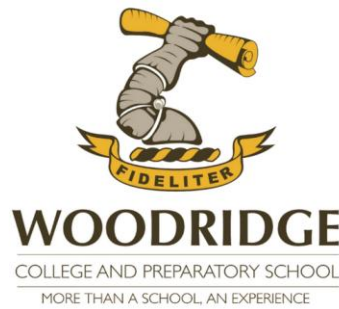




The Woodridge Outdoor Education Rite of Passage

The Significance of the Walking Stick and the Journey Towards “The Way”

Woodridge College and Preparatory School has built its Outdoor Education program around the idea that growth is not merely academic or athletic, it is personal, communal, and spiritual. Through carefully designed expeditions and challenges, pupils are guided along a structured series of rites of passage that foster independence, leadership, and connection to nature.

The Scaffolded Journey

Grade 8 – Learning Responsibility and Self-Reliance

In their first year of College, pupils begin their outdoor journey by learning the foundations of self-reliance and responsibility.

The year begins with the Grade 8 Valley Night, where pupils spend a night under a simple tarpaulin in a wild valley on the Woodridge campus, no tents, no luxury, only teamwork and shared courage. The experience is hosted by the Prefects and Matrics, who welcome the new pupils into the College community with a bonfire and reflection around what it means to be part of Woodridge.

Upon their return to school, these pupils are publicly acknowledged at assembly and invited to sit in the front rows, a symbolic gesture marking their first small rite of passage. They are now permitted to wear their blazers in the hall, a privilege earned through participation, not entitlement.

By the end of Grade 8, they undertake a practice expedition that prepares them for the President’s Award Bronze (Duke of Edinburgh) journey. Here they learn to:

- Navigate using maps and compasses,
- Cook and plan their own meals,
- Work collaboratively in teams,
- and reflect on the meaning of perseverance and leadership.

These experiences build a foundation for what comes next.

Grade 9 – The Rite of Passage

In Grade 9, pupils undertake two significant expeditions that define their transition from being guided to guiding themselves:



COLLEGE HEADMASTER: L HARTLEY | PREP HEADMASTER: T VON BERG | BUSINESS MANAGER: D EMSLIE

TRUSTEES: A PUGGIA | N CRAWFORD | P LYNCH | C MAKALIMA | N MALIZA | D NEZAR

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1. The Maitland Expedition (30 km, 3 days) – A formative challenge early in the year that emphasizes navigation, group responsibility, and resilience.
2. The Longmore Expedition (40 km, 3 days) – A culminating journey that tests leadership, teamwork, and character.

Each pupil must carry everything they need, plot their route, estimate their time of arrival, and complete their journey with purpose. These are not just hikes, they are deliberate, self-directed challenges that prepare pupils for The Way 21-Day Wilderness Adventure in Grade 10.

Upon successful completion of these two expeditions, pupils are recognized at a special Outdoor Education Assembly and are presented with their Walking Stick, the symbol of their Rite of Passage.

The Walking Stick Ceremony

The Walking Stick is both practical and deeply symbolic.

It is not a random object; it is grown, cut, and shaped on Woodridge soil, specifically from the young blue gum forest in the western corner of the campus. The material itself symbolizes rootedness: the idea that strength comes from one's environment, and that the lessons learned at Woodridge are drawn from the very landscape that shapes the community.

A small hole is drilled near the top of each stick, through which a short piece of rope is threaded and tied in a bowline knot, a traditional knot used by sailors and mountaineers.

The Significance of the Bowline

The bowline is often called "the king of knots", simple, reliable, and strong.

It forms a fixed loop that does not slip, no matter how much strain is placed on it. This has powerful symbolism for Woodridge pupils:

- Security: The knot represents the strength of the Woodridge community, firm, dependable, and unwavering, even in pressure.
- Connection: The loop reminds pupils that while they journey independently, they remain connected to those who have gone before them and to those who walk beside them.
- Competence: The bowline is a practical knot, every competent outdoorsperson should know it. It reflects the practical skills and confidence Woodridge pupils develop through the Outdoor Education program.
- Leadership: A well-tied bowline speaks of preparation and foresight, the traits of a dependable leader.

Thus, the rope and knot transform the stick from an object into a symbol of mastery, community, and self-belief.

The Uses and Meaning of the Walking Stick

Beyond its symbolism, the walking stick is a vital companion on The Way.

It becomes a literal extension of the pupil during the 21-day journey through the Baviaanskloof.

Its purposes are many:

1. Stability: A third leg on uneven or rocky ground, providing balance and safety.
2. Protection: Used to move vegetation aside, check for snakes, or steady oneself when crossing rivers.

"Every report is a step towards a safer journey. Speak up, share what happened—together, we create a culture of care and prevention."



3. Shelter: A central pole when constructing a tarp shelter in treeless terrain.
4. Endurance: A physical reminder to keep going, each push on the stick propelling the body forward.
5. Connection: A shared symbol between all those who have undertaken The Way; each stick carries the memory of its owner's journey.
6. Identity: The stick is named and personalized, it represents not just a student, but a traveller who has earned their place in the Woodridge lineage.
7. Story: Each nick, scratch, and mark on the stick tells the story of a journey, of effort, courage, and discovery.

By the end of the 21 days, the stick has travelled 400 km beside its owner. It bears the dust of valleys, the scratches of cliffs, and the spirit of the wilderness.

From Rafters to the Road

After the Grade 9 ceremony, the sticks are collected, labelled with the pupils' names by the Head Boy and Head Girl, and hung from the rafters of the Outdoor Education Headquarters (OEHQ).

There they remain, visible, waiting, suspended between what has been achieved and what is yet to come.

When those same pupils return as Grade 10s the following year, they gather once more at OEHQ before setting off on The Way 21-Day Wilderness Adventure.

In an informal but deeply meaningful moment, the Headmaster personally takes down each stick and presents it to its rightful owner, now older, stronger, and ready for what lies ahead.

The act symbolizes continuity, the journey that began at Woodridge continues into the wilderness, and the lessons of the wilderness will return with them.

Reflection

The Walking Stick represents:

- The roots of Woodridge,
- The strength of community,
- The stability of character,
- The growth that comes from challenge,
- And the faith that guides one through uncertainty.

It is a simple, natural object, yet it embodies everything the Outdoor Education program seeks to instil: Resilience. Humility. Connection. Leadership. Purpose.

When each student eventually returns from The Way, their stick has become more than wood and rope, it has become a part of their story.

"May your stick steady your steps, guide your path, and remind you of where you come from, and of who you are becoming."



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