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“In contrast, many of our urban youth today have only alleys, decaying lots, and condemned buildings to explore” — Robert A. Hanson

# An Outdoor Challenge Program as a Means of Enhancing Mental Health

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**ABSTRACT.** Modern life fosters confusion and encourages passivity, and youth suffer most from this pattern. The Outdoor Challenge Program enables young people to experience the active roles and the clarity of purpose called forth by a wilderness opportunity. The experience appears to enhance their mental health during and after the program.

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**M**AN HAS A GREAT NEED to explore and learn. These psychological processes evolved in the wilderness before history began, and it is still in wilderness that they can be experienced at their peak. Perhaps part of the continuing human need for exploration is what Pfeiffer (1969) describes as, "The central mystery of man, his persisting restlessness, this is the human drive . . . It is the force behind discontent, the search for novelty, exploration and missions of all sorts." When a contemporary man speaks of a need to return for a time to the wilderness, he is in essence going back to where his significant psychological processes developed. The natural environment is the true home of these processes, and in that environment we expect to find a clarity and effectiveness of psychological functioning. Indeed, research is now beginning to demonstrate them (see the following paper in this symposium by R. Kaplan).

To appreciate the significance of man's tie to his wilderness heritage, compare the effectiveness of his psychological processes in the wilderness with their effectiveness in a modern urban environment. Stanley Milgram (1970), writing on the experience of living in cities, says, "City life, as we experience it, constitutes a continuous set of encounters with overload, and of resultant adaptations." Each of the adaptations Milgram cites has a tendency to insulate and remove the individual from his environ-

ment and from fellow humans. The mechanisms that allow people to go about their daily activities in an urban setting without involving themselves with the drunk on the street corner, the crime in their neighborhoods, the bewildering mass of humanity, are really mechanisms that require them to ignore much of their environment. The opposite is needed in the natural environment, where man depended on knowledge. This dependence, in the sense of psychological functioning today is one of his major ties to the natural environment.

During man's development, natural selection favored effective exploration. Through many thousands of years of evolution man built upon his psychological capacity for exploration; many lands and places were discovered and rediscovered. Man's recent history is filled with tales of great explorers, and they often serve as models and idols for youth. In the last few hundred years, exploration of living space has ceased because there is no new space to explore. But exploration of wilderness or natural areas still seems meaningful. There an individual or group can rediscover the thrill of exploration, while leaving the land undisturbed for others to rediscover. In contrast, many of our urban youth today have only alleys, decaying lots, and condemned buildings to explore. Exploration, which used to be held in high esteem, is now often considered delinquent, because of the lack of opportunity and increasing population. The

need for this type of experience is greatest in urban areas where the opportunity is lacking.

It is the lack of clarity for many of these urban youth, (as described later in this symposium by Stephen Kaplan) that disrupts their relationships with their environment. Changing contemporary demands on youth foster confusion and tend to leave youth with little chance to respond by active exploration. They are forced to be passive.

## THE OUTDOOR CHALLENGE PROGRAM

The Outdoor Challenge Program (*Hanson 1973*) was developed to give teenagers a highly active 2 weeks in the wilderness. It focused on clearly defined goals and on specific techniques that could be quickly learned and put into practice: map reading, compass orienteering, backpacking, setting up camp, rappelling, locating edible foods and shelter, solo experience, ecology (with emphasis on understanding the ecosystem to be lived with for 2 weeks), first aid, etc. The first day the group is taken by the leaders on an orientation hike into a swamp, then asked to find their own way back without instruction. Usually they become lost, and fail totally to function as a group. The leaders use each problem to put the group in a position where it must take responsibility for itself and find some way or organizing and solving problems. Techniques of map and compass orientation are taught the same day or the following morning. The next day the group must find its own way over a 5-mile course full of swamps, high cliffs, and trackless forest, under the watchful eyes of the leaders. Initially, the participants feel hesitant but in 3 or 4 days they are ready to strike out across 25 miles of trackless forest, and after 10 days they are eager to go off on their own without the leaders. It is inspiring to watch them change as they develop increasing confidence and self-esteem.

Rappelling and overnight solos offer the greatest challenge as well as the greatest rewards. These activities are specifically chosen to enhance a clarity of purpose, which is perhaps both frightening and appealing. They are presented and learned in such a way that even when the participants have fears (and most do) they believe they can do what they set out to.

They learn to help and support each other, and though one may be afraid of one activity, he may do better than the average the next day at another activity. When the group has completed these 2 weeks, the members are both reluctant to leave the wilderness and ready and proud to go home. They have many stories to tell, but more important, they have a new sense of clarity and purpose in their lives.

## HOW PARTICIPANTS CHANGE

As a leader in these programs, I have seen listless, bored, fearful (and sometimes eager) participants who left for the wilderness 2 weeks earlier return stimulated, active, hopeful, eager, and proud. They spoke of new things they wanted to do. Equally often they talked about old passive behavior using drugs, being afraid of the dark, having no interest in the future, all of which they intended to change. During the 2-week period, most of these young people were perceiving, thinking, and feeling at a high pitch for them; their psychological processes were active and they were making the best of this opportunity.

After a few days in the wilderness their ties to their previous environment are loosening and they begin to see themselves in a new, more active position. They have been able to find their way to a lake represented by a small mark on a mightily big map. They are tired but they know their accomplishments.

They are beginning to develop new ties to this environment; things in the wilderness are becoming real to them. They feel a stronger, clearer relationship to their world, which many acknowledge they have never felt before. They are eager to keep on and reach new and more fulfilling goals. As the 2 weeks are completed, I believe, the participants begin to feel at home in this unfamiliar but comfortable environment. They begin to feel that the wilderness is theirs; they have lived in it, been along with it, related to it. They can feel clearly the strength of a new relationship to their external world and a new self-concept. Their object relationships have been strengthened. They have explored and come to know an area in a way that most of them have had little change to before. They have come to know themselves a bit better, and by so

doing most of them have found something in the wilderness that they can take back.

## VALUES THAT ENDURE

It seems that in this wilderness experience the paradigm of man's relations with his external objects is modified. The individual is active; he comes to know the world about him, first by the physical act of exploration on foot, then psychologically on solo where he has several days to reflect on his experiences and to strengthen his emotional and cognitive relations with this new, clearer, more definite world.

We can view man as able to relate to objects in his external world in three ways: First, he may relate to them with fear. A fearful individual often goes through much of his life having difficulty establishing close relationships with people and things; he never seems able to trust, avoids putting himself in situations where he will have to depend on anyone or anything. Second, one may relate to objects with dependence. A dependent individual tends to cling to others, has difficulty letting go of other people or trying anything on his own, and seems always to put himself in situations that force others to reassure him. He relates in a similar way to objects in his environment. Third, and far healthier, is the individual who relates to objects and people as other possibilities to explore, to learn about, to try new relationships with. Here exploration, which, as we have seen, has great evolutionary importance, is a key to developing healthier, clearer, and more meaningful relationships with one's environment.

Man, through exploration, built his knowledge-processing system and obtained the basic data about his environment that he needed to expand his knowledge of the world. When this knowledge-processing system was built and began functioning, man gained his knowledge by walking. The physiological process of walking while exploring gave basic data from the most primitive of human senses, touch. Man

touched the earth with his feet; he felt it through the kinesthetic sensors in his muscles, and at times with his hands. Even today, the infant's first real contact with his external world is by touch, and it is often by touch that he explores and learns.

Walking also determined the amount and speed by which data was presented to our information-processing mechanisms. Even today we often hear that "one knows an area by having walked through it." Psychological evolution began with the speed of its data-processing requirements often determined by walking speed. These processing mechanisms have, in more recent times, been subjected to an increasing flood of stimuli. As we have seen, in the city much of this flood must be ignored; the psychological effects of doing so are considered by S. Kaplan in this symposium.

In the wilderness, exploration and active processes such as walking enable people to experience clear and effective functioning of their perceptual and cognitive processes. The clarity of this encounter seems to provide basic elements upon which an efficient and active behavioral system may be established. The experience seems to enhance mental health and facilitate psychological functioning even after it is over.

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