

Nothing Here to Care About: Participant Constructions of Nature Following a 12-Day Wilderness Program

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ABSTRACT: The experience of 8 teenage participants of a 12-day adventure trip was investigated through participant observation and semistructured posttrip interviews. The teen participants conceptualized nature as a place out there—a reality fundamentally different and removed from their home reality of civilization. The teens understood nature as undisturbed, natural, unfamiliar, without people or human material development, relaxing, not busy, and with a sense of freedom. The teens strongly suggested nature does not exist at home. It appears that, with this construction of nature, the teens felt diminished motivation to take care of their home environment.

Key words: constructivist learning theory, environmental concern, experiential education, outdoor recreation

An often-assumed benefit of wilderness adventure programs is that, by experiencing an environment in which the natural world dominates, trip participants will begin to care about the natural world. Still, little research has been published about wilderness trip participants' perceptions of nature and subsequent environmental concern (Ewert, 1989; Hanna, 1995). Some researchers have noted that significant life experiences in natural settings are important in developing positive perceptions and environ-

mental action (Palmer, 1992; Tanner, 1980). Other researchers have shown that wilderness trips provide enhanced awareness about the relationships among self, others, and the natural world (Beringer, 1990; Hanna, 1995; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). By contrast, most research has shown that one-time experiences are usually not as important as periodic exposure during the early years of life (Gillet, Ythomas, Skok, & McLaughlin, 1991; Newhouse, 1990). Most studies in this area have sought to measure attitudinal and behavioral change resulting from an outdoor experience. The paucity of research about how individuals interpret experience in the natural world—especially on wilderness trips—is surprising given the variety and depth of such writing in the popular press. There is even less research on how participants use such experiences when they return to everyday life (Hanna, 1995).

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Adventure and wilderness programs exist on a continuum that blends recreation, education, and personal development (Ewert, 1989; Friese, Hendee, & Kinziger, 1998). Even programs on the recreational side of the spectrum are learning events. As such, wilderness adventure programs of all types fall solidly within the domain of experiential education. Experiential education is founded in a constructivist theory of learning (DeLay, 1996; Simmons, 1995). *Constructivist learning theory* proposes that learners are actors in the knowledge-making process (Ausubel, 1978; Von Glasersfeld, 1995). However, much of the research in environmental education (EE) has been deterministic—focused on how the program effects change within an individual; other researchers have critiqued this dominant behaviorist slant to research in EE (Robertson, 1994; Robottom & Hart, 1993, 1995). The literature has tended to focus on behavior, knowledge, and attitudes and ignore how individuals conceptualize and make meaning (Peled, 1989). These researchers have called for more research that is influenced by a constructivist understanding of learning.

According to constructivist theorists, learning is the individual's own action to make sense of an experience, while adapting the educational event to fit past understanding (Ballantyne & Packer, 1996; Robertson, 1994; Von Glasersfeld, 1995). Therefore, knowledge is not a precise representation of the world as it is; instead, knowledge is a construction that an individual builds to fit with his or her experience of the world.

Knowledge formation—learning—is further influenced by the social structures and cultural assumptions on which a person lives and the individual's prior experience (Fay, 1986; Goodson, 1990). Bannister and Fransella (1980) described the tension between the personal and social construction of knowledge: "Living in a similar culture, we come to share constructs with others of our group, although the implications of these constructs may not be identical" (pp. 105–106). The individual often leaves these social constructions unexamined. Berger and Luckmann (1966) call this phenomenon "taken-for-granted knowledge." Instead, such constructions form the basis for much of the learner's prior experience.

Peled (1989) explained the importance of understanding the constructions people use to order their understanding:

Our experience of places and our intentions and actions toward them are determined by the way we construe them, by the way we perceive the entities that populate them: people, objects, hills, fields, space. . . . Thus, one's readiness to preserve the existing ecology of a wooded hill will be shaped by whether he or she construes it as a holiday resort, a reserve, picturesque landscape or as raw material. (p. 19)

More recently, Ballantyne and Packer (1996) stated that "few investigations have been undertaken, however, of the broader conceptual frameworks that influence student's understanding of, attitudes toward, and interactions with the environment (p. 29)." Intuition suggests that wilderness experiences may have a role in developing an individual's

ecological sensitivity. This study attempts to begin filling the gap in research about participants' subjective outdoor experiences and how individuals use such experiences in everyday life to think and act in response to environmental concerns.

Research Methods

This research focuses on understanding the constructions that people hold and use and understanding the origins of these constructions (Robertson, 1994). Thus, the research design needed to be fluid and emergent. I began this process by asking "How do participants use the experience of a wilderness adventure program to think about the environment and care for it at home?"

I chose several methods as a combined approach to investigating the research question. In the first phase of the study, I accompanied teenagers on a 12-day, adventure program, which was run by a local outdoor education and recreation center in Alberta, Canada. The activities included a 5-day hike into remote mountainous sections of Banff National Park and Assiniboine Provincial Park. Activities included rock climbing and caving at separate locations, and 4 days of canoeing along a remote section of the North Saskatchewan River (see Table 1). Eight teens, 14–16 years old, participated in the trip and paid a small amount for it. The adult leader and 1 participant were female; all others were male. All the youth were from a small suburban community on the outskirts of Edmonton, Alberta. Most participants met for a series of pretrip planning sessions. Several participants had been camping before, although only 2 (Kenneth and Mackenzie; all names have been changed) had experience with overnight outdoor pursuits such as canoeing. During planning, the leader emphasized "care of self, care of others, and care of the environment" as the theme of the trip. (See Table 1 for the trip itinerary.)

The trip leader explained that I would attend the outing as an extra adult who was also doing research for a university degree. The teens were informed about the nature of the study, and both they and their parents signed consent forms. During the trip, I participated actively, making overt observations. I took brief notes during breaks, which I fleshed out in detail at night. However, the primary function of my participation was to build rapport with the teens. The trip experience served as a shared context for the second section of the study.

TABLE 1. Trip Itinerary

Day	Activity
1–5	Backpacking
6	Rock climbing
7	Day hike and caving
8–12	Canoe trip

The second part of the study involved two semistructured interviews that I conducted with each teen 8–14 days after the trip. The first interview focused on the teenagers' post-trip reentry into everyday life. The second interview took place approximately 6 months later. During the second interview, I clarified emerging themes and determined if the expected solidification of posttrip constructs had occurred. I conducted the interviews, which were intentionally conversational, in places that the teens found comfortable—donut shops, a park, and the local library. I developed specific questions but the interview followed directions that emerged during the conversation. Questions took the form of “Tell me about a time at home when you felt you were in nature.”

I analyzed field notes on an ongoing basis; these notes informed the interviews, which were taped and transcribed. Then, I grouped related concepts, ideas, and observations into categories using a combination of constant comparison and analytic induction (Glaser & Strauss, 1991; Henderson, 1967). Themes emerged as I cross-compared categories and data. As a longtime leader of wilderness trips, I used my experience and knowledge of other wilderness programs to examine the viability of emerging themes and to understand practitioners' common-sense knowledge (Goodson, 1990). I further enhanced my credibility by checking conclusions with participants and other wilderness leaders. The tentative conclusions' possible relevance to EE is another measure of the credibility of the data and conclusions.

Unquestionably, the research process changed the character of the trip for the participants. Several teens said the opportunity for additional reflection enhanced their experience. The goal of interpretive social science is to reach a deeper understanding of the details of particular experience, rather than a broader and more general overview of a subject. One should not assume that this study represents the experience of any wilderness adventure program other than this particular trip and these participants.

Findings

Nature and Environment at Home

The trip was a powerful experience for the eight teens. In the second interview, several participants said that the excursion was one of the best events of their year. Among the reasons they cited for the positive experience were the activities, people involved, natural setting, chance to get away from home, opportunity to challenge themselves, and opportunity for personal growth. The importance of the reasons varied among the participants.

Most of the teenagers expressed concern for the environment but said that this concern did not translate into action at home. Several participants said that their environmental concern related to wanting wilderness settings to “remain as they are.” For example, Peter said, “I believe nature should stay the way it is or we should try to keep it the way that it is.” He explained his self-described lack of interest in the

environment because “it's not very natural here [in my home town].” Similarly, Gary described his interest in the environment, “Yeah, a little bit. I'd like that Mt. Assiniboine place to stay the same as it is.” Most of the teens said they were too busy in their everyday lives to think about the environment.

Few of the teens made a connection between care for the environment that they practiced or discussed on the trip and their lifestyles at home. “[Here at home] it's already impacted, [so whatever you do] doesn't make much of a difference . . . there's nothing really you can do,” Mackenzie commented. Several other participants echoed this thought. During the second interview, I asked Danny what he gained on the trip regarding care for the environment; he showed me a candy wrapper that was in his pocket from lunch. “[I] haven't littered; I used to litter sometimes but now I put it into my pocket until I go home,” he said.

When asked if he thought about the environment, J. J. replied, “Kind of. Not really though. You think about it a couple minutes, then forget about it.” Asked why this happens, he said that there was no nature at home, although “there used to be.” He then described a recent subdivision development near his house. Shrugging and expressing a sense of fatalism, he commented, “There's really not much one person can do.”

The belief that nature did not exist at home seemed to affect the teens' willingness to care for the environment at home. Mackenzie explained,

I recycle here [at home]. . . . But to me it's all a lost cause. Like picking up garbage . . . will make it look nice but it can't really help the plants to grow. . . . Like, is anything going to grow in this cement? I don't think so!

As the significance of the participants' assertion that there was little or no nature at home began to emerge, other questions developed. How did the teens conceptualize nature? What kept this potentially powerful experience from becoming a more significant part of their actions toward the environment at home?

The Construction of Nature

Although the construction of nature varied among the teens, it had common characteristics. Nature was an elusive concept, defined by what it is not more than what it is. Throughout the trip and after, the participants often described nature as “not civilization.” In my analysis of the teens' comments, I found a common set of characteristics, which are divided into two categories. The qualities of nature are the more tangible characteristics, whereas the feel of nature includes more emotive and less articulable characteristics whereas that the teenagers experienced when in natural environments (see Table 2.). Together, these characteristics describe the construction of nature in the teens' life world.

The first quality of nature for these teens was that it was undisturbed. During a pretrip meeting, part of the group definition of *wilderness* was that it was a place “where peo-

TABLE 2. The Construction of Nature as Described by Teen Participants After Wilderness/Adventure Trip

<i>The qualities of nature</i>	
Nature is	
Undisturbed	
Without people	
Natural (wth trees)	
Not human-made	
Out there	
<i>The feeling of nature</i>	
Nature is	
Different from civilization	
Relaxing or not busy	
Free	
Unfamiliar	

ple leave it alone.” This characteristic seems to have been applied to nature in general. During the interviews, several teens said nature was untouched. Other teens said that nature was “undisturbed land, no permanent marks of interference” and “what was originally here before industrialization . . . everything that was natural.” Gary said that nature was “the outdoors, and away from civilization. The way things normally are.” When asked to clarify “normally,” Gary said, “the way things are made to be, not affected by humans.”

For the teens, the second quality of nature was that it was without people. Nature is “where people are not” said one participant. “Trees are a part of nature but not us,” said another. Three other teens contrasted nature, using the statement “civilization is where there’s lots of people.”

A third quality of nature was its natural character. Most participants said that nature was difficult to explain, then used specific items such as “the trees, the ground, the water,” “animals and trees,” and “[nature] gots mountains” to clarify this abstract and circular reasoning. Several teens described the lack of mountains and a river that was perceived to be polluted were used by several teens to explain why there was no nature at home.

Another quality of nature was that it was not human-made. “Anything human constructed, made by humans” was part of civilization and not nature, said Kenneth. “Man-made stuff is unnatural, and nature-made stuff is natural,” said J. J. This characteristic is also shown by the teenagers’ frequent references to nature not being like civilization (which included cars, roads, houses, pollution, telephone wires, and ornamental trees). Participants were ambiguous about backcountry developments; the teens accepted some developments but rejected others. For example, the teens accepted picnic tables at mountain campsites but rejected a group of backcountry cabins. However, for Gary, being on the river “wasn’t close to nature because there’s campsites developed.” Participants’ acceptance of human-built items seemed to depend on the amount of development and its relationship to the other qualities.

The final quality of nature was that it was out there. According to the teens, nature is undisturbed; it has few or no people and it has lots of trees, mountains, and rivers. These comments suggest that nature must be somewhere else than the teens’ home communities. For example, Bob said he thought about nature during the trip, but not at home. When asked why, he responded, “I was in nature then.” Other teens made comments such as “I would like to live out there and just visit here, not live here and visit there” and “Nature is a place we don’t stay.” Mackenzie believed that her environmental concern was expressed mostly when she was “out in the wilderness . . . I’m out there so it’s kind of like I’m concerned.” Gary thought that it was nice to be in “a whole environment, whole nature. Just to be out there, not like this here.”

Although they often had difficulty articulating the “feeling of nature,” this idea was essential for the teens in constructing nature. Their descriptions hint that they felt something “out there” that they did not feel in the city or at home. Furthermore, these affective characteristics contributed to the perception that nature does not exist at home, and even a sense that nature was somehow better.

The first aspect of the feeling of nature was that it was different than civilization. Only 1 participant suggested that he could recapture any portion of the emotional experience related to the wilderness at home. He described the city as busy, noisy, and wrecked, with too many people.

The air just smells different. Like you can smell all the exhaust and down there it’s just the pine trees and the horse [expletive] and all that stuff. And when you come back here it’s like gravel and cigarette butts and . . . it’s all manmade. Like you can’t go anywhere without seeing a car or anything. (J. J.)

Responding to a question about whether she experienced the natural world in her community, Mackenzie said that nature might be there, “but it wouldn’t be the nature that I like.” As described above, other participants made similar comments indicating a mutually exclusive distinction between nature and civilization.

The second aspect of the feeling of nature was that it was relaxing or not busy. Several teens described nature as a place to get away from their busy lives. Several participants also described how the feeling of getting away from civilization and into nature was important. Hiking, canoeing, experiencing solitary moments, breathing cleaner air, and seeing trees were among the activities associated with the relaxing experience of nature. Several teens also commented on the beauty they saw in the wilderness. In contrast, civilization seemed to intrude into participants’ feeling of nature and pulled the teens into the mindset of the other world. For example, Mackenzie described one experience,

When we were nearing the van [on the last hiking day] I was like, “Oh god, I have to do this and this and this when I get home.” I didn’t want to go back to the van . . . because—I don’t know—I didn’t want to go back to civilization.

The teens also experienced a sense of freedom as part of the feeling of nature. "Back there you can be free. I love it," said Luke. Other teens said they missed that feeling of "being able to do whatever you want." Many participants enjoyed the freedom to make their own choices. As teens they are constrained by parents, school, and other authorities. On this wilderness trip, they experienced an opportunity to have more control over their actions and consequences. This sense of freedom seemed to have been associated with the natural world. Even the trees were free, suggested Danny: "[It was] wilderness. When you're away there's just one marked trail. Then you go off anywhere. . . . It's a place where there's trees and they let trees grow and stuff."

The final aspect of the feeling of nature was its unfamiliarity. Civilization was familiar for the teens; nature was different. Familiar natural settings might not be construed as part of nature. Gary compared the naturalness of the trip with the land on which he lives, "It's different trees [on the trip]. It's better." Both Mackenzie and Kenneth did not think that a local 550-acre nature center was natural. Kenneth explained, "I've been there too many times . . . If I know a place it's not nature." For Mackenzie, the river portion of the trip was not as natural as the backpacking portion. "Because I had done that [stretch of river] before . . . it wasn't really [like nature]," she said. Kenneth also suggested that his familiarity with the North Saskatchewan River influenced his perception of it:

[I couldn't see it] so much as nature because it goes right through Edmonton. . . . [It didn't seem like nature] because the river was going through some cities. Cities are built on rivers. So rivers just aren't nature. The North Saskatchewan anyway.

(The North Saskatchewan River flows through Edmonton, Alberta, several hundred km downstream from the location of the canoeing part of the trip.)

Discussion

The adventure program participants suggested that nature has certain qualities. Nature is defined mostly in comparison to civilization; it is undisturbed, mostly without human-made items, unfamiliar, without people, out there, relaxing, and free. Because nature is out there in this posttrip construction, it is not to be found in the home environment. Thus, the teens imply that the home environment is already wrecked, so why bother with environmental concern? Environmental educators would be quick to understand the tremendous implications of such an attitude.

It would appear that wilderness is the blueprint on which the teens are building their construction of nature. Their inclination to see nature in terms of wilderness may have increased because of the trip. Other people—who have had different formative experiences—may erect their own constructions in which to house the concept of nature and the value of environmental concern. But that is the point; these teens are using this experience to assist their understanding of nature. In their vision of reality, this experience is nature.

However, suggesting that the teens believe that these qualities of nature are the sole result of the wilderness trip ignores years of experience in the participants' lives that have also contributed to their construction of nature. I did not find much information in the posttrip interviews that protested this model of nature, which suggests that the bulk of the participants' prior experience supports these characteristics. If this is the case, the wilderness trip may have reinforced the notion that nature is out there in the wilderness and not at home. Although I did not investigate stability or change in the conceptions between the interviews, it is likely that the teens' views of nature are sturdy and will persist with little remodeling. This conclusion comes from the apparent consistency between interviews and reasonable congruity ideas maintained by North American society's dominant paradigms regarding nature and the environment (Evernden, 1992; Nash, 1967; Wilson, 1991).

The teen participants of the trip constructed nature in a particular way. They understood civilization but believed that the natural world was out there. This construction of nature may justify less environmental concern. Readiness to protect the environment is founded on a task's relevance to an individual. However, to reach the goal of caring for the environment, different constructions are probably needed than those that these teens have formed.

Constructivist learning theory has been emphasized primarily in cognitive development (Ballantyne & Parker, 1996; Robertson, 1994; Von Glaserfeld, 1995). However, the role of the characteristics (that can best be described as feelings) is apparent in knowledge about nature. Smell and sound recollection, and emotive characteristics (i.e., being free, not busy, relaxing, and unfamiliar) were important in forming the teens' perceptions. Other environmental educators have noted the important role of the affective domain (Bixler et al., 1994; Iozzi, 1989a, 1989b). Thus, the construction of knowledge is not limited to the cognitive domain.

The feel of nature was a starting point for the participants in exploring a subtle emotional life world. It was also an endpoint because this constellation of characteristics contributed to a segregation between the natural world and the home world. The teens had a sense that nature was appealing and not present in their home community. Therefore, nature must be the opposite of the qualities and feelings that were more present in the place that they knew to be civilization. The participants of this wilderness adventure program described a construction of nature as nature versus civilization. Nash (1967), Evernden (1992), Wilson (1991), and others have written of the Western cultural worldview and its human-nature dichotomization. This cultural milieu seemed to be at work in the participants as they experienced and formed knowledge about the natural world. Notions like nature, stewardship, and the human role are complex and influenced by many elements. Research into how individuals make meaning from their experiences is essential in environmental research.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Contrary to the hope of most wilderness leaders that a better relationship and awareness about the natural environment dichotomy between humans and the natural world. The implication is that programs that take participants away from their home environment to pristine natural settings may be counterproductive to EE. By contrast, these teens also reported positive environmental concerns and—at times—a feeling of connectedness to the natural world.

In this study, I illustrate the need for programs that are more oriented to helping participants clearly understand the connection among humans, nature and the local environment. Wilderness leaders need to be careful in program design and work to facilitate effective transfer of learning to the home context; they need to directly address the nature–civilization dichotomy. Teaching and practicing sensitivity to the natural world will also help participants become aware of nature, even at home. Learning to look at small wonders—instead of just the spectacular scenes and pristine expressions of nature—would go a long way toward alerting participants that nature at home could be a source of the powerful feelings generated in wilderness settings. As Hanna (1995) noted, wilderness leaders should help participants understand specific actions they can take at home to protect the environment.

Most important, outdoor educators need to develop programs at home instead of heading out there. Wilderness activities can only involve a small population cluster because of locale and other socioeconomic constraints. These pursuits may bleed interest and energy away from the real environmental needs of the human-dominated environments where most of us live.

This study underlines the importance of understanding how people think. The underlying assumptions and constructs that people hold and live by need to be addressed for fundamental change toward sound environmental lifestyles to occur. If nature is out there and we humans are separated from it (as these wilderness program participants suggest) then nature has little meaning in everyday life. This mindset may indeed be the fundamental environmental problem.

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