

Camps and Nature Report

(June 2007)

Penny A. James and Karla A. Henderson, Ph.D., North Carolina State University

Introduction

The notion of children and nature has evoked great discussion particularly since the publication of Richard Louv's (2005) book, *Last Child in the Woods*. In this book, Louv stated: The shift in our relationship to the natural world is startling, even in settings that one would assume are devoted to nature. Not that long ago, summer camp was a place where you camped, hiked in the woods, learned about plants and animals, or told firelight stories about ghosts or mountain lions. As likely as not today, "summer camp" is a weight-loss camp, or a computer camp. For a new generation, nature is more abstraction than reality." (p.2)

Louv's assessment seems somewhat unjustified. Camps have made use of the outdoors as recreation and learning laboratories for youth and adults for almost 150 years. Most camps continue to emphasize the importance of the outdoors. Now more than ever camps have an integral role to play in connecting children, youth, and adults to the outdoors.

The purpose of this survey was to create a baseline regarding the attitudes that camp directors in ACA accredited camps had about nature and camps during the spring of 2007. We wanted to assess the status of nature-based activities in organized camps. A random sample of camp directors was invited to participate in an on-line survey (i.e., Survey Monkey) to determine their attitudes about nature and the roles that camps currently played in using the natural world.

Methods

The questionnaire was developed by the authors in collaboration with members of the ACA Children, Nature, and Camps Task Force as well as the ACA Research Team. Items were initially developed through a literature review and Louv's book. We were interested in ascertaining baseline attitudes and to determine if various demographic and attitudinal factors had a relationship with the focus that camps placed on designing outdoor opportunities for campers. The study and questionnaire were reviewed and approved through the NC State Institutional Review Board (approval number 127-07-4). The survey consisted of 23 questions including: opportunities for nature activities at camp, factors impacting children's connection to nature, nature focus and opportunities at camps, personal attitudes toward the environment, and camp characteristics.

A random sample of camp director email addresses was drawn from the ACA camp membership list (N=~2500 camps). These individuals were sent an online survey on April 19, 2007 and invited to complete the survey within 10 days. A reminder was sent on April 26 with the final deadline extended to May 11, 2007. At this point, the website was closed. A total of 144 questionnaires were completed from the initial 529 invitations. Twenty-two addresses were not valid resulting in a response rate of 28%.

This report presents an overview of the results of the study that may be of particular interest to the ACA Children, Nature, and Camps Task Force. The researchers plan to submit presentation proposals for the 2008 ACA Conference Research Symposium (proposal due early September with presentation in February, if accepted) and the 2008 Coalition for Education in the Outdoors (proposal due in early September with presentation in January, if accepted). As appropriate, an article may be submitted to *Camping Magazine* as well as to either *Research on Education in the Outdoors* or *Journal of Experiential Education*. This report presents descriptive statistics from the survey results. In the early fall we will conduct more analyses with inferential statistics to answer further research questions and to develop the presentations and papers noted.

Results

Almost 60% of the camps described themselves as residential with 17% day camps and a quarter running both resident and day camps. Almost two thirds of the camps said that their camps lasted an average of 1-2 weeks. Sponsorship included the following: Independent not for profit (36%), Agency sponsored (25%), Independent for Profit (21%), Religiously Affiliated (17%), and less than 2% from Government Sponsored. These results were relatively consistent with the ACA membership that includes this proportion of day and resident camps. Our respondents were slightly unrepresentative of the sponsorship with fewer agency camps than on the membership list and slightly more independent not-for-profit camps than the ACA proportion. Nevertheless, the sample was representative of the ACA membership.

Camp Characteristics

Almost two thirds of the camps had been in operation for 50 years or more. About 87% described their camp as "traditional outdoor camp" with 10% saying they were specialized by an activity other than sports (2%) or Wilderness/Trip (2%). Almost three-fourths of the camps said that they were located in rural or wilderness/remote environments with 6% in urban areas and 15% in suburban locations.

The majority of campers served were between the ages of 9-15 years but almost half the camps said they served adults and almost that many had family camps. Interestingly, a quarter of the camps said they had campers that were age 5 or younger. Forty-one percent of the camps served campers of all abilities but over half (53%) said they specifically did not serve children with disabilities and 6% said they served only those individuals. Three-quarters of the camps were co-educational with 7% boys only and 21% girls only. The primary income category served by the camps was middle class (66%) with 15% saying they served primarily low-income and 18% serving primarily high income. Over half of the campers came from suburban areas while less than one-third came from urban areas and 18% from rural or small towns.

Camps and the Natural World

The visibility of nature as part of the camp experience was an important aspect of this study. Camps are typically associated with the outdoors, but we were interested in how explicit these connections were. Almost three fourths (70%) of the respondents said their camp mission included words such as outdoors, nature, environment, natural environment or natural world. Nine respondents (7%) said they did not know if the mission included those words and 23% said their mission did not include these words.

Of the camps that operated year around, 37% said nature was equally important all year around with 16% saying nature was more important in the summer. We thought perhaps some camps were doing more with environmental education programs for school programs but this speculation was only true for 8% of the camps surveyed.

Over three-fourths (76%) of the camps said they had specifically stated goals related to youth contact with nature. However, about two thirds (63%) of the directors thought that nature opportunities were only of minor consideration in the decisions parents made about sending their children to camp.

Youth Connections to Nature

A number of questions related to how much camp directors agreed with the importance of youth connecting to nature. Table 1 shows the responses to the questions based on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 =strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. As noted, over 95% of the respondents stated that *opportunities to connect with the natural environment at camp are important for children*. Further, many respondents agreed with the statement: *Children today are less connected to the environment than they were 20 years ago. Fostering campers' connections to the natural environment requires purposeful program* was agreed to by 86% of the respondents. One question that had somewhat mixed results was in regard to whether *camps must rethink and diversify their programming away from nature-based activities to accommodate the non-nature interests of campers*. About 55% disagreed with that statement while 27% agreed and 17% were unsure.

We were also curious about why camp directors might think children were more disconnected from nature than in the past. Table 2 gives a descriptive summary of these results. The highest rated reason that camp directors speculated was *children's greater interest in electronics/media* followed by *decreased access to natural spaces*, and *lack of time due to increased demands*. As can be seen in the table, camp directors rated a number of reasons as potentially high for why children in society are not more connected to the outdoors. Reading through this list provides some idea of the challenges facing camp professionals, teachers, and others who want to have a role in connecting children to nature.

Camp Programming

Respondents to the survey indicated that 83% of the camps had programs primarily staged in the outdoors and 14% indicated that programming occurred both indoors and outdoors. Over three-fourths of the camps said that their campers spent more than 7 hours a

day outside in the open air with only one camp reporting less than 2 hours a day in the open air.

We asked about what activities at camp were essential, somewhat important, or not at all important in terms using the outdoor environment. Activities that camp directors said were essential to be in the outdoors included responses that were anticipated: adventure activities, boating, challenge activities, field sports, hiking, horseback riding, motorized recreation, nature study, primitive skills, swimming, target sports, and trip/travel. Activities that were somewhat dependent on the outdoors were camp craft and cooperative games. The only activity that about half the respondents said did not depend on the outdoors was arts and crafts, although 10% said it was essential.

Personal Philosophy

A final set of questions were related to the personal philosophy about nature of the camp directors. For the most part, perusal of these responses indicated that the majority of directors agreed with statements such as *I recognize and appreciate the intelligence of other living organisms* (86%), *I have a deep understanding of how my actions affect the natural world* (84%), *I think of the natural world as a community to which I belong* (81%), and *I often feel a sense of oneness with the natural world around me* (80%). These responses may be of limited interest to ACA but will be further described in a scholarly research paper.

Conclusions

Several broad conclusions can be stated based on this study designed to create a baseline about camp director attitudes about children and nature.

- This sample of respondents was fairly representative of the characteristics of camps that are accredited by ACA.
- The connections that children make to nature are important to almost all camp directors.
- Camp directors recognized that many reasons exist for why children are not more connected to nature.
- Three-fourths of the camp directors said their mission reflected some focus on nature.
- Many camp directors believed that connecting children and nature required purposeful programming.
- Most of the camp directors indicated that camp activities and programs were primarily conducted in the outdoors and over three-fourths said campers spent more than 7 hours outdoors in the fresh air each day.
- Camp directors did not believe that nature opportunities at camp influenced parents' decisions about sending their children to camp.

This study was a first step in assessing the influence that camp programs can have on children's connections to nature. Further research is needed to learn more about the ways that nature activities are used in camps. In addition, how staffs are trained to address nature issues with campers is also important to consider. We hope this study provides a baseline for future research and the development of training materials.

Table 1

Attitudes Regarding Issues about Campers and Nature

Item	N	M ¹	SD	% of Agreement	% of Disagreement
Opportunities to connect with the natural environment are important for children	142	4.76	.66	95	3
Children today are less connected to the environment than they were 20 years ago	141	4.45	.78	88	4
Today's camps are even more important to foster connections between children and the natural environment than camps were a generation ago	141	4.40	.75	86	2
Fostering campers' connections to the natural environment requires purposeful programming	141	4.31	.77	86	2
The natural environment is important to the fulfillment of my camp's mission	140	4.24	.84	80	5
The natural environment is important to the fulfillment of my camp's goals and objectives	141	4.19	.88	81	5
...Camps must rethink and diversify their programming away from nature-based activities to accommodate the non-nature interests of campers	141	2.57	1.28	27	55

¹Using Likert-type scale with 1 =strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree

Table 2

Reasons Why Children's Connections to Nature have Decreased

Item	N	M ¹	SD	% of Agreement	% of Disagreement
Greater interest in electronics/media	141	4.11	.93	85	8
Decreased access to natural spaces	141	4.00	1.00	78	11
Lack of time (due to increased demands/expectations on children)	141	3.96	.94	78	10
Parental fear of strangers	140	3.84	1.03	66	12
Lack of knowledge or skill related to outdoor recreation activities	141	3.72	1.04	70	14
Discomfort endured outdoors not endured indoors (e.g., weather, bugs)	141	3.72	1.03	67	14
Lack of environmental knowledge	141	3.70	.94	66	11
Parental fear of wilderness	140	3.63	1.08	66	15
Decreased need to interact with environment on daily basis for survival	141	3.59	.98	61	14
Lack of imagination/creativity necessary for unstructured outdoor play	141	3.55	1.24	64	25
Lack of interest in being outdoors	141	3.53	1.10	64	21
Lack of transportation to natural spaces	141	3.50	1.03	51	18
Fear of litigation (parental or organizational concern)	140	3.30	1.05	45	22

¹Using Likert-type scale with 1 =strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree