

A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF THE WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE AS A SOURCE OF SPIRITUAL INSPIRATION

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Abstract

On-site observations, personal field journals, and in-depth interviews were used to examine qualitative aspects of the wilderness experience as a source of spiritual inspiration. Two groups of women kept personal journal accounts of their daily 'lived-experience' during one of two outdoor recreation trips; five participants went to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in northern Minnesota, and seven went to the Grand Canyon of northern Arizona. Journal entries were content-analysed, exploring the commonalities and idiosyncrasies found between individual accounts. Results were used to develop a general interview guide. Follow-up in-depth personal interviews were conducted within 3 weeks of the conclusion of each trip. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were content-analysed, looking for commonalities and distinctions between the data. Participants spoke of the expansiveness of the landscape and an awareness of the sheer powers of nature as contributing to a meaningful wilderness experience, which thereby acted as spiritual inspiration for most individuals. Moreover, positive interpersonal interactions combined with complete immersion in a wilderness setting seemed to influence one's proclivity to perceiving elements of the landscape as possible sources of spiritual inspiration. © 1999 Academic Press

Introduction

This article focuses on exploring the affective components of the wilderness place setting as they relate to spiritually beneficial outdoor recreation experiences; more specifically, what types of setting characteristics or attributes (i.e. biophysical and social) give rise to outdoor experiences that are considered spiritually inspirational. Historically, most research on recreation has focused primarily on specific *activities* rather than the recreational setting in and of itself. However, over the past two decades researchers have begun to recognize that the setting itself is largely influential in determining how satisfied the recreationist is with the activity. In effect, the parameters of recreation research have now broadened to include the environment as a primary point of inquiry. The thrust of this article is to more fully investigate a number of setting attributes that were 'key' in determining the spiritually inspirational qualities of two different out-

door recreation experiences for two separate groups of women.

In brief, 12 study participants were asked to keep personal journal accounts of their daily 'lived-experience' during one of two outdoor recreation trips in an attempt to better understand the qualitative aspects of the wilderness person-place relationship, and how this may be a possible source of spiritual inspiration. Five of these participants went to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in northern Minnesota and canoed for 7 days, and the other seven participants traveled to the Grand Canyon and backpacked for 6 days across the inner plateau of the canyon. Participants were observed in the field, and extensive field notes were taken by the principle researcher in an effort to more fully 'flesh-out' or capture the subtle nuances of their person-place interactions. Participants were asked to keep a personal journal while on the trip, which served as a point of reference during the in-depth follow-up interviews that were conducted after the

conclusion of each trip. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and the resulting transcripts were then content-analysed using the constant comparison method. The final analysis revealed that there were specific landscape qualities and positive social interactions that heavily influenced the spiritually inspirational potential for each wilderness site.

Prior research and conceptual overview

Various scholars within the fields of architecture, landscape architecture, and geography illustrate that specific places have the capacity to instill in people a meaningful 'sense of place' (Tuan, 1974, 1977; Relph, 1976; Buttimer & Seamon, 1980; Seamon, 1980, 1987; Brill, 1986). The term sense of place loosely refers to the idea that people have some positive affective sentiment for specific places, be they social, natural, cultural, or historic resources.

Similarly, much has been written to convey the notion that place is not just the backdrop against which a cast of actors come in and successfully engage in the act of 'play' (acting out their own personal scripts), but rather that 'place' itself is a meaningful phenomenon, and correspondingly, bestows deep meaning to the individuals who venture out onto the stage. Relph (1976) and others (Jackson, 1970; Seamon, 1980; Porteous, 1990; Roberts, 1995; Abram, 1996) contend that place is not just the 'where' of something, but that the landscape itself embodies meaning. However, such meanings vary according to the type of landscape and the personal history that a person brings to the particular setting.

Roberts (1995) states that when an individual thoroughly experiences a place, one begins to gain a life that is full of quality and meaning, not simply in the material sense. For it is through one's interactions with the 'particulars' of a place that one creates their own personal identity and deepest-held values. In effect, it is through various place interactions that the individual begins to develop a deep psychological association with a particular geographic region, a specific locale, or even, perhaps, a certain spot that holds no significant meaning for anyone but the individual. One cannot help but develop some form of attachment to the various social and natural landscapes that one encounters and moves through in one's lifetime, and frequently the feelings one forms in response to a particular place can be especially strong and overwhelming.

Furthermore, leaders in the field of humanistic psychology speak of the 'peak' (Maslow 1976, 1982) and 'flow' experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). These types of experiences are marked by a momentary loss of sense-of-self, where the usual subject/object distinctions break down and the individual becomes totally immersed in the present moment; leading to a more self-actualized state of existence when experienced on a frequent basis. Frequently these types of powerful or 'transcendent' experiences are experienced in a natural outdoors setting, and are usually the result of intense physical and/or emotional challenge. However, relatively little is known as to how much of an influence the natural environment itself has on the individual's experience. In addition, there are dimensions of the peak and flow experience that are common to the mystical or bliss experience described in great detail by both James (1902/1958) and Jung (1960, 1964).

Furthermore, much of the traditional research in environmental psychology has produced simplistic interpretations of the person-place interaction, relying heavily upon numerical scales to express an individual's preference for a particular landscape (Schroeder & Daniel, 1981; Zube *et al.*, 1982; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). In particular, these studies have focused on the functional and visual components of the setting and have described various places merely in terms of their physical location and appearance. These preference scales, however, are somewhat limited and unsophisticated with regard to capturing fully the more affective responses individuals have to particular landscapes.

In addition, past research on 'place' and 'place attachment' has typically focused in a one-way direction, that of individual to place; often overlooking the relationship of place to individual, that is, the affective appeal that place impresses upon the individual. Moreover, as the directional relationship of place to individual has been somewhat neglected, a limited understanding exists of what constitutes 'place' and the ways in which an individual might experience place as a source of spiritual inspiration. Furthermore, it has been loosely suggested that perhaps place itself serves as a genesis in forming one's own personal spirituality (McDonald & Schreyer, 1991).

Concomitantly, individuals who engage in recreational behavior(s) within these landscapes accrue a variety of benefits from their recreational experiences. In drawing on literature from the fields of recreation and leisure studies, past research suggests that individuals accrue some type of benefit(s)

from positive recreational engagements (Driver & Brown, 1978; Driver, 1988; Driver *et al.*, 1991). Benefits as described within the context of leisure and recreation are defined as an improved condition(s) or prevention of worsening of a condition(s) that accrue to individuals, groups, or both (Driver *et al.*, 1991). More specifically, benefits as described by Driver and his colleagues fall into four general categories. Benefits can be either: (1) personal; (2) social; (3) economic; or (4) environmental in nature. Personal benefits are tied to issues of health and psychological well-being, self-image, and self-satisfaction. Social benefits include family stability, community pride, and cultural identity. Economic benefits are tied to individual productivity, tourism and recreational goods. Environmental benefits result from environmental health and protection, attitudes, and investment in natural areas (Driver *et al.*, 1991). These benefits affect not only the mind and body of the individual, but can also affect community structure, economic sustainability, and environmental costs of future generations.

Stringer and McAvoy (1992) found that the wilderness environment itself, and particularly the activities one engages in while out in the wilderness are conducive to furthering one's spiritual development. Additionally, Stringer and McAvoy attempted to identify the most salient factors that give rise to one's individual sense of spirituality within wilderness-based experimental programs and found them to be: (1) sharing personal thoughts and opinions with other members of the group; and (2) being in a wilderness environment. However, Stringer and McAvoy did *not* explore specific environmental (i.e. biophysical and social) features that could contribute to one's sense of spirituality in the natural setting; moreover, those that served as a source of spiritual inspiration.

Additional research by McDonald and Schreyer (1991) found that the wilderness experience itself creates a unique combination of extreme states of consciousness and increased sensory acuity which can lead to the more *meaningful* aspects of outdoor experiences. They further suggest that visual, gustatory, olfactory, auditory, and kinesthetic cues are enhanced or heightened when in a wilderness-like setting. Additional findings by Beck (1987) support the notion that the wilderness-like setting often heightens one's level of sensory awareness, resulting in 'peak' or optimal experiences as previously described (Maslow, 1976, 1982). Moreover, it is this unique combination of extreme states of consciousness and heightened levels of sensory acuity that may be particularly inspirational with regard to

one's sense of personal spirituality. However, this approach to recreation and leisure research may still be overlooking the vast array of environmental features that may cue a more affective interaction with a particular place.

To bring things into focus, several place-related concepts such as 'sense of place', 'place attachment', 'sacred space', and 'sense of the divine' were used as the starting point in exploring possible linkages between the wilderness place setting and the spiritual benefits that individuals accrue from the wilderness recreation experience. Moreover, in as much as these place-related concepts are conceptualized as emerging *from* the natural landscape, there might be specific setting attributes that trigger or give rise to *meaningful* experiences in nature. When this occurs, it may lead to more long-term spiritual benefits off-site. It is speculated that when the individual leaves the setting, various off-site spiritual benefits may continue to be realized due to the *meaningful* experiences they had in nature. However, these off-site benefits could quite possibly lead to a more psychologically-balanced state of being and environmentally-sound way of being in the world.

Clearly, this type of broad inquiry requires a longitudinal analysis. This paper should be viewed as the first phase of a much broader, long-term research agenda which ultimately aims to explore the more long-term, off-site spiritual benefits accrued from the wilderness experience. It is important to recognize that the remaining sections of this paper will focus specifically on the results from the first phase of this long-term research agenda. In effect, this study attempts to move beyond past research by focusing its analysis on the array of biophysical, social, and managerial setting attributes that characterize the wilderness place setting. Additionally it attempts to establish a deeper understanding of how these factors serve as the source or seedbed of spiritual inspiration (Figure 1).

Methodology

When designing this research it was recognized early on that specifically *how* individuals experience the wilderness place setting and the meanings they associate with it are highly subjective. Therefore, the qualitative method of naturalistic inquiry was employed throughout all the phases of this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Ultimately, there was no *a priori* theory that

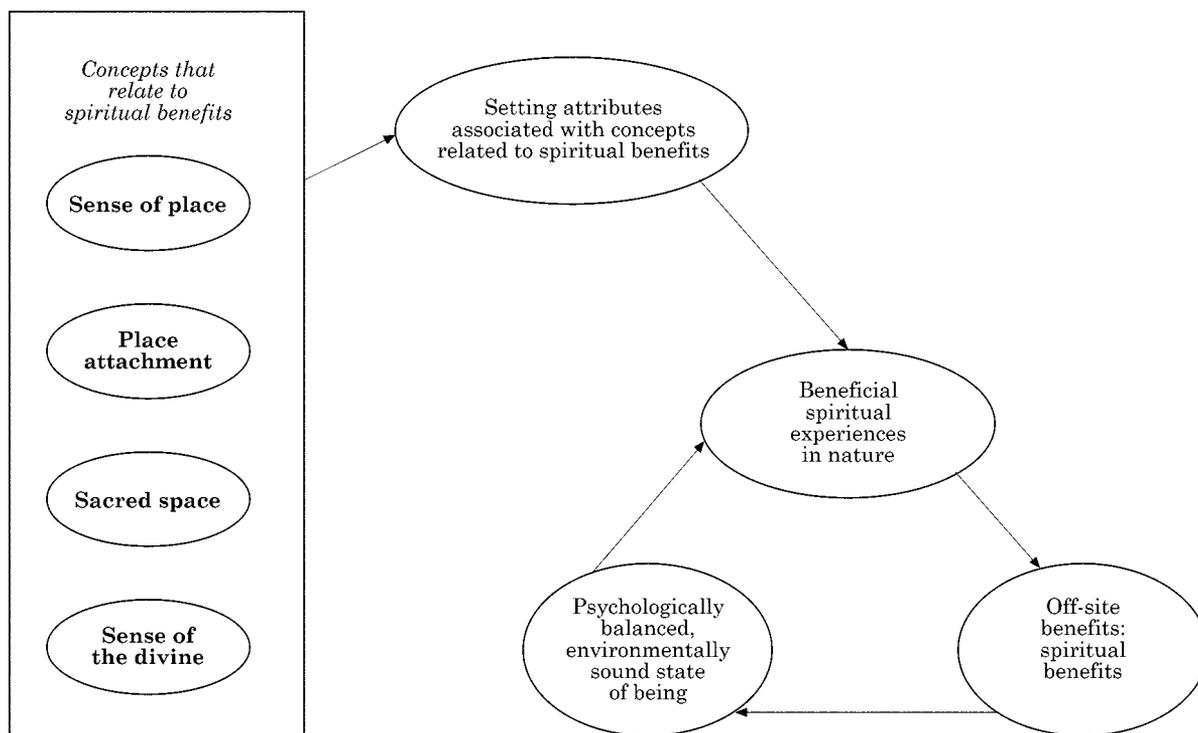


FIGURE 1. Relationship of place concepts with recreation benefits.

was being tested in this study, and instead emergent theories were cross-checked with participants throughout various stages of the study. More specifically, several sources of data were used in exploring the more affective responses to the wilderness recreation experience: (1) on-site observations; (2) personal field journals; and (3) follow-up, individual interviews.

On-site observations, though of limited value with regard to capturing the more affective or emotional aspects of the participant's experience, were necessary for establishing trust and rapport with the trip participants. Essentially, participant observations elicited information that could be explored to a greater degree in the follow-up in-depth personal interviews that occurred after the commencement of each trip. In addition, extensive field notes were taken by the primary researcher who went into the field. The observations were made at two different study site locations: (1) the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness located in northern Minnesota; and (2) the Grand Canyon in northern Arizona. These two sites were chosen due to the fact that they differ greatly in terms of their vegetation, geological, and climatic variations, and the researchers were interested in exploring whether or

not these variations significantly affected the spiritually inspirational aspects of the place setting and overall wilderness experience.

Participant selection

In most qualitative naturalistic research it is quite common to narrow one's inquiry to focus on a subset of the larger population who is most apt to provide a wholistic understanding of the object or phenomenon under study; in this particular case, the 'phenomenon' under study was the wilderness recreation experience itself. In this instance, participants were selected using a purposive sampling scheme which targeted those women who: (1) were visiting the wilderness for recreational purposes; (2) were traveling with an all-women's group; and (3) had the intention of exploring the more contemplative aspects of the recreational experience rather than skill acquisition and physical development.

It is important to recognize that only women were considered for inclusion in this study. Prior research on recreation and leisure suggests that women tend to feel inhibited and less free to express their physical competencies when in a mixed-gender group (Henderson *et al.*, 1989). Furthermore, within the context of recreation and

leisure, Iso-Ahola (1980) states that most small groups tend to experience some degree of group cohesion and bonding. Yet, it is suspected that this bonding effect becomes increasingly difficult to observe and is compounded by stereotyped sex roles and gender inequities when in mixed-gender groups (Henderson *et al.*, 1989). Colley (1984) also persuasively argues that within the context of recreational engagements women tend to take on sex role stereotypes when in mixed gender groups, hence limiting their experience. Therefore, in an effort to avoid the sex role stereotypes so often found in mixed gender groups and to ensure the likelihood of positive small-group bonding, the researchers deemed that it was important and necessary to select and study only women recreationists as a subset of the larger population.

The help of *Woodswomen, Inc.* was enlisted in identifying potential study participants. More specifically, permission was granted by *Woodswomen, Inc.* to go along as a participant-observer on two of their over 30 commercial outdoor adventure trips. *Woodswomen* is an outdoor adventure organization that is based in the Minneapolis area and has been running trips for women and girls since the mid 1970s. Both trips were advertised as beginner's trips, and neither required any previous outdoor experience.

Several months in advance, a letter was sent to all possible study participants which introduced the primary researcher and gave a brief overview of the study objectives. Letters of informed consent were also included, outlining what was expected of each individual should they agree to participate in the study.

Data analysis

As previously mentioned, there were three primary sources of data for this study: (1) on-site observations which were made by the primary researcher; (2) personal trip journals which were kept by each individual participant; and (3) in-depth follow-up interviews that were conducted with each individual participant.

On-site participant observations

On-site observations were used in an effort to develop a certain rapport with the study participants, and also to increase the level of trust with participants so as to solicit a more free-ranging and honest response during their interview sessions. To

some degree, sharing the trip experience with the participants gave the researcher and the individuals a common context from which to start the interviews.

More specifically, the on-site observations were designed to note particular things such as how each individual responded to a variety of environmental stimuli including, for example, changes in the weather, daily travel agendas, notable interpersonal dynamics, and so on. In effect, the participant observations drew attention to potentially important information that could be explored further in the individual interview sessions.

In addition, a general site inventory was taken at each specific camping location, noting the different types of vegetation and wildlife that were present, and the types of management facilities available, if any. This information was recorded in a field notebook which was also used to record the daily weather conditions and to keep a detailed time-log of when particular activities occurred, and in what sequence.

Personal trip journals

All 12 participants were provided with a notebook and were asked to keep a running account of their wilderness experience. In an effort to reduce research bias, instructions were kept very general, and participants were simply asked to record the thoughts and feelings that they had in response to the various settings they encountered on the trip. In addition, they were asked to include any thoughts and feelings they had in response to the various social interactions that occurred on the trip. Participants were instructed that the specific length or format of the daily entries did not matter much, as long as they were developing some type of on-going dialogue with themselves about the overall trip experience.

Upon completion of each trip, the journals were given to the primary researcher, a duplicate copy was made of each of the participants' journal entries, and the original journal was then sent back to each participant. The journal entries were content-analysed within 2 weeks of getting back from each trip, and compared to the on-site participant observations and field notes taken by the primary researcher. The content analysis consisted of multiple consecutive readings of the journal entries, constantly comparing the common themes that were emerging from the various data sets. In this case the content analysis revealed common themes and

meaningful events that seemed to require further probing in the individual interview sessions. In addition, the individual journal accounts were compared and contrasted to the field notes and the on-site participant observations kept by the primary researcher. Both elicited a rich mix of topics and issues to be explored in subsequent interview sessions.

Follow-up interviews

Within 3 weeks of each trip, participants were contacted by phone for a personal, in-depth interview. All 12 interviews were conducted by telephone and tape-recorded to ensure reporting accuracy. All participants had given prior consent to having their conversation recorded. A general interview guide was used for each interview, and was based on information that was gleaned from the participants' journals, and from the field notes and the on-site participant observations. More specifically, a general interview guide was used for each personal interview and included several basic demographic questions along with two key research questions. The two key research questions were designed to be open-ended in nature, encouraging participants to speak at length about the totality of their wilderness experience. In effect, the key questions were designed to determine the centrality and importance of the various setting attributes (i.e. biophysical, social, or managerial) that contributed to the more *meaningful* aspects of their trip experience, and to determine what attributes, if any, elicited spiritual inspiration. If deemed necessary, a series of probing or follow-up questions was then asked to elicit a clearer understanding on the part of the researcher.

All tape-recorded interviews were then transcribed verbatim onto a word processing package and a hard copy was produced for each interview. The constant-comparison method was used during final analysis, and consisted of a series of multiple-consecutive readings of the transcripts. This allowed common themes and categories to simply 'emerge' from the data, and an on-going coding scheme was developed early on in this stage of analysis to help manage and interpret the data. More specifically, similar segments of text were 'flagged' with a colored tag which indicated a reoccurring theme or pattern. The categories changed and grew with each consecutive reading until finally, certain themes emerged as being more important than others.

Results

On-site participant observations

Overall, when reviewing the on-site participant field observation, it appeared that the wilderness experience had had a profound effect on most of the participants. While out in the field it was observed that most women were somewhat in awe of the relatively pristine and remote characteristic of the environment they encountered, and many commented throughout their trip as to how far removed they felt from modern civilization. Most made verbal comments throughout the trip about how different the setting was from their everyday lives, and many spoke about the thrill of being exposed to the sheer powers of nature. For many participants it appeared that they were both enlivened and mystified by being in such an untamed and 'wild' landscape. Many participants discussed among themselves what it must have been like to travel through the area for the first time, comparing their travels to the Native Indians who had at one time lived in each of the two wilderness areas.

Additionally, participant observations revealed that there was a certain camaraderie that quickly developed between and among the individual members of each group. And in general, most participants appeared to deeply respect and trust the other participants. It was noted that none of the women knew each other prior to taking the trip, and yet it was striking to witness how quickly the group bonded and the degree to which they continuously offered each other physical and emotional support. For instance, the physical terrain of each of the two wilderness areas visited was physically challenging and many participants were faced with a degree of physical challenge they had not expected. For example, the trails in the Grand Canyon were often steep and especially narrow, making hiking with a heavy pack challenging, and frequently the women would extend a steadying hand to one another, helping to navigate the especially precipitous terrain. Typically, at the end of each day, the women would gather around the cook stove and review the day's events, noting their accomplishments and disappointments, sharing their feelings, and listening intently to one another describe the landscapes in terms of how it had 'touched' them throughout the day.

Neither of the trips were marked by any unforeseen event. Both trips lasted for 7 days and the daily routine consisted of rising with the sun, eating breakfast as a group, making the day's travel

plans, breaking down camp, hiking or paddling for several hours (breaking only briefly for rest-stops and lunch), and then establishing camp by around four in the afternoon, at which point the participants were free to do as they pleased for a few hours. Typically this was when the participants wrote in their journals or ventured off alone, exploring the landscape immediately surrounding camp. The group reconvened and usually cooked dinner as a group and then turned in shortly after sunset.

Personal trip journals

After multiple consecutive readings of the participants' journal entries it became evident that there were several factors that had most significantly influenced their wilderness experience. For example, most wrote in their journals about the importance of traveling in an all-women's group, noting how rare it was to be traveling with just women across the wilderness landscape. Many made entries about the unusually uncommon level of support and encouragement that they had received from perfect strangers. In addition, many participants spoke about the excitement of being in 'real' wilderness which gave them ample opportunity to freely explore their physical surroundings, which for many had the effect of getting in touch with their physical senses again.

However, the wilderness environment did pose certain physical challenges and several participants wrote about having feelings of *fear* or *uncertainty* in response to particularly challenging events, such as sitting out a particularly harsh thunderstorm one evening for those women who visited the Boundary Waters. But more frequently words such

as *uninhibited*, *peaceful*, *whole*, *refreshed*, *joyful*, *in tune*, and *enraptured* were used to describe the daily 'lived-experience' of the individual participants.

After multiple consecutive readings of the participants journals it became clear that there were several identifying themes that were common to each of the participants' wilderness experiences (Table 1). For example, most participants viewed this trip experience within the larger context of their lives lived elsewhere, making occasional comparisons between what had occurred on the trip vs that at home. In this instance the code 'con' was applied to phrases that dealt mainly with this theme. In addition, in reviewing the individual journal accounts, it became quite clear that the participants had two distinctly different ways in which they related to the world and people around them, and a code of 'way' was assigned to those segments of text that centered on this theme. For instance, some participants described aspects of their wilderness experience in a very embodied way, describing the landscape as if there was some deep connection between themselves and the natural world. In contrast, others described their relationship to the natural environment as if they were somewhat removed from the setting itself.

The code 'per', which stands for perspective, was ascribed to segments of text that described the individual's way of thinking about a given situation that was not bound to the particular setting itself, but instead was about something far more general and broadly applied. For example, many participants wrote in their journals about things that were happening in their lives at home, or things that had happened in the past which seemed to

TABLE 1
Key thematic codes

Code	Descriptor	Theme
con	Setting or context	Contextual information
way	Way of locating oneself	Understanding of oneself in relation to other people and/or objects of the environment
per	General perspective	Thoughts about a given situation that are not bound to a particular setting
fea	Feature	Tangible feature of the natural environment
ev	Event	Specific event that left an overall impression
act	Activity	Regularly occurring kinds of behavior
str	Strategy	Ways of accomplishing things: delegation of responsibilities, negotiations between individuals
rel	Relationship	Unofficially defined pattern of social interaction
feel	Feelings	Feelings specifically noted in association with a particular event and/or situation

hold particular meaning for the individual.

In contrast, the code 'fea' marked those segments of text that spoke about tangible features of the natural environment that appeared to have made a significant impact on the individual participant. For example, most of the women who visited the Grand Canyon commented in their journals at one point or another on the rich color and texture of the rock walls of the inner canyon. Another code that was frequently used was the code 'ev', which delineated sections of text describing particular events that appeared to have made an overall impact on the individual's experience. For example, the women who visited the Boundary Waters were exposed to a tremendous thunderstorm the second night into the trip, and all five participants wrote extensively about this event, chronicling the entire night's affairs.

Other coding categories included 'act', which stood for activities or regularly occurring kinds of behavior, and 'str', which stood for strategies which defined particular ways of accomplishing tasks such as taking care of camp chores or negotiating a group decision. The code 'rel' was assigned to segments of text that spoke about the various relationships that had developed between and among the various group members. Finally, one of the most frequently used codes was 'feel', which specifically marked sections of text that described how the individual was feeling.

This phase of analysis served as a guide in developing a set of guiding questions that were then used in the individual interview sessions that were to follow. More specifically, several basic demographic questions along with two key research questions were designed in response to the information that had been gleaned from the participants' personal journals. In effect, the two key questions were designed to determine the centrality and importance of the various setting attributes in contributing to the more *meaningful* aspects of the participants' wilderness experience overall, and additionally, to determine whether the place setting itself was a source of spiritual inspiration, and if so, why?

More specifically, the first key question read as follows: 'Please recall the most *meaningful* aspects of your trip, and describe in as much detail as possible what actually occurred.' Follow-up questions included: 'Was there anything in particular about the landscape itself that caught your attention?'; 'Could you describe in detail the feelings you experienced at the time?'; 'Did you hear any particular sounds?'; 'What was the weather like?' and so

on. In effect, probing questions were asked in order to cultivate a more holistic understanding of the *meaningful* aspects of the participants' wilderness place experience. Moreover, these probing questions were asked in an effort to determine what effect, if any, particular biophysical, social, or managerial setting had impacted or influenced the individual's overall trip experience. Biophysical attributes include those things that make up the physical environment such as vegetation, geologic formations, water bodies, wildlife, and so on; whereas social attributes are those things that relate to the social atmosphere of the setting, including such things as the number of persons in an individual group, the various types of activities the group (or individual group members) engage in, and encounters with other groups or individuals. Managerial attributes include things such as the presence (or absence) of service facilities like campfire rings, pit toilets, or signage.

The second key question that was designed to gain insight into the individual's understanding of the metaphysical constructs of spirituality and spiritual inspiration read as follows: 'Could you give me a brief description of the word spiritual as you understand and define it for yourself, as well as the word spirituality?' Follow-up questions included: 'Thinking about the definition you just gave for the words spiritual and spirituality, in addition to what you think of when you hear terms such as sense of place or sacred space, did you find anything in particular about the setting to be particularly spiritually inspiring, and if so, why?' The follow-up questions were asked for two reasons. First, to determine whether the more meaningful aspects of their wilderness experience had any correlation to place-related phenomenon as previously described in an earlier section of the manuscript; and secondly, to determine what particular setting attributes, if any, had any bearing on the place being viewed as spiritually inspirational.

It is important to note that even though there were two separate and discrete key interview questions, the women addressed the two questions in a very global way, oftentimes elaborating on their answers to the second key question in relation to their response to the first key question. To provide an accurate account of precisely *how* the participants responded to the interview questions and in an effort to retain the richness of the data, the following results are organized around the central themes that emerged in response to *both* key questions, rather than presenting results to each key question separately.

Follow-up interviews

Basic demographic questions revealed that study participants were between the ages of 26 and 55, with the average age being 47. All but one of the women were over the age of 45. Three of the twelve participants had had some prior outdoor recreation/camping experience, and yet only one of the women pursued outdoor activities on a regular basis. Only one of the women had previously spent an extended period of time in the wilderness. All of the women were working professionals, and all had had some post-secondary education ranging from at least 2 years of college to four women who held advanced graduate degrees. All 12 participants were White. Nine out of the twelve were married, or had been at one time, and all had at least one child. One participant belonged to an organized religion, the remaining 11 women claimed no formal religious affiliation.

After multiple consecutive readings of the interview transcripts several common themes began to emerge from the data. There were two overarching themes that emerged in response to *both* key questions from *both* groups of participants: (1) the importance of being with an all-women's group; and (2) the importance of being in *bona fide* wilderness (Table 2). These two overarching themes characterized the participants' responses to the first key question which probed the overall *meaning* of the wilderness experience; in addition to the responses received for the second key question, probed their self-definition and understanding of that which is 'spiritual' and correspondingly, that which they found spiritually inspirational. However, in addition, there were several other common themes that emerged from the data, yet most of these other themes simply underscored or emphasized the two main overarching themes.

Importance of being with an all-women's group

Most of the participants had a great deal to say about how the all-women's aspect had contributed to the more *meaningful* aspects of their trip. Many

testified to having grown both physically and emotionally from having had the opportunity to share their life's joys and sorrows with other women who were willing to 'really listen' and to be nonjudgmental, and who were also actively supportive of what they had experienced both physically and emotionally while on the trip. Additionally, many claimed that had they not taken this trip they would not have had the chance to regain a sense of 'connectedness' and 'meaning' in their lives elsewhere.

Group trust and emotional safety. Many of the 12 participants spoke repeatedly of the centrality and importance of being in an all-women's group and stated that being with a group of other women had contributed greatly to their wilderness experience. When exploring this theme more fully, most women suggested that it was the on-going emotional support and continuous verbal encouragement they had received from other group members that had contributed most significantly to the more *meaningful* aspects of their trip. Several times throughout the interviews the topics of 'emotional safety' and 'personal bonding' came up. When exploring these issues further, it was found that the level of emotional support and verbal encouragement they had received from other group members was somewhat unusual. In that, most women felt they did not receive this same degree of emotional support from family and significant others back at home. In fact, most of the women commented that they were more used to giving out encouragement, rather than receiving encouragement from others.

Sharing common life changes. For most of the participants, this was the first time they had been away from their families or careers, and for many this was the first time that they had done any extensive camping/wilderness travel at all, let alone with an all-women's group. Additionally, many participants viewed this trip as a symbolic gesture of self-reward, done to acknowledge the years they had spent taking care of other people's needs instead of tending to their own on-going emotional and psychological needs. Most of the women

TABLE 2
Common response themes to key interview questions

Importance of being with an all-women's group	Importance of being in bona-fide wilderness
Group trust and emotional support	Direct contact with nature
Sharing common life changes	Periods of solitude
Noncompetitive atmosphere	Inherent physical challenge

were over the age of 45 and all had recently dealt with some major life change in the past (i.e. death of a loved one, major career change, deterioration of personal health, and so on), so for many of these women this trip was an opportunity to step away from the stresses of life back at home, and gave them a chance to connect with other women who were facing similar life challenges.

Noncompetitive atmosphere. Not only did the level of emotional support and encouragement contribute to the more meaningful aspects of the participants experience, but for many this contributed to the more spiritually inspirational qualities of the trip as well. Additionally, it repeatedly arose in the interview sessions that for many of these women what made their wilderness experience especially meaningful was the fact that there was virtually no reason to be anyone but themselves. Many participants commented frequently on how relaxed and easy it was being in a noncompetitive atmosphere. In probing this further, several women suggested that it was because of this noncompetitive atmosphere that they felt psychologically secure, and were therefore more open and receptive to fully experiencing the grandeur and beauty of the landscape around them. Additionally, many claimed that had they not taken this trip they would not have had the opportunity to experience this grandeur, nor the opportunity to regain a sense of 'connectedness' and 'meaning' in their lives elsewhere. The following excerpts are used to illustrate the centrality and importance of being with an all-women's group for many of the participants.

The strongest part, the thing that I remember the most is just the interaction with all the other women {slight pause} which to me was equally important as being in this beautiful setting. You know, the natural setting was a wonderful place, but it was the interactions with all of these women that was truly inspirational to me. I have just never encountered that kind of cooperation, in such a simple, gentle manner. {long pause} Maybe it *was* [italics added] the place, the setting itself washed away all the other stuff {brief pause} all the artificial barriers that get in the way of first just being comfortable with yourself, and then being with a group of people you haven't met before. All I know is that being on this trip with other women made it [the trip] incredibly meaningful to me. (Boundary Waters trip participant, age 43)

I think that the acceptance I felt overall from the other women played a major part in my experience because I was made to feel so comfortable early on. I think that that had a lot to do with why I felt so clear and spiritually in-tune the rest of the trip.

... I found it incredible that we all just helped each other out and were constantly there for one another. I mean sure, the leader set a good example, but how often do you get together with complete strangers and hit it off. I think the fact there were no men there was significant for me. I didn't feel any pressure to be anything else than who I am, and I certainly didn't feel threatened by any of the women there. {slight pause} If anything I felt like they were really there for me, even when I was struggling to make it [hiking] and didn't think that me knees would hold out. It was great how we moved together as a team, and everyone really seemed to have genuine respect for each other. The whole experience really got me inspired and I got to experience the power of being with all women. {slight pause} It's something that I've never experienced before in my life, and I'm sure glad I did. (Grand Canyon trip participant, age 45)

Importance of being in bone fide wilderness

For some women the importance of being in an all-women's group appeared to be slightly more important than being in a beautiful physical setting in terms of the more *meaningful* aspects of the trip overall. In many instances the biophysical aspects of the environment, such as the verdant vegetation for those who visited the Boundary Waters, or the noticeable stillness of the desert landscape for those who went to the Grand Canyon, was somewhat overshadowed by the positive social dynamics that had occurred between the various participants. However, when asked to describe their wilderness experience in greater detail, it became apparent that certain biophysical elements of each specific site had in fact contributed greatly to their experience overall. In addition, it appeared that it was the biophysical attributes that rendered each site as spiritually inspirational, and presupposed a more contemplative and self-reflective interpretation of the trip experience overall. One of the themes that consistently arose in the individual interviews was the importance of being in a *bona fide* wilderness area; in other words, that the trip itself had taken place in a pristine setting, away from the trappings of modern civilization.

Direct contact with nature. For many participants this was the first time they had ever been out in a vast, remote wilderness area, and correspondingly, this had a very powerful and moving effect on many of them. In probing this point further, it became clearly evident that many of the women experienced a great sense of freedom and release from simply having the opportunity to go out and explore, rediscovering the sights and sounds of nature. So even though the positive social dynamics of

the trip left a lasting impression on most of the participants, there was an even stronger tendency to recall in great detail how various tangible features of the natural environment had also greatly contributed to their overall wilderness experience.

For example, participants who went to the Boundary Waters frequently mentioned how exhilarating it was to hear or see various signs of wildlife, or to feel the weather gradually shifting before a storm. Participants in the Grand Canyon frequently mentioned the significance of being out under an open sky, sleeping without a tent and being able to vividly see the stars at night without interference from any other light sources. In effect, this direct contact with nature inspired many participants to identify that they very rarely 'experienced' the natural world in their every day lives elsewhere, and yet in doing so, it helped them to 'get in touch', as one participant stated, with more important spiritual matters. The following excerpts were chosen to help illustrate the importance of having this direct contact with nature as a means to introspection and deep contemplation.

It was so incredible being able to hear the birds, yeah, and just the crunching of animals all around us. Walking through the brush, I mean, we were really bushwhacking. The sounds of the forest, the snapping of the twigs, hearing the tiny sigh of the wind through the treetops at night. We didn't always get that when we were carrying canoes and packs and stuff across the portages. But at the end of the day, when we were left on our own to go and explore that was when I felt like I was in-touch. (brief pause) Those certain areas where the moss was real thick and you just felt your foot squishing around. It all felt so natural, so real. That kind of stuff, the feeling of being in a natural surrounding and getting back in-touch with all the really important stuff in life. I don't often experience that here [at home] because I'm too distracted by other responsibilities. (Boundary Waters trip participants, age 47)

I remember crawling out of my tent and creeping down to the water's edge and watching the pale moonlight dance across the surface of the water. And there across the lake was a beaver, slapping its tail against the water. I couldn't see it, but knew it was there, letting me know that we were in its territory. I mean, I felt such a sense of peace hearing that sound. And I thought to myself, what a simple lifestyle this is, being attuned to the sights and sounds of nature. It made me realize that I needed to clear out the hecticness [*sic*] in my everyday life. (Boundary Waters trip participant, age 43)

I remember the way the moon rose up over the canyon wall and then cast shadows over the entire canyon floor. I loved just lying there and staring up

at the stars and being able to pick out Orion's belt and being filled with this sense of infinitude. It made me love going to bed at night to experience this feeling all over again... I felt a complete merging with the surrounding environment. Instead of sitting back and observing it, it's like I was moving into it in some way, or rather it was moving into me... It was pure shadow-play, being at peace with the night sky and the big, beautiful desert silence that simply held us all in a trance. (Grand Canyon trip participant, age 50)

Periods of solitude. Furthermore, it was during periods of solitude that many participants admitted to contemplating some of life's deepest questions. Many reported asking themselves questions such as: 'What is the purpose of my life now that I am older?'; 'What really matters in life?'; 'Where has my life gone?'; and 'What shall I do with the rest of my life?' When exploring this further in the individual interviews, several women suggested that they found it incredibly useful to engage in more contemplative and self-reflective thinking, as it seemed to help them maintain their own mental, spiritual, and emotional well-being. However, several participants also recognized that they did not regularly take time out of their every day lives to engage in this type of self-reflection, and many expressed deep regret and frustration for not doing so; as one participant stated, 'It's when I take that time out and just let myself 'be', without doing or acting, that I nourish my soul'. By the same token, more than half of the women indicated that these periods of solitude left them feeling rejuvenated and gave them a renewed sense of hope about the challenges that were waiting for them back at home.

When probed further as to the necessity of being in a wilderness environment for this type of self-reflection to occur, many suggested that there was something 'different' about being out in nature in the wilderness and being in nature at home. One participant suggested that the difference was all about having the opportunity to explore in an unfettered, unrestricted, undeveloped, and pristine environment. For several of the other participants what accounted for this 'difference' was that for some reason they experienced a heightened sensitivity toward the sights and sounds that were immediately surrounding them. When probed further, many of the women described this heightened sensory awareness as part and parcel to their definition of 'spiritual'. Therefore, it seems that having the opportunity for wilderness solitude was spiritually inspirational for several of the participants, and as one woman stated: 'Being out here alone

allows my feet to roam free, and I find that my mind simply just follows... it helps me to feel grounded again'. The following excerpts illustrate the centrality and importance of wilderness solitude in maintaining one's sense of spirit and overall well-being.

You understand what I'm saying (brief pause) in the sense that you have the chance to go back and take a breath of fresh air. Large areas of wilderness allow you to do that. Being in such a pristine, remote area let's me step back from my life and put it into perspective, to re-focus on the things that really matter. It's not the incoming call on line one that matters, but it's being able to gather the wood and boil the water and cook your own food. But it goes beyond just surviving. *That* (italics added) is where I can thrive. It's something about being put back in touch with the essential, miles and miles away from the nearest town or convenience store, that's when we can get in touch with our primitive selves. Out there in the wilderness I am able to see my life as simple and holy again. (Boundary Waters trip participant, age 45)

It was marvelous and wonderful those times when I could go off on my own, you know, after we got in to camp and all [at day's end]. Or early in the morning before everyone else was awake. I noticed more, I felt more. (slight pause) I felt more connected to myself and even to the other people on the trip after I took these momentary periods of solitude. The water and trees became more beautiful when I was able to go off by myself and just sit, perched on a rock away from the rest of the group. Not that I didn't like the other women and all, it's just that being alone is when I found my center. Times when I did that [going off alone] it was like returning to a place deep inside me, and visiting an older, wiser me (slight pause) even though I felt young and vitally alive *too*. (italics added) It's hard to explain really, I guess it's just that I rarely have those opportunities at home to go off and be my myself. I suppose I just don't take the time out. But there's something about being out there [wilderness] that really puts me in the right frame of mind for soaking it all in. (extended pause) I found it really comforting, and left me with feelings of being capable and strong again. Something that I really needed to feel again. I'd just stop and sit and smell the pine duff or listen to the wind, and it really comforted me (pause) although I can't fully explain why. (long pause) It made me feel like I had a home again, like I really belonged. (Boundary Waters trip participant, age 47)

I found those open tracks of land to be incredibly inspirational. You know, without all sorts of lines and poles, and buildings cluttering it all up. We need more open expanses of land, they allow our spirit to simply roam. I find that it's through the roaming that my spirit comes to rest in my body (brief pause) and once I have that feeling of completeness, I know that everything is okay. That to

me is truly inspirational. To be given the opportunity to just wander and explore, yet knowing or trusting that you won't get lost (long pause) and then winding your way back to what has become your temporary home. (extended pause) But I suppose even if I did get lost, that would still be part of my spiritual journey, finding my way home could also be inspirational. (Grand Canyon trip participant, age 48)

Inherent physical challenge. The physical challenge associated with each wilderness environment was at times extremely exhausting for many of the participants, and even though the two trips were advertised as beginner-level trips, most participants encountered a degree of physical challenge that many admitted to feeling somewhat unprepared for once the trip had begun. This in part is due to the fact that they were traveling in *bona fide* wilderness. By definition, wilderness is a region which contains no permanent inhabitants, no possibility for motorized travel, and is spacious enough so that a traveler crossing it by foot must have the experience of sleeping out of doors. In effect, most areas that are technically classified as wilderness are somewhat hard to get to, somewhat difficult to travel through, and by default, possess certain rugged characteristics.

For example, those who went to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness were hemmed in by extremely thick vegetation and typically paddled their canoes for several hours at a time, working their way from one campsite to the next. The only stops were at the portages. At each portage crossing, the canoes had to be completely unloaded and all the gear then had to be carried across the trail by hand, including the canoes which weighed in excess of 120 pounds apiece. Frequently the portage trails were rocky and uneven, some were mired down in as much as a foot of mud, therefore making portage crossings at times extremely difficult. On average there were five portage crossings a day.

In contrast, the women who traveled through the Grand Canyon had their own challenges. For instance, participants hiked with fully loaded backpacks that weighed approximately 45 pounds each, and faced daytime temperatures that frequently exceeded 90 degrees Fahrenheit. In addition, the terrain across most of the Tonto Plateau was notably rough and rocky, making the original descent into the gorge especially challenging. Frequently the trail narrowed to just barely a foot wide, with a sheer drop-off on one side and a canyon wall on the other, which made the hiking that much more challenging. What's more, there was the

constant threat of not being able to find potable water at the next intended camping spot.

Despite the physical challenge that most wilderness travel presents, many of the participants claimed to have experienced a reawakening to their physical capabilities and a renewed sense of their bodies. Several found that once they overcame the psychological uncertainties they had about their physical abilities, and simply engaged themselves more fully in the challenge at hand, many were left with a sense of deep accomplishment, which invariably bolstered their self-confidence and self-esteem. For several women, regaining the sense of one's physical abilities was one of the primary dimensions of what several defined as 'spiritual'. And correspondingly, several suggested that having the opportunity to fully indulge in the more physical sides of their nature, say, rather than the intellectual, in itself was spiritually inspirational. It was discovered that several of the women had participated in some form of sport or recreation when they were younger. However, many had fallen away from this type of physical activity as they had gotten older, and most of the participants had not undertaken anything quite so physically challenging in many years. So for many, the physical challenge that is inherent to most wilderness travel offered many of the participants a chance to re-experience their physicality, and in return, many were left feeling deeply empowered by the experience.

I can't even fully capture in words what happened to me when I was out there. The first day when I looked out over the lip of the canyon and looked down, and saw the trail that we were headed down, knowing that my knees were weak to begin with {brief pause} and my spirit as well, I thought to myself 'there's no way I can do that.' And yet five days later, my body incredibly tired, I felt more alive than I had in all my life. The sense of accomplishment I felt was really inspirational {pause} and it helped me to come back and face what was waiting for me back here [home]. But it's not just that I felt physically healthier {brief pause} and still *do* [italics added] but what's happened is that I feel more balanced and secure. It's like that was the spark I needed to feel competent and able to handle my life again. It sparked a flame inside me that I can't remember feeling since I was a young girl... It's like the spirit is burning deep inside me again, and I'm looking at my life a little differently... I wouldn't give it up for anything. It got the flame burning inside me again, and it's burning bright. (Grand Canyon trip participant, age 42)

You know you ask me about the most meaningful part of my trip, and I can't really isolate any one thing {slight pause} it's too hard to pull it apart like that. But one of the things that comes to mind was

just knowing that I was able to do it. You know, being able to carry a canoe like that and putting up with the rough weather. God, I hadn't done anything like that in years and I was really a bit scared that I wouldn't make it or that the group would have to turn back because of my back or my knees giving out, or something. {pause} I remember that one morning when we pulled away from shore... And we only paddled for a little while and when we got to the portage and saw that it was a mud wallow [*sic*] I remember thinking, 'what am I doing here?' But you know, we all just dealt with it, pulled the gear out of the boats, pulled each other out of the boats, chipped in, trudged through the mud, and just dove into the moment. I mean hauling all our stuff with us and sinking into a routine, a rhythm, so it wasn't such a chore and my body held up through it all. {trailing off} It still hangs with me. (Boundary Waters trip participant, age 49)

I was scared to death... the whole time we were traveling down this fear was right below the surface. At points there would be a wall, and I would say to myself, 'I'm going down.' My biggest fear was if my pack hit the wall, I would fall over the edge. So it was really a survival thing for me. I cried a few times and just had to stop, and didn't know if I could go on. But the feeling when I finally reached the top (brief pause), was overwhelming! I mean, to know that I had succeeded was so empowering. (long pause) While we were on the hike portion itself, which was mostly extreme drops or extreme rises, I couldn't look at anything much else because I didn't trust my knees. I looked down most of the time. Every step I had to look where I was going. It was not an enjoyable or truly relaxing trip, yet it was (brief pause), very empowering. I proved to myself that I could do some things that I didn't think I could do. And through the pain and fear, I discovered my body was stronger than I had thought it was. (Grand Canyon trip participant, age 47)

Wilderness as spiritual inspiration

As previously mentioned, most study participants addressed the two key interview questions in a very global way, frequently interchanging thoughts about the more *meaningful* aspects of their wilderness experience with the thoughts and feelings they had about the metaphysical construct of 'spirituality', and that which is perceived as spiritually inspirational. It was very typical that after hearing the second key question which read: 'Could you give me a brief description of the word spiritual as you understand and define it for yourself, as well as the word spirituality?', most participants would then relate their ideas about 'spirituality' and 'that which is spiritual' back to what they had interpreted and defined as *meaningful*.

Moreover, personal definitions for the word

TABLE 3
Characteristics common to spiritual and spirituality

Dimensions of spiritual and spirituality	Feelings associated with spirituality
Ineffable	Empowered
Intangible	Hopeful
Centering force	Grounded and secure
Heightened sensory awareness	Wonder and awe
Timelessness	Humility

'spiritual' and 'spirituality' varied among the participants. However, there were a number of common characteristics and attributes that many participants attributed to these two metaphysical constructs (Table 3). For instance, when describing what they felt to be 'spiritual', many of the participants expressed that it was something beyond words, or more accurately, that words simply could not adequately capture what it was when they were fully experiencing their own spirituality. This seems to indicate that there is a certain ineffability and intangibility that marks or delineates those experiences that are more 'spiritual' in nature, as opposed to those that are more ordinary. In addition, participants frequently claimed to have experienced a certain heightened sensory awareness when describing the more spiritually inspirational qualities of their trip. Moreover, several participants claimed to have experienced a momentary loss of the passage of time when encountering that which they found to be spiritually inspirational.

More often than not, participants had a rather broad definition of the words 'spiritual' and 'spirituality', but their self-definitions and descriptions were certainly not centered around the concept of an organized religion. In general, the participants had a broader understanding of spirituality, and although some participants' outlooks had been shaped or influenced by traditional religions at an earlier stage in their lives, none were currently following any regular religious faith practice.

The following quotes seem to fully capture the complexity of emotions and cognitive dimensions that participants felt in response to the more spiritual dimensions of their wilderness experience. More specifically, the following quotes illustrate the rich array of biophysical and social setting attributes that spiritually inspired many of the participants.

It was stopping for a moment and looking up to see the full moon rising, and having a sense of timelessness. I felt a complete merging with the surrounding environment. Instead of sitting back and

observing it [the landscape], it's like I was moving into it in some way {brief pause} or rather it was moving into me. I couldn't deny its effect on me. I suppose what I experienced was transcendence {pause} losing myself into my surroundings. It was expansive and at first I was afraid and then deeply comforted and filled with a sense of complete peace. (Grand Canyon trip participant, age 50)

Spiritual to me is getting in-touch with the life-force that is inside of every one of us, yet it is much larger than each of us as individuals. I express my spirituality when I am deeply in-tune with the forces of nature and feel a certain interconnectedness with all other living things—that is when I am experiencing my spirituality to the fullest. {brief pause} You know that one day, when we hiked down into that canyon and came upon the skull with the huge curly horns, I felt something incredibly powerful about that place, but I couldn't hold it in my hands, I could just sense it in the air... It was powerful, and the feeling of that particular place was almost palpable. I mean I got a sense of how we as humans fit in {brief pause} sometimes, and don't really belong at others... there was a certain reverence that just seemed to envelope everybody and the entire canyon. And it was at that very moment that I felt a kind of opening, somewhere deep within me. It was a bit scary, but it also felt very comforting. It was like the earth itself was holding me in a spell, and I felt nourished way deep down inside {long pause}. Yeah, so I guess you could say that spirituality to me is being in-tune with and respectful of the earth's rhythms. (Grand Canyon trip participant, age 53)

To be calm, and to just be centered in myself and to relax and not get excited about a whole lot of stuff. I guess, that's it for me. Yeah, the feeling of being totally self-assured and comfortable within the great scheme of things... If I want to get a sense of my own spirituality or a sense of self, I want to go outdoors. And what often happens is that as I become familiar with a particular place, I also become re-familiarized with myself and how I fit with the rest of the world. Yeah, I want to go somewhere where there's trees and water {brief pause}. But it's not like I want to connect with something else, it's that I want to connect with myself, and once I do that, then I *am* {italics added} connected with something larger than myself. For me to experience 'that which is spiritual' {momentary laugh}, it has to be nature, with water, with trees. Some people believe in a god, but I don't. I don't believe there is someone out there for us. God is not out there looking out for me, it's really about me coming here to myself and discovering my aliveness [*sic*] in Mother Nature. (Boundary Waters trip participant, age 46)

To briefly summarize, most participants described these two different places as being spiritually inspirational primarily in terms of a rich

combination of biophysical and social attributes. Moreover, these two different wilderness settings were viewed as spiritually inspirational not only because of the particular flora or fauna that characterized each area, but perhaps more importantly, because of the positive interpersonal interactions that had occurred in each of the all-women's group. As one participant stated, the setting 'came alive' when the participants were sharing their life stories around the camps at night, and some participants even claimed that this small-group sharing was a subset or dimension of what they defined as 'spiritual' for themselves.

In trying to identify the particular biophysical attributes that rendered each wilderness site as spiritually inspirational, something interesting arose when comparing the participants' aggregate responses to the first key question with the aggregate responses to the second key question. More specifically, when comparing the aggregate responses to the first key question, which was aimed at getting an understanding of what had added meaning to their wilderness experience, participants who backpacked through the Grand Canyon more frequently spoke about individual features of the biophysical environment than did participants who traveled to the Boundary Waters. Those participants who traveled to the Boundary Waters typically referred to the natural environment as more of an organic whole, rather than as a collection of individual biophysical elements (Tables 4 and 5). In effect, Boundary Waters participants interpreted

the environment as more of a gestalt, so to speak, and less frequently focused in on any one particular environmental feature over another. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that when in the Boundary Waters there is little topographic relief, and therefore, little or no opportunity for taking in a panoramic vista. In contrast, much of the landscape in the Grand Canyon is characterized by sweeping panoramic vistas which have been created by the extensive erosion and geologic up-lifting that has occurred in that area over hundreds of thousands of years.

In summary, the lived-experience of each participants' wilderness place was a rich combination of being in *bona fide* wilderness. Perhaps it was that the sheer vastness and expansiveness of the wilderness environment conditioned a more emotional and psychological-spiritual understanding of the experience overall. However, one cannot deny the positive effect that the overall social dynamics and group bonding had on most of the participants.

Discussion

This study suggests that the way in which individuals react to and interpret the natural environment is a multi-faceted phenomenon, and the ways in which various individuals derive or attach *meaning* from various landscapes is equally complex. Additionally, this study found that the person-place interaction is a somewhat dynamic phenomenon,

TABLE 4
Most meaningful aspects of trip experience

Participants*	Key thematic codes†								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
A	2	6	4	15	5	3	6	16	13
B	3	5	3	18	4	2	7	12	14
C	4	4	4	18	5	3	5	15	14
D	2	4	5	17	3	4	4	11	12
E	1	2	3	16	4	3	5	13	12
F	2	4	3	21	4	2	5	13	9
G	3	5	5	24	3	3	6	14	11
H	2	6	2	26	3	3	4	17	10
I	2	4	1	23	3	4	4	14	9
J	4	5	0	27	2	3	3	16	8
K	2	4	2	26	5	2	5	15	11
L	3	5	2	25	4	3	6	12	10

*Participants A–E are participants to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness; F–L are participants to the Grand Canyon.

†1 = context; 2 = perspective that is bound to the setting; 3 = general perspective; 4 = features of the natural environment; 5 = events; 6 = activities; 7 = strategies; 8 = relationships; and 9 = feelings.

TABLE 5
Categorical themes contributing to spiritually inspirational aspects of the trip

Participant*	Key thematic codes†								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
A	0	3	2	16	1	0	7	4	5
B	1	2	3	16	2	2	7	6	4
C	0	3	3	17	2	0	6	4	3
D	0	3	3	17	0	0	8	4	2
E	1	2	3	18	2	0	6	4	3
F	2	3	3	16	2	1	5	5	3
G	0	0	2	17	1	1	8	5	4
H	2	2	2	16	3	2	7	7	2
I	2	3	1	17	0	0	6	9	3
J	1	2	0	17	2	1	8	8	2
K	2	3	2	18	3	2	7	7	3
L	0	1	2	17	0	1	6	7	3

*Participants A–E are participants to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness; F–L are participants to the Grand Canyon.

†1 = context; 2 = perspective that is bound to the setting; 3 = general perspective; 4 = features of the natural environment; 5 = events; 6 = activities; 7 = strategies; 8 = relationships; and 9 = feelings.

one that is multi-dimensional, which confirms earlier work by Tuan (1976) and others (Relph, 1976; Seamon, 1984; Fishwick & Vining, 1992). Moreover, the results of this study suggest that the social dimensions that characterize the person–place interaction, and in this instance the wilderness place setting, are equally as important to consider in determining the *meaning* that one derives from a particular place. In that, this study found that the affective appeal of a particular place setting has as much to do with the social interactions that occur there, as with the overall visual appeal of the landscape itself. In effect, this study showed that the social dynamics between group members played a large part in interpreting the wilderness place setting as spiritually inspirational, and in turn, the wilderness experience itself was also heavily influenced by the interpersonal interactions that had occurred within each of the two place settings. That is not to say that the participants did not interpret certain biophysical features of the environment as spiritually inspirational *per se*, it is just that most participants could not so easily isolate and speak about the importance of the various biophysical features of the place setting without also addressing the more social aspects of the place setting as well.

In addition, in view of the fact that much of the past research on person–place interactions has relied heavily on numerical scaling systems in determining an individual's preference for a particular landscape, this study went beyond the traditional approach and built a more comprehensive and

wholistic understanding of the person–place interaction. Whereas these types of numerical scaling systems tend to rely heavily on visual cues in determining landscape preference and, in so doing, miss much of the other sensory cues that enrich and enliven the place setting, this study confirmed that it was a rich array of visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and kinesthetic cues that made the place setting itself come 'alive', and hence, was interpreted as spiritually inspirational.

What's more, it was discovered that precisely *how* the visual components of each place setting hung together to form a complete 'picture' was perceived quite differently by the two groups of participants. For instance, it was found that the individuals who visited the Boundary Waters visually assessed their environment as more of a gestalt, whereas the Grand Canyon participants paid closer attention to individual biophysical features of the landscape. Perhaps this is due in part to the fact that the desert landscape itself is somewhat sparse and barren, and in some respects the eye is simply drawn to the single, isolated feature such as a lone-standing acacia bush simply as a way of 'punctuating' an otherwise indistinguishable landscape. This, in effect, encourages the individual to focus more specifically on individual features of the landscape itself. More specifically, the eye might 'train' the individual to become more observant of a single isolated feature of the landscape merely as a means of successfully navigating through an otherwise inhospitable environment. For instance, when in the Grand Canyon there is virtually no vegeta-

tion that would block one's view, and therefore one has the ability to locate themselves in relation to some distant point on the far horizon, and likewise, to successfully reach that particular point on the horizon as long as one keeps track visually of the sparse biophysical features that mark the landscape and act as navigational cues.

In contrast, because the Boundary Waters are so densely vegetated, barring the lakes and streams, the only opportunity for any kind of panoramic view or placing oneself in relation to a fixed point on the horizon is when one is in a canoe on the water. And then, typically, the land itself appears as a 'wall of green' as one participant stated, rather than as individual plants and trees. Time and time again, the verbal descriptions taken from the participants who went to the Boundary Waters described the biophysical features of the wilderness environment as if they were an entire composition, rather than as a collection of individual stanzas and notes. Yet despite this difference, both wilderness environments filled the participants with a deep sense of belonging and spiritual inspiration.

Furthermore, in terms of the geological outlay and the biophysical features that characterize each of these particular wilderness areas, the two settings vary greatly. One is a vast desert landscape, the other, essentially a forest primeval. The only similarity between these two environments is that they are both technically classified as 'wilderness'. Whereas the Wilderness Act of 1964 legally defines wilderness as land that has been unmodified by human action (which in effect limits the types of activities that can occur there, in addition to restricting the types of service facilities available) this was in fact the most fundamental aspect of the trip itself that provoked a more contemplative and self-reflective examination of the experience overall—that the whole thing took place in an unmodified, untamed, and wild area.

Furthermore, in trying to establish a clear linkage between various place-related concepts, the wilderness experience, and the spiritually inspirational qualities of the setting itself, it became clear that there were certain aspects of the participants' experiences that closely paralleled the 'place attachment' and 'sacred space' phenomena. In that, at some level, most participants developed a deep sense of identification and 'at-homeness' with the place they had visited, primarily because they had immersed themselves so directly and immediately into the natural environment itself. Again, this seems to underscore the importance of being in *bona fide* wilderness, where there is very little

mediating an especially close and intimate encounter with the sheer powers of nature. By far it was the wild and untamed aspects of the wilderness environment that spoke to most participants at a very deep level, and left them open to perceiving the place as more of a transcendent reality.

Furthermore, by what the participants said in their individual interviews, it appears that several of them might have experienced something quite similar to that of a religious experience. The religious experience is typically characterized by a sudden illumination of individual consciousness, where the experience itself is somewhat fleeting or momentary and lacks specific content, yet leaves the individual with an overwhelming feeling of having made contact with a power much greater than the self (Eliade, 1961). Typically, what ensues is an intense and pressing recognition of one's insignificance in the larger cosmos and a heightened recognition of the interrelatedness of all life-forms, ultimately leading to feelings of peace and humility. It is said that this type of experience is the manifestation of 'sacred power', and when one makes contact with 'sacred power' it is a self-transcending experience which carries the mind to the edge of its limited understanding. When this type of experience occurs it could be said that one has come into 'sacred space', and as Graber (1976) suggests, wilderness is the ideal medium from which to experience sacred power. Furthermore, it could be said that wilderness helps humans to achieve transcendence by putting them in a receptive mood for contact with 'sacred power'. In this specific instance, it appeared that the vastness of the wilderness and the total immersion into it served to remind the participants of the vastness of the universe and the cosmos, and one's place within it. For these 12 women it was the sheer expansiveness of the landscape that presupposed any type of spiritual self-investigation. Moreover, it was the unexplored land beyond the crest of the next canyon wall, or the unnamed lake beyond the next bend in the river that led to questions about the 'unknown', and the ultimately 'unknowable', which pulled them deeper into the depths of sacred power. Yet, it is important to note that not all participants professed to having a religious experience *per se*. However, study results clearly indicate that most participants were definitely moved to new spiritual heights as a result of their wilderness experience.

Furthermore, from study results it also seems that for many of the participants this was a very authentic experience itself, not merely a superficial 'guided tour', which frequently leaves the visitor

captivated on site, but scrambling to remember specific details of a particular place soon after the visit has ended. Instead these women got down into the thick of the environment and experienced it first-hand, and because of it many developed a deep sense of identification with the place itself. This seems to support earlier work of Relph (1976), who claimed that the authentic place experience is one where the individual not only forms a deep sense of identification with the place, but moreover, develops a real 'feel' for the place.

Likewise, this study confirms what Seamon (1979, 1987) depicts as the 'insideness–outsideness' dynamic of the authentic place experience. Seamon states that as the individual becomes more familiar with the particulars of the place, one becomes part of the place itself, moving from a position of being 'outside' the biophysical and social dynamics that characterize a particular place to that of being on the 'inside'. In this case, these 12 women did in fact move through this 'insideness–outsideness' dynamic by carrying backpacks through intense heat across treacherous desert terrain, or paddling for hours on-end, then carrying canoes, paddles and gear across precarious portage trails, all the while stitching themselves more securely to the social fabric that characterized each place. And perhaps it was then that these 12 participants were able to seriously reflect upon and contemplate life's deeper meanings and get in touch with their spiritual selves. But the question still remains, which comes first, the individual feeling emotionally secure within their social setting, or the individual feeling secure within their biophysical environment which then enables the individual to feel more self-secure within their social situation(s)? To be certain, the person–place interaction is a dynamic and multi-faceted phenomenon.

To summarize, this study strongly suggests that it is a unique combination of biophysical, social, and managerial attributes that coalesce and give some sense of meaning to the overall landscape, and likewise, for the wilderness experience. Similarly, it is a unique combination of social interactions and landscape characteristics that render a place as spiritually inspirational, at least for these particular women. And although this study cannot be generalized too broadly beyond the 12 participants, this study does indicate that recreational experiences in a wilderness setting have the distinct potential to positively enrich the lives of those who take to the 'wild'. The beneficial aspects of wilderness recreation include not only the potential for physical and emotional growth, but moreover

the opportunity to grow spiritually. What's more, once participants are faced with questions about one's own spirituality, and begin to contemplate and define their own conceptualization of 'that which is spiritual', they may find unique opportunities in their everyday lives of ways to enhance their spiritual growth.

Yet, if we want to broaden our understanding of the more qualitative dimensions of the person–place interaction and of 'place' as a source of spiritual inspiration, and also deepen our understanding of the wilderness experience as a phenomenon in itself, it seems both prudent and wise to pursue this type of qualitative inquiry with other subsets of the general population. For example, we might get a more complete and comprehensive understanding of the relative importance that gender plays on positive group dynamics and on one's understanding of 'place' as a source of spiritual inspiration if we were to include a mixed-gender group or an all-male group in future studies. It would seem likely that there are similarities between a mixed-gender group or an all-male group in terms of the biophysical elements of the landscape that give rise to spiritual inspiration, yet it would be interesting to explore and determine how important the social dynamics are in contributing to the spiritually inspirational qualities of the wilderness experience overall. To further investigate the more affective and qualitative dimensions of the wilderness experience across gender lines would make for fruitful future research. One might also focus the analysis on only *one* wilderness setting as opposed to two, having several different groups visit that one particular area, noting the similarities and distinctions that might arise from the different data sets.

What is unmistakable is that additional qualitative inquiry can surely enrich and enhance the current body of knowledge about person–place interactions and the wilderness experience, thus enabling us to create a more complete understanding of these complex phenomena. Furthermore, we must include various types of qualitative analysis in our on-going search to deepen our understanding of the long-term spiritual benefits accrued from various recreational experiences.

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