

RESIDENT CAMP DIRECTORS, SPIRITUALITY, AND WILDERNESS

Michael Rule, M.A.

Resident Camp Director/YMCA, 16355 Scenic Palisades Rd., Mt. Carroll, IL 61053

Edward Udd, Ph.D.

Department Chair, SUNY College at Brockport, Recreation and Leisure Studies, 350 New Campus Dr., Brockport, NY 14420

Abstract: A vast majority of resident camp directors in this study perceived wilderness to hold spiritual qualities. In addition, resident camp directors also valued educational components for campers and staff as important before they ventured into wilderness areas. Resident camp directors influence the lives of millions of youth and they are an important provider of wilderness experience programs. Resident camp directors' attitudes and preferences toward wilderness can be helpful in the development of the perception of wilderness by the youth staying at their camps. Consequently, camp directors should not be overlooked as a constituent group for both developing future attitudes towards wilderness and support for wilderness management strategies.

Introduction

Organized camping is a well-established industry. Organized camping has evolved into a year-round industry servicing children, adults, families, businesses and other organizations. From 1970 through 1991, over four million boys participated in the Boys Scouts of America and over two and a half million girls participated in the Girls Scouts of America (Chadwick & Heaton, 1996). At least fifty-five hundred resident (overnight) camps operate in the United States (Knudson, Cable, & Beck, 1995; ACA, 1998b). The total economic impact of the eleven thousand two hundred organized camps operation in the United States in 1982 was \$2,418,192,000 (Organized Camping Resources Center, 1984).

Resident camps can be defined as having a fixed site and permanent facilities located in a natural setting and where campers live for a period of time usually from a few days to eight or more weeks (Mitchell & Meier, 1983; Shivers, 1989). Camps not already located in primitive locales frequently take advantage of trip camping programs to provide wilderness experiences and new challenges for campers (Shivers, 1989; Gager, 1996). The use of wilderness experience programs is of particular interest to this study. The following passage is the *Recommended Wilderness Ethics for ACA Camps*:

As camp people we have a unique opportunity to teach youngsters and adults to care for and respect, to feel at ease in, and to come to love the natural world around them. We should always

seek to go through the woods and forests, the deserts, and the canyon lands and across the mountains so no one will know we have passed that way. We should seek to instill a reverence for all living things, and where possible, point out their interrelationships. (American Camping Association, 1993, p. 227)

The importance of positive values for natural areas is clear from this statement. And one that is both compatible with wilderness management strategies and with educating the public to take proper care of wilderness areas.

Resident camps are among the key providers of wilderness experience programs in the United States (Gager, 1996). Early exposure in life to wild lands can shape attitudes toward wilderness for life (Bixler & Floyd, 1997). Spiritual growth and renewal has been found to be an important reason for engaging in many outdoor recreation activities (Driver, Dustin, Baltic, Elsner & Peterson, 1996). Since camps can play a strong role in forming people's attitudes toward wilderness (Atkinson, 1990), this paper examines some spiritual values associated with wilderness reported by resident camp directors. In addition, this paper examines their opinions on other values of wilderness and its uses. Resident camp directors, who oversee programs under their direction, are an important group to study in the formation of attitudes held by youth.

Methods

The subjects for this study were camp directors. Subjects for this study were selected from the American Camping Association's (ACA) *Guide to ACA-Accredited Camps* (1998a). The guide contains a listing and brief description of all its camp members. Only camps which provided their own summer resident camping program, were included in the study. Specialty camps (e.g., computer camp and sports camps) were not included. A total of 1,240 camps were identified as having a traditional resident camp program. Of this group, 630 camps had an e-mail address listed. All of these camps were contacted first with a post card sent by first class mail. A week later the questionnaire was sent by e-mail. A second questionnaire was sent a week after the first. A thank you note was sent by e-mail to every respondent within 24 hours.

A random sample of 40 camps, which did not have e-mail addresses listed, was contacted and surveyed by telephone to inquire whether the camp's director had access to e-mail. A group of 12 non-respondents (to the e-mail survey) was randomly selected and surveyed by telephone. Both of these samples' responses were compared with the main data group. They were found to be very similar in character.

As part of a broader focused questionnaire, Likert-type questions were used. The answer categories ranged from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* to measure perceived values of wilderness by resident camp directors. An expert panel of three recreation and leisure studies researchers and two resident camp directors served as judges in the evaluation of the content validity and clarity of the original pool of survey questions. Ten camping professionals (e.g.,

program directors) participated in a pre-test of the questionnaire. Wordings of items were modified in response to the results of these efforts.

Results

Approximately 54 percent (68 of 125) of the respondents were male. The mean age for a camp director in this sample was about 40 years old. The mean level of formal education was 17.5 years (with this being skewed to the low side as the top of the scale was "19+" and 18 respondents checked this category). The mean level of experience for camp directors was 8.9 years (range .10 to 35 years). The mean number of years respondents had been camp professionals was 13.2 years (range .25 to 37 years). The average number of years the camps of the directors had been operating was 57 years (range 5 to 112). The percentage of respondents who indicated that they had led a wilderness trip within the past two years was 31.1 percent. The mean number of trips led over this time was 4.2 per person. The percentage of respondents who indicated that they had ever led a wilderness trip while working for a resident camp was 72.8 percent with the mean number of trips equal to 18 per person over this time.

Two items of the questionnaire asked directly about the spiritual value derived from wilderness experiences. On both items over 90% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that wilderness experiences did provide spiritual value. Wilderness experiences were felt by 87.1% of respondents felt that wilderness is a factor in regards to one's spiritual health. In response to weighing the relative value of wilderness as a spiritual resource versus recreation, scientific, economic, education, and/or aesthetic use, 80.6% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that spiritual value was at least of equal value. When asked if they felt closer to God in wilderness areas, 75.8% agreed or strongly agreed, and 57.3% felt that spiritual considerations should be considered in decisions concerning wilderness regions.

On other issues, 87.1% of resident camp directors agreed or strongly agreed that camps should inform and educate campers and staff about cultural sensitivity and local people before departure on wilderness trips. Wilderness areas were seen as important to camps by 84.8% of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with that statement. A high percent of respondents (85.5% agreeing or strongly agreeing) that educational and interpretive programs should be provided to campers before they venture into wilderness areas. And, 82.3% agreed or strongly agreed with the wilderness ethic statement of the American Camping Association cited in the introduction above.

Discussion and Conclusions

Resident camp directors have a great deal of experience both in directing camps and in using wilderness to supplement the camping experiences of resident campers. Their education level is high and their interest in properly preparing campers to fully appreciate their wilderness experiences is also high.

Given this predisposition to support and promote wilderness, resident camp directors may represent a relatively unrecognized advocacy group for wilderness. Wilderness managers may wish to consider tapping this resource where such resident camp directors are found in proximity to the lands that they manage.

Little research has been conducted on the benefits of nature-based recreation that may arise from a possible relationship between nature and the human spirit (Elsner, Lewis, Snell & Spitzer, 1996). For man, wilderness has a spiritual quality (Jaakson & Shin, 1992). Spiritual growth and renewal has been found to be an important reason for engaging in many outdoor recreation activities (Driver, Dustin, Baltic, Elsner & Peterson, 1996).

The high degree of agreement with the importance of spiritual values in association with wilderness should draw attention for future research. While certainly difficult to quantify, the spiritual value of wilderness should be addressed when significant changes are planned in managing wilderness areas. And in learning of these values, resident camp directors may be a rich source of future information.

Resident camp directors are in a unique position to influence future generations in their attitudes and values associated with wilderness. For those who manage these lands, a long range approach in shaping future attitudes and values should include resident camp directors. And this same group may be able to articulate spiritual values of wilderness that are presently left unsaid in much of the literature.

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