create their own conference. Program directors were busy running their own programs, travel money was scarce, and there wasn't a lot of interest, nor time available to do otherwise.

Finally in 1984, representatives from several university outdoor programs decided it was time to organize a conference solely for professionals involved in the non-profit outdoor recreation field. That conference, called the National Outdoor Recreation Conference was held at Montana State University - and what a conference it was! The cork had finally been popped and years of pent up energy released. Finally, outdoor programmers and academics were able to meet one another face-to-face at a conference designed specifically around outdoor recreation and education.

The desire for new ideas was so great that it was difficult to get scheduled programs to stop on time. Informational sessions would often spill out into hallways where discussions continued in small groups long afterward. It didn't seem like there was enough time in the day to meet attendees' thirst for information, the days extending well into the evening, and even into the early hours of morning.

Near the end of the 1984 conference, a collective unease began to spread among participants. Was this it? Would this wonderful vehicle of exchanging information in the field come to an abrupt end? The original organizers had hoped not.

Like replicating DNA strands, they had hoped that a strand would unwind from the first conference creating a second conference. And then a third conference would unwind from the second and so on. Throughout the conference, organizers were busy assisting the DNA process, button-holing friends, and encouraging a new group to plan the next conference. Finally several California schools came to the rescue, announcing that they would host the next the event. Two years later, the second conference was held in Davis, California.

The second conference was as satisfying and stimulating as the first. By the time the Davis conference was held, those intimately involved in organizing the conferences began to believe that this new and innovative way of a running conference might work after all. The benefits were plain to see. It was incredibly efficient. Since the conference didn't require a supervising organization, all energies could be directed toward putting on a good conference and not supporting an organizational structure. Conference fees were unimaginably low, making it affordable by students and professionals. That was largely because everyone pitched in and helped, and none of the conference fees went to support a sponsoring organization.

Eventually, the cooperative manner in which the conference continued from year to year without the supervision of an outside organization became known as a "non-association." It quickly became a source of pride. It was like a common adventure trip. People could work cooperatively together, share leadership tasks, and create great things without getting bogged down in organizational bureaucracy. Considering the youngness of the field and the desire to try new things, the concept of a non-association turned into one grand and fantastic experiment. The experiment lasted for an amazing nine years, from 1984 to 1993, a period of time which I refer to as the Non-association Era.

## **An Augury**

An augury of things to come, however, made its presence at the third conference which was held at Colorado State in Fort Collins, Colorado. A meeting was scheduled to talk about the future of the conference and select the next site. During that discussion, a representative of the Audubon Society offered to have the bird watching society take over sponsorship of the conference. No one had seen this individual at previous conferences and he would never be seen again. Apparently, he was a local Audubon member, and it was likely that he had no authority to offer the organization's sponsorship, but it did raise a red flag and it started the room buzzing. A few people suggested forming a new association, but the overall consensus was to continue the non-association experiment. It was argued that the conference had been spectacular success so far. Why change that?

The fourth conference was held at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. By now the word had gotten out about the National Outdoor Recreation Conference. Professionals, academics and students were returning from conferences recharged, full of ideas for their programs and classrooms. It was becoming the place to go if you were involved in non-profit outdoor recreation. Something else was happening at the same time: growth in the number of outdoor recreational programs. Combine this with the conference's first eastern location, and there were an overwhelming numbers of new faces present.

The conference was also attracting the interest of other organizations. One of those was Association of Experiential Education. AEE's representative, Dan Garvey, attended the site selection meeting and proposed that the National Outdoor Recreation Conference organize under the auspices of his organization.

The AEE is a well respected organization and Garvey's proposal was very attractive. It was particularly attractive to the many new individuals in the room that had no idea of the non-association experiment. A wild discussion followed. A few tried to explain how the conference operated, how it was able to exist without the need of a supervising organization. Others, mostly new participants, spoke in support of Garvey's offer. Finally a vote was called.

It was at that point that Jim Rennie, who had helped organize the first conference in 1984, rose from his chair and made the most peculiar announcement.

"This is not an association." Rennie explained. "This is a non-association. In non-associations people can not vote."

The room remained quiet while the implications of Rennie's words settled in. Everywhere there were looks of disbelief.

A rumble began. "We can't vote?" And with that the room erupted in debate about the matter of voting in non-associations. In the end the vote was never taken and the non-association was preserved.

Dan Garvey's offer of AEE's support was offered freely, and it is very much to his credit that he graciously accepted the result. Of course, no one was really sure what the result was, but he was gracious in its acceptance just the same.

Jim Rennie quickly offered to sponsor the next conference at University of Idaho in Moscow. Since there were no other realistic proposals, the next conference would head back west.

A huge drawback of the non-association concept now became apparent. Under the right conditions, it was not inconceivable for another organization to appear at the conference and make generous offers of support and assistance and assimilate the conference. Representatives from other organizations might not be as gracious and understanding as Dan Garvey. A slick operator, looking to do a little empire building, might not so ethically inclined. There was a real danger that the conference and its participants could be hijacked.

The conference was safe for a while. Jim Rennie was determined to keep it firmly in the non-association camp at University of Idaho. But non-association supporters realized that the conference couldn't always be kept in safe territory. It had to move back and forth across the U.S. (and Canada) if it was to be truly effective. It was time to deal with the "A" word: association. Creating an association was infinitely preferable to being overtaken by another organization. At least some of the original ideals and principles of the non-association could be preserved and incorporated in its structure. Moreover, conference attendees were beginning to desire other benefits such as the ability to network between conferences, a collective voice to weigh in on important issues, and an outdoor education journal. Those benefits were clearly only possible through the structure of a professional association.

### **The Sub-group Era**

Consensus was reached at the next conference (held at the University of Calgary) that a committee would be formed to create the structure of the new association. It was unanimous. By this time all non-association supporters were on board. All that winter, mail was exchanged between committee members. The next fall, committee members assembled in Corvallis just before the start of 7th conference. They worked to put together a structure which was open, cooperative rather than authoritarian, employed consensus building, kept membership fees low, and dispensed with the rules and regulations which often bog down organizations.

They worked right through the night and into the early hours of the morning. Unknowingly, they had set a trend. For the next several years, the fledging organization's board meetings would often go all night long. One could easily spot board members at conferences. They were the ones clutching coffee cups and wandering around in a daze.

Finally the constitution framers reached agreement and were ready to present the new organization at a general meeting scheduled near the end of the conference.

We move now to the climactic general meeting. It was here, at the general meeting, that one of the strangest and most surprising events in AORE's history took place. The organizational meeting was being run by Dave Secunda who was the director of a 4-year old organization called the Outdoor Recreation Coalition (ORCA), a trade group of outdoor manufactures. Secunda had been chosen to lead the discussion because he was very good at moderating large groups. He was articulate, disarming and quick on his feet.

Secunda very efficiently guided the process through the approval of by-laws and elections of the new board. AORE as a professional association had finally become a reality.

Then came a stunning turn of events. Secunda proposed that the new association not incorporate independently, but rather become an arm of ORCA.

This came as a complete surprise to the members of the constitutional framing committee. Secunda had been present through all of the committee's meetings. During those meetings he never once mentioned his proposal.

It was also an audacious proposal. One of the important reasons for forming the new organization was to prevent the overtaking of the conference by another outside organization. But, amazingly, Secunda was proposing just that. In reality, AORE would become a sub-group of ORCA. "Sub-group," in fact, was the proper and legal name for the arrangement as outlined in ORCA's by-laws at the time. Accepting Secunda's proposal would mean that AORE would not become an independent professional association. It could not incorporate on its own. It could not gain its own tax exempt status.

Those facts were not totally understood at the time since Secunda had used a wide array of euphemistic terms in his explanations. Moreover, the offer had come so quickly that there was no chance for anyone to do any research.

It was a captivating offer and Secunda knew how to sell. He offered a central office, secretarial help, money management and other benefits. A few early conference organizers stood and spoke against the proposal, but they scrambled for words, having found themselves utterly surprised by the announcement. Voices soon joined Secunda's expressing support and others joined those. Why pass up such a generous offer? A vote was taken and Secunda's proposal was accepted. Any hope that AORE would become its own independent association was dashed.

No doubt that Secunda was sincere in his intention to help AORE, but why use political trickery? Why not give the new association a little time to get its feet under it, and let the new board thoroughly research the proposal first?

It was, at the end of the day, an incredible irony. The association had been formed to avoid being overtaken by an outside organization. Minutes after it had been formed, it was overtaken by a large outside organization. Even through AORE members continued to call themselves an association, it was in name only. It could not become a legal association. It had, quite astonishingly, returned to the status of a non-association, this time in the form of a subgroup.

To Secunda's credit, he pulled strings at ORCA to make things work, but it was a very odd arrangement from the start. AORE was meant to be a professional organization of academics and practitioners working in the field of outdoor recreation. ORCA, however, was a trade organization. Its primary responsibility was to protect manufacturers and retailers. The parent organization and its new sub-group had two very different, and even potentially conflicting purposes. Thus began AORE's Sub-group Era.

## **Creating Documents**

The board went to work, holding its meetings a day or so in advance of the annual conference. Early on, it was decided that documents were needed: informational brochures, a mission statement, goals and objectives, policy statements, and strategic plans. There was great concern over the wording of documents, and each would be read word for word while board members pondered all possible meanings and sub-meanings and anguished over proper noun choices. Board members might spend all night working on one page of a document. When the second year came around-and a few new members came aboard-the board determined that more documents were needed and existing documents needed revision, and board members

would go through the same process. Around the third or fourth year, the board was composed of a completely new set of members. Not knowing what exactly had been completed by earlier boards, and moved by a great desire to bring everything up to date, the new board embarked upon drafting their own set of documents.

I was on the board in the early 1990s and re-joined it again during a stormy period in 2000. Board members were still going through and revising documents which I had worked on in the 1990s.

But I've come to learn and accept that as the nature of the beast. The membership wants the board to grapple with the issues. It wants the board to make sure it has looked at all sides of an issue before making important decisions. This process of being faithful to the membership, however, does have its drawbacks. The production of documents and the exploration of issues requires a lot of talking, in fact a great amount of talking, an inordinate amount of talking. Talking, of course, doesn't really get things done.

But such inefficiencies are a small price to pay for the vital benefits provided by associations. Because AORE exists, there is an elected group of people that are charged with the responsibility of making sure that there will indeed be a conference. When conferences were run as a non-association, there was no such group which had been given that responsibility. It's very likely that the (National Outdoor Conference which was renamed the International Conference on Outdoor Recreation and Education, and which, in turn, recently was renamed AORE's Annual Conference) would have disappeared or have been merged into another organization's conference had not AORE been around to keep a watchful eye on things. There are other vital advantages: accountability of money, supervision and management of scholarship funds, maintenance of a listserv, and custody of all the little and vital tasks that could not have been accomplished otherwise.

There is absolutely no question that the association route was the best way to go. Still during some of those interminable night meetings when fellow board members and I might spend an entire hour coming to agreement on the wording of one sentence, I would yearn for those bureaucracy-free days when it was all a non-association.

## **The Downhill Slide**

Let's return to AORE's story. We left off at Corvallis in 1993. AORE had just become assimilated into ORCA as a sub-group. Dave Secunda had promised in Corvallis that membership fees would not be raised. Within two years, however, ORCA was raising AORE membership fees. It wasn't a large raise, but it was a of reminder who really was in the driver's seat. In an independent professional association, the members set their own membership fees, but since AORE was not independent, its fees were set by the parent organization.

A minor replay of the Boston tea party transpired. No AORE members served on ORCA's board, and thus AORE had no direct representation. Because of the fee issue, a small group at the 1995 conference held at Cornell, threw tea bags into the air, and made an attempt at ending the relationship. It was unsuccessful. Even so, the Cornell conference marked the beginning of a long slippery downhill course in relations between the two organizations-and that brings us to the lowest point in AORE's history.

It happened at the 1998 conference held at Fort Walton Beach, Florida. AORE had now been a part of ORCA for 5 years. Problems were mounting between the two organizations. Finally,

ORCA had enough. Yes, you heard that right. It was ORCA that decided the relationship was no longer in their interest. AORE was cut loose.

### **Starts-n-Stops**

AORE had lost five years in which they could have been legally incorporated, obtained their non-profit status and been well on their way to fulfilling their mission to their membership. Instead they were starting all over again.

If that wasn't bad enough, there was also a more pressing concern. The Florida conference had been held earlier than past conferences and did not attract the usual numbers of conference attendees. The fledging organization not only had to start from ground zero from an organizational basis. It had to pick up the tab for a conference that was way in the red.

Interestingly enough, many of the individuals who had enthusiastically supported Dave Secunda's bid to overtake the organization were now gone. They were no longer members of the Association having moved on to different professions.

But the newly elected board went to work and gradually put the association back together. This time it would be a real association owned by its members and not by an outside organization. A national office manager was selected to help manage the association. There was, of course, turmoil and uncertainty, but there was always the conference to offset it. The conference remained the bright spot, the one common purpose that held all else together.

Still, in the background, turmoil continued. Sadly, the first manager of the fledging association was ineffective and impolitic. Like Secunda he had made promises which were too good to be true. Shouting matches with the board or association members were not unheard of.

Thus began a three year period of starts and stops, hopes and disappointments. Mercifully, it lasted no longer than three years. The Association manager finally quit abruptly in the middle of the year before his contract ended. AORE's president Tina Carter had to drive to Colorado to collect all of the association's documents and return with them to her Texas school. Amidst her many professional duties, she did the best she could to keep the association's office going until a new manager could be found.

### **A Real Association Finally Emerges**

The board then entered into a careful and exhaustive search for its next national office manager. A proposal came in from one of its own: Georgi Baird. Georgi had been involved through all phases of the organization's history: non-association, sub-group, and starts-n-stops. She knew the conference's history well. She had helped at many of the late night meetings, taking notes, soothing raw nerves, and keeping groggy members awake.

With the hiring of Georgi Baird in 2001, AORE, the organization, suddenly came out of the long dark tunnel which it had entered at Corvallis. She was the complete opposite of the group's first office manager: optimistic, diplomatic, and competent. Baird knew the background of the organization, she knew its members, and, importantly, she knew how to run an office efficiently. She was paid a very modest salary-and for that AORE got an incredible deal. For starters, the organization got two for the price of one. Ken, her husband was a computer expert and he quickly computerized AORE's records.

Together they brought a remarkable degree of professionalism and proficiency to the office. Things got done and got done on time. Though it wasn't in the original plan, Baird was asked to

take on the responsibilities of handling conference monies. It added greatly to her work load, but it freed conference organizers from the task of handling money, allowing them to concentrate on programming.

Finally, the association belonged to the members. Finally it had become an established, respected and reliable organization serving the outdoor education field. Things never stay the same, of course. Change is the one constant that we can always count on. But, nonetheless, if newspaper writers had been following the story, the final headline in the series would have read: "AORE: Finally a Real and Independent Association."

### **A Look Forward**

By 2005 Georgi Baird was ready for a well-deserved retirement. Stepping down from her position, she was replaced by Cynthia Blankenship Bruggeman. Cynthia, working under the able leadership of a new board and president, quickly started building upon the strong and solid foundation established by Georgi.

What does the future hold? Well, there will always be challenges and unexpected twists and turns. I will guarantee you that there will be more snake oil salesmen making wonderful and fantastic promises. But the organization will survive. It's worth fighting for. It will continue to make an impact in the outdoor education field. And the conference will continue.

So there it is, the history of the Association of Outdoor Recreation and Education: from its earliest beginnings as the great non-association experiment; to the brief flicker of a professional association to its quick demise and new life as an industry sub-group; to the starts and stops of a resurrected association; to finally becoming a real live professional association.

There are a few of us left, still remaining members of AORE, who have been through all of those stages. I suppose that had we any kind of control - which, of course, we didn't - it might have been easier to dispense with the idea of a non-association and formed an association right off the bat. But, in the end, we probably wouldn't have wanted it that way. It would have been too easy, too tame, too conventional, too so-so - and, besides, what a wild and spirited ride we would have missed.

### **About the Author**

Ron Watters was one of the organizers of the first National Conference on Outdoor Recreation which was held in 1984. He served on the planning committees of several subsequent conferences, including those in 1986, 1991, 1992, and 2001. He edited and published conference proceedings from the following years: 1984, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1995 and 1996. He was on AORE's constitutional framing committee in 1993. He served on the founding Board of Directors from 1993 to 1995. He returned to the board and served from 2000 to 2003. During that time he helped the Association gain its non-profit tax status, and he wrote "Conference Handbook for Hosts of the International Conference and Outdoor Recreation and Education" and "A Helpful Guide to Becoming a Host of ICORE."