

Trends and Issues in Outdoor Education Programs
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Trends and Issues in Outdoor Education:

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Standards, Testing, and the No Child Left Behind Act

- Possibly the # 1 trend of residential environmental education is addressing state standards
- No Child Left Behind Act was mentioned by several programs as a challenge that is holding us, as an industry, back from providing the programs that we would like to provide.
- Emphasis for schools is now on “teaching to the test”. Rather than teaching for the sake of teaching and sharing knowledge so students will learn and grow.
- While Environmental Ed. programs are focused on addressing standards, Adventure & Team-building programs are not (necessarily). And yet, most states are required to do some form of “character education” under which many of these programs would lie.

(From Ali Lien’s Master’s Research Project 2005-2006, Prescott College)

Pig in a Python: Baby Boomers in Experiential Education

- Historically, adventure education and many experiential education programs around the United States have been populated by young people. Research and practice has focused for years on the needs and opportunities set forth by this demographic.
- The baby boom generation (born 1946-1964) has been recognized by author and researcher Ken Dychtwald, and others, as group that has required the social fabric of the United States to make unique accommodations as this age group has made their way through various waypoints in society. In many cases this group’s arrival at social milestones has lead to considerable changes and adjustments to meet their needs/wants.

- In 2008 Baby Boomers:
 - are those between ages 44yrs and 63yrs.
 - make up 28% of the US Population.
 - are now beginning to retire (possibly with increased time and money to spend).
- It has been said that baby boomers are a more active and outdoor-oriented group of people. What does this suggest for experiential programming?
- Dan Garvey, Deb Sugarman, and Drew Brennan have conducted independent research that has pointed to the need for experiential education programs to make necessary changes to programs to accommodate older adult participants.

Access to Public Lands

- Most NPS areas require permits, and USFS areas require Outfitter/Guide permits for educational and non-profit groups as well as commercial groups. Some areas are not issuing new group permits, and there are reductions in some other areas. Very difficult to get permits for popular wilderness areas.
- Rumors that Forest Service in some areas may start limiting educational groups, and may start charging them higher fees. (Pressure from commercial outfitters?)
- October 19, 2007 – USFS published proposed directives that could “establish a flat land use fee for temporary use permits....to facilitate greater participation in outfitting and guiding by youth, educational and religious groups...”
- Some outdoor programs feel that some over-zealous wilderness managers don’t want any organized groups in wilderness.
- One program administrator said, “Some eco-zealot land management types hate to have anyone in wilderness, and consider any outfitters as vile exploiters...Mostly it’s a managing agency personnel issue—it is easier for them to deny a permit request, and there is no accountability.”

15 Passenger Vans — Insurance Risk and Cost Issue

- Resulting from some tragic accidents with school, college and church groups.
- Vans roll due to instability when loaded—really mainly a driver issue, slippery roads, driving too fast for conditions, inadequate tire pressure, drivers inexperienced in driving truck-like vehicles.
- Some outdoor programs have gotten rid of 15 passenger vans due to pressure from insurance companies and on advice of program attorneys.
- Some have taken out rear seat. Makes it an 11 passenger van. This results in need to use more vans and more drivers for trips to the backcountry, resulting in significantly higher transportation costs.
- Wilderness Inquiry still uses 15 passenger vans. They believe the insurance industry and attorneys advising programs panicked. They believe it is more a matter of using experienced drivers than worrying about taking out the rear seat.

“Nature-Deficit Disorder”

- Comes from Richard Louv’s new book titled “Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder.” In the book he describes changing youth attitudes about and participation in nature related activities.

- According to Louv, children in the U.S. are becoming more and more disconnected and alienated from nature.
- Increased urbanization, fast paced lifestyle, worries about personal security for children, and increased use of technology for recreation all result in fewer opportunities for children to connect with nature.
- National Parks are experiencing a 20-25% drop in tent camping and backcountry camping over the past 10 years, and a 33% drop in RV camping in the parks.
- This not only indicates a drop in actual camping participation, but a drop in parents taking their children camping so that they help their children develop an affiliation for the outdoors.
- On the other hand we now have a \$10 billion computer gaming industry. Young people camping outside shopping centers waiting in line to buy the \$700 new Play-Station game, or the new Nintendo game. Ironic, it is probably the only time those tents have ever been used.
- Outdoor products industry is also showing a continued decline in outdoor activities like deer hunting in the 18-35 year old demographic. State departments of natural resources are also seeing this drop in young people becoming involved in hunting and fishing.
- Not saying that everyone needs to hunt or fish to be initiated to the outdoors. But these statistics about camping and other activities are an indication that the youth of today are not developing a close affiliation with the outdoors through many traditional outdoor activities.
- This is having an effect on the willingness of today's youth to become involved in some of the outdoor programs we all work with.

Increase in Private Contract and Shorter Programs

- A number of the larger outdoor programs are seeing a slight decline in participation of catalog advertised outdoor trip programs, especially summer programs.
- One reason is that high schools, particularly in the east, are not getting out for the summer until late June, the summer season is shrinking. This means that summer programs at some camps and programs like NOLS and OB are having difficulty filling trips in June.
- Less demand for long trips (10-21 days) and more demand for shorter trips of 3-8 days.
- All programs are increasing contract outdoor programs where intact groups want specialized leadership and trip programs.
- Examples include NOLS contract leadership programs with the Naval Academy, their trip program last year for Orthodox Jews, and Wilderness Inquiry's 1-3 day trips with youth development groups.

Cultural Diversity—Are We Ready?

- Outdoor programs and the discipline have traditionally been white, western and middle-class. This includes and staff and participants.
- The staff of outdoor programs has remained quite stable, still mainly white, western and middle-class.
- There has been a gender shift in that there are now more women working as leaders and facilitators. And, some like NOLS say that staff are getting older, closer to 30 than 20.

- But, are we prepared to offer services to a population with changing demographics?
- AEE recently conducted a member survey to address strategies to attract and serve minority populations in outdoor programs. Some strategies so far include:
 - Hire more minority staff, Spanish and Hmong speaking staff.
 - Expand participant recruiting to the internet, to multi-language newsletters, to local youth workers in urban areas and in American Indian and First Nation tribal areas.
 - Have programs available in Spanish and Hmong and other languages.
 - Involve families more in programs.
- Diversity will continue to be a major challenge for programs.

The questions that remain related to diversity in Outdoor/Adventure Programming are:

- What have the trends been over the past 16 years?
- Does our staff population match the students that we serve?
- How are we creating an environment that is inclusive for all staff?
- How do we define diversity?

Pressure on Leaders to Protect Participants from “All Harm”

- Many participants now expect instant gratification and immediate outcomes, they want to “Go For It!”, they want to stretch themselves in outdoor programs.
- And yet, they expect the outdoor leaders, the outdoor organization or land managers to assume all risk for them in case anything goes wrong. They expect the outdoor organizations to guarantee safety.
- So, they and their parents demand that all groups have elaborate risk management plans in place, and emergency medical assistance immediately available. They expect 911 types of service even in remote areas.
- They also expect and demand that technology be immediately available; including satellite phones, cell phones, GPS, 4 wheelers, and helicopters available at all times and in all places, even remote wilderness areas.
- We may reach a point where the outdoor organization will have to water down programs so much that they will lose their attractiveness.

Professionalization of Outdoor Leaders

- More outdoor leaders today are likely to consider outdoor leadership as a career. We are seeing smarter more capable leaders come into the field, and the field has become more legitimate as a career choice. Some in the field see the rise of research and evaluation projects that document program outcomes as a contributor to this legitimization of the field as a career.
- We have seen a growth over the past 15 years in the demand for leaders to have a number of certifications. This “Certification Syndrome” has good and not so good results. It helps get insurance coverage for a program, and helps soothe fears of parents and participants. But, some leaders with lots of certifications just do not have that real “spark” or “gleam in the eye” of a real charismatic leader, and they never really click with participants.
- Also, leaders now often do not have a history of lots of personal leisure outdoor experiences, like fishing, hunting, catching frogs and snakes as a kid, growing up on a

farm, going on personal trips with friends. They have been so busy accumulating certifications that they tend to have less non-program outdoor trip experiences of their own. This may result in leaders who are just not as interesting or inspiring to participants in the future.

- Some outdoor programs are seeing an aging of staff, their instructors are getting older. Some fear that this older staff may not relate as well to participants in their teens or early 20's.
- There was a day when a program director position in a university or adventure program would be filled with whoever came along that qualified for the job. Now, there are easily 70+ applicants for a coveted directorship position.
 - Competition is growing
 - Professionalism and experience required to achieve these positions calls for more than an initial base attraction to our industry
 - Due to our industry's financial constraints it is often difficult to attract and then maintain those talented individuals with the experience to guide and develop others.

Demand for Outcome Accountability Moving Programs to Sponsor Research

- Program funders are demanding that program outcomes be measured and documented through research and evaluation. And, participants are then demanding specific outcomes from program participation.
- An example of a branch of outdoor adventure that did not do this well is corporate adventure programs. Dr. Michael Gass, a noted scholar in adventure programs, has said that the demise of corporate adventure program was due mainly to a lack of evidence-based outcomes and procedures.
- Rather than universities or government agencies sponsoring research in outdoor adventure programs, the outdoor organizations themselves are now sponsoring more research in their programs to try and establish evidence-based research that documents the outcomes and effectiveness of their programs.
- NOLS is in the 5th year of a major study to measure specific program participation outcomes. They will have objective data for 4-5,000 students and instructors. They are working with researchers from the University of Utah. This is an objective, quantitative study using uniform questionnaires and other instruments. They are also now starting another study looking more at qualitative measures like the means/ends testing procedures to look at outcomes, values and program attributes.
- Wilderness Inquiry has had a 20-year research program looking at participant outcomes and values, and leadership characteristics.
- The American Camp Association has recently been working with Dr. Henderson and Dr. Bialeschki and others to objectively document the youth development influence of a camp experience. They have developed and tested an instrument to document these outcomes.
- John Gookin of NOLS gives us a caution though on relying totally on objective, measurable indicators to tell us about the success of an outdoor program. He says that once a program starts identifying objective outcomes then that means we will be telling participants what they should learn or experience in an outdoor program. That flies in the face of constructivism where students can construct their own learning and their own

outcomes. The objective outcomes the program is now designed to provide may start displacing the rich human experience that used to define outdoor experiential education.

Wilderness and Adventure Therapy Moving Towards Legitimacy

- These programs are designed to change certain problem behaviors in youth (school drop-out, drug abuse, defiance of parents and community) or to treat juvenile offenders. The outdoor program is integrated with professional counseling and or psychiatric treatment).
- This area has been plagued by a lack of rigorous evidence-based research.
- Practitioners and researchers in this area seem to be moving towards more evidence-based research to develop best practices and to provide evidence that adventure-based therapy is effective in treating troubled adolescents.
- Another example as to how outdoor programs are driving the research, a consortium of 10 wilderness based adventure therapy programs have joined to form the "Outdoor Behavioral Healthcare Industry Council." This consortium provides \$40,000 per year to an outdoor researcher (Keith Russell) at the University of Minnesota to conduct major research and evaluation projects at their facilities. This promises to provide significant research results to address the issue of behavioral outcomes and change that can result from participation in wilderness based adventure therapy programs.

Effects of Outdoor Programming on Youth Development

- In public schools, there are examples of outdoor programming being incorporated. How can that become necessary to the curriculum?
- The days of running around outside after school are slowly fading, and just getting dirty in the mud. Can that be in the school day as it is? What if that has to become homework for youth to get to do? There are so many that would have loved to do that in their school, and research could show how that does impact a youth's well-being and self- development.
- There are specific trends that continue to appear in the literature, like benefits to others, motivation, skills, and self-esteem that are in multiple articles. "Benefit to others" (Boyes et al, 2006) was also translated into "contributing to the welling of others" (Davis, 2004), "group work" (Davis et al., 2006), and "working in a team with others" (Neill & Richards, 1998) show a common benefit of outdoor programming.

Understanding and Use of Risk in Outdoor/Adventure Programs

- Outdoor/ Adventure programs are consistently reporting that challenge is a major course component that affects change in participants
- Much of the literature talks about risk on levels of real and perceived so that risk can be measured and manipulated.
- It is suggested that student's perceptions of risk should become increasingly important in the management of risk on emotional and physical levels.

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