

Duke of Edinburgh Silver and Gold Practice Adventurous Journey 2020

Saturday morning broke with a slight chill but the equipment was packed and ready to go. Hillcrest was eerily quiet as we arrived – but that wasn't to last for long. Ms Sharon Tobler was already waiting when Sam Schooley, Abbey Gibbs, Zach Gibbs and Jack Johnson arrived. After loading the paddles, seats and kayaks onto my trailer and tying down, we were off to the upper reaches of the Nerang River – just above Hinze Dam. Joshua Bryant was meeting us at Pocket Road, Numinbah where we were to launch by 10:30am in the morning.

It was obvious that the water level had dropped over the last three weeks since I had reconnoitred the river, as the short runs of shallow water we would be forced to drag our kayaks over, had lengthened, but were still manageable. The rocks were a tad slippery, but everyone was well prepared and carefully negotiated the creek bed geography.

After the last of the portages, we glided into a scene reminiscent of an American movie featuring 'gators in a Louisiana swamp. Duck-weed covered the entire surface and the finger-like bone grey branches of drowned trees stretched up all around us. Everyone seemed to hush a little and it was only a floating log across the entire width of the creek blocking our passage that broke us out of the gloom. It required a bit of ingenuity to force the narrow end down to allow the kayaks to slip over the top of it and allow us to progress.

From here on the weed cleared and paddling was steadier. I used a navigation app to determine the students were cruising at about four and a half km/hr – a respectable speed. After a few more bends of the waterway we paddled under the Pine Creek Bridge and past the Numinbah Environmental Centre. We had reached the dam proper.

Interestingly, much of the Hinze Dam edge is fringed by stands of drowned tree trunks. Fish like cover and food sources – these dead trees provide the perfect habitat. This attracts fisherman hoping to tangle with the local Australian Bass. Though there are Yellowbelly, Saratoga and Mary River Murray cod supposedly in the dam, I am yet to see one. We passed a number of fishermen either on their kayaks or in their tinnies plying their skills or was it more trying luck?

It was a solid workout paddling from the Western arm of the dam across to the other. Our destination was the eastern boat ramp and it would be a total travel distance of about 14.5km for the day. Generally the wind was nothing but a light breeze, however, as we came around the corner and in view of the Dam wall, the breeze changed into a solid wind from the southeast and demanded nothing but grit, determination and a stoic resolve to paddle onwards despite the fatigue that was creeping through everyone's limbs. Fortunately the wind abated to a breeze and then disappeared altogether for the last half hour. Over the final kilometre, we were paddling across a millpond surface and our predicted 4:15pm arrival was just about spot on! Jack, Zach, Joshua, Abbey and Sam did an awesome job of paddling for the day and the comments of tired arms and sore lower backs reflected the task completed! Mrs Tobler and I had been working our legs out though, as the Hobie kayaks use a pedalling system rather than paddles - but we were just as weary.

Mrs Wotton was there to greet us with our transportation and after a quick reloading of the kayaks we were chauffeured to a property owned by friends of ours barely two minutes down the road. Lenor and James are lovely people and graciously allowed us to camp overnight on a bare, flat pad in the adjoining paddock. A quick unpack and setting up of tents ensued while the sun slowly dipped behind the hills and darkness enveloped us. Jasmine lives on the property too and bravely introduced herself to the group. Being a Year 11 student at a nearby school, she thought it

appropriate to say “Hello!”, but not knowing any of the Hillcrest mob who had come to squat, she was unsure of what reception she’d receive. I was so proud of how inclusive our Hillcrest students were of her as they quickly integrated her into the group for the evening. Sitting round the designated fire pit, a decent blaze had been lit and everyone was able to assemble their Trangia, or other camp cooking equipment to use as they prepared their own evening meal. Students cater for themselves and are responsible for what food is brought and how it is prepared. Knowing there would be a fire, plans had obviously been made, as marshmallows quickly surfaced and sugar and conversation flowed into the evening. Sleep was a priority and sleep was welcomed shortly after 10:00pm in order to refresh and restore us for another day to come.

Pancakes were on the menu, with multiple containers of ‘Shake & Pour’ materialising out of Joshua’s bag and Sam also contributing. Everyone who wanted pancakes, had pancakes – smothered in choc-hazelnut spread and wolfed down. So much for a 1 hour breakfast, this gourmet fare had stretched out to a 2 hour banquet (along with a few stomachs), but the students knew it was going to fuel the remaining 7 kilometres charge back across the Dam. After packing down the tents and gear, then cramming both people and belongings into the 4x4, it was back to the Dam for Day Two.

The water was beautiful, the air was starting to warm up and God was so good! The wind was but a slight zephyr and already a number of locals had obviously launched prior to our arrival as we noted the empty vehicles already in the parking area. It wasn’t long before PFDs were on, seats locked into place, paddles were in hands and kayaks were on the water. On the return we took a short detour deeper into an inlet that we had been considering for a possible camp (sadly there is no camping on the dam), but it was obvious that most of the foreshore was at an uncomfortable steepness and wouldn’t have been pleasant to try to pitch a tent on. There was likely a spot right at the end of inlet, but I think we made the right choice in staying where we had.

Jack was keen to visit an island he had identified on a map at the boat ramp, so that was to be our lunch destination. It didn’t take long to arrive there, so Jack, Zach and Joshua took ten minutes to circumnavigate the isle by foot. A quick feed, a moment of excitement when Joshua was convinced he had a fish on (that escaped off the hook before he landed it) and we were in the home straight. A bit more zig-zagging through dead trees to clear the island fringe before open water was all that remained between us and home.

Hinze Dam is limited to non-fuel powered craft. That is, you can only use electric powered motors, sails or body power to propel your boat/yak/canoe/board. This means you really do get to enjoy the peace and quiet along with some good exercise.

With a number of parents already waiting to greet us you could see the metres quickly eaten up as racing contests started between students in the final stretch. What a fantastic couple of days it was! Wonderful company and a pleasure being out in nature doing something that breathes life back into living! To all the Duke of Ed students, thank you for allowing me to be part of the journey. Hmmm, now we better start planning the 4 day, 3 night Qualifying Journey!

If you haven’t considered it before, have a chat to any of the above students about Duke of Ed and what is involved in it and where it can take you. It’s something very exciting to be a part of.

Mr Paul Wotton

SLC Teacher and Head of Resource Centres