

RESEARCH REPORT

Spiritual outcomes of wilderness experience: A synthesis of recent social science research

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SPIRITUALITY IS OFTEN ASSOCIATED WITH WILDERNESS

experience. Driver et al. (1996) suggested that a deeper understanding of the spiritual meanings that nature holds for humans could improve public land management. This article reviews 19 research studies, all but one published since 1997. In the vast majority of these studies, participants self-defined spirituality.

The behavioral model of outdoor recreation frames the empirical research reviewed and allows for the inclusion of many factors involved in the wilderness and spirituality relationship. The framework includes antecedent conditions, setting, and recreation components, which together lead to short- and long-term spiritual outcomes. This research synthesis may help park managers to better understand the processes that link wilderness experience with spiritual outcomes and to educate wilderness visitors about these processes (fig. 1).

Antecedent conditions

“Antecedent conditions” refers to people’s characteristics prior to their wilderness experience. Personal history and current circumstances may influence wilderness experience. Examples include “baggage,” such as fear (Fox 1999) and wilderness spiritual mentorship (Foster and Borrie *in press*). Spiritual mentorship refers to how parents, relatives, friends, guides, visual media, fiction, and nonfiction may influence a person’s spiritual experience in wilderness.

People’s motivations and attitude to engage in wilderness activity can be considered antecedents. Spiritual outcomes have been associated with visiting wilderness for spiritual journey and self-discovery (Riley and Hendee 2000). While some wilderness participants may not be seeking spiritual outcomes (Heintzman 2007; Stringer and McAvoy 1992), quantitative studies suggest that 46% to 69% of wilderness visitors seek or experience spiritual outcomes (Brayley and Fox 1998; Heintzman 2002, *in press*; Trainor and Norgaard 1999), although these outcomes may not be the most valued (Behan et al. 2001).

Sociodemographic characteristics are also considered antecedent conditions. For 514 campers at wilderness-class parks that are part of the Ontario Provincial Parks system in Canada, the degree to which introspection/spirituality added to satisfaction

Abstract

This article synthesizes recent empirical research on wilderness experience and spirituality using the behavioral model of outdoor recreation. Antecedent conditions, setting, and recreation components together lead to short- and long-term spiritual outcomes. Implications for wilderness management are discussed.

Key words

spiritual outcomes, spirituality, wilderness experience, wilderness management

ANTECEDENT CONDITIONS

Personal History and Current Circumstances
Motivation and Attitude
Sociodemographic Characteristics
Spiritual Tradition

SETTING

Nature
Being Away
Place Processes

RECREATION

Activity
Solitude
Free Time
Group Experiences



SPIRITUAL OUTCOMES

Short-term:
Spiritual Experiences

Long-term:
Spiritual Well-Being

Leisure-Spiritual Coping

Figure 1. Wilderness experience and spirituality: The combination of the antecedent conditions a person brings to the wilderness experience, along with the setting and recreation components of the wilderness experience, may lead to spiritual outcomes of spiritual experience, spiritual well-being, and leisure-spiritual coping.

with the park experience was greater for males than for females and increased with education level (Heintzman *in press*). This gender difference was also true for day visitors to Ontario Parks (Heintzman 2002).

Finally, spiritual tradition should be considered. For example, for wilderness visitors with Christian understandings of spirituality, wilderness is viewed as God’s creation, which is entwined with their spirituality (Foster and Borrie *in press*; Heintzman 2008).

Setting

Wilderness settings produce opportunities for spiritual outcomes for two main reasons. First, the natural setting of wilderness elicits a variety of outcomes, including a sense of wonder and awe (Fox 1997); connection with God or a higher power (Heintzman 2007, 2008); a sense of peacefulness, calm, stillness, and tranquility (Fox 1997; Heintzman 2007); therapeutic benefits (Fox 1997); and peak experiences that facilitate spiritual expression (McDonald et al. 2009). The biophysical characteristics of bona fide wilderness and direct contact with nature (Fredrickson and Anderson 1999), the natural backcountry setting (Marsh 2008), and naturalness (Riley and Hendee 2000; White and Hendee 2000) have all been associated with spirituality.

Second, being away appears to be as important as the natural setting for wilderness visitors. Stringer and McAvoy (1992) observed that greater opportunities for and enhancement of spiritual experiences in wilderness were usually ascribed to lack of constraints and responsibilities in wilderness compared with participants' everyday lives. Being away has been associated with the opportunity to get away from the everyday routine to focus on spirituality (Heintzman 2007, 2008); sacredness of life (McDonald et al. 2009); a simpler, less rushed life with no connection to the outside world, which enhances one's ability to "commune" with God (Bobilya et al. 2011); and escape from information technology (Foster and Borrie *in press*), all of which have been associated with spiritual outcomes. Being in nature may be important for some wilderness visitors and being away may be significant for others (Trainor and Norgaard 1999), but often the combination of these is conducive to spirituality (Foster and Borrie *in press*).

Place processes may be a third reason why wilderness settings produce opportunities for spiritual outcomes. The spiritually inspirational characteristics of wilderness have been linked to the phenomena of "place attachment" and "sacred space" as wilderness visitors have developed a sense of "at-homeness" and identification with the wilderness they visited (Fredrickson and Anderson 1999). Also, spiritual place meanings have been associated with sacred sites by visitors at the Apostle Islands (Salk et al. 2010).

Recreation

The type of wilderness recreation activity engaged in influences spirituality. While diverse wilderness activities have been associated with spirituality (Stringer and McAvoy 1992), Ontario Parks visitors, including visitors to wilderness parks, who spent most of their time at a park in more nature-oriented activities (e.g., viewing/photographing nature, guided hikes/walks) rated higher

on the degree to which introspection/spirituality added to their satisfaction than did participants who spent most of their time in activities such as biking and swimming/wading (Heintzman 2002, *in press*). Similarly, Behan et al. (2001) found that spiritual benefits were valued more by foot travelers than by mountain bikers.

The intensity of a recreation activity in wilderness may also influence spirituality. The physical challenge of canoeing and hiking (Fredrickson and Anderson 1999), adventure, and mental and physical exercise (Marsh 2008) in wilderness have been associated with spirituality.

The type of spiritual outcome may also be influenced by the type of wilderness activity engaged in. Wilderness canoeists had spiritual experiences focused on interconnections with people while mountain hikers described spiritual experiences involving appreciation of wilderness beauty (Stringer and McAvoy 1992). Wilderness canoe paddling has also been found to offer an opportunity for spiritual reflection as it provides time to consider the difference between wilderness conditions and everyday life (Foster and Borrie *in press*).

Solitude in wilderness has led to peace, tranquility, a chance for an inner journey, time for self-reflection (Fox 1997), and renewal resulting from contemplation of life's deepest questions, which can be difficult or impossible during everyday life (Fredrickson and Anderson 1999). The importance of solitude for spirituality has also been reported by wilderness program participants (White and Hendee 2000), wilderness canoeists who participated in a solo experience (Heintzman 2007), and backcountry adventurers (Marsh 2008). Ontario Parks campers, including wilderness park campers, who visited the park alone rated introspection/spirituality higher than those who visited the park with others (Heintzman *in press*). In the case of group wilderness experiences, unscheduled time in wilderness when one is free to do as one chooses has been viewed as a critical component in spiritual experiences (Stringer and McAvoy 1992).

Group experiences, including the sharing of experiences, opinions, and ideas (Stringer and McAvoy 1992); working as a team (Fox 1997); "group trust and emotional support," "sharing common life changes," and a "non-competitive atmosphere" (Fredrickson and Anderson 1999); and the opportunity to discuss with others, to share stories and personal life experiences, and to have friendships and camaraderie (Heintzman 2007) have all been associated with spirituality. Conversations and discussions on one wilderness trip facilitated ongoing spiritual friendships (Heintzman 2008). Being part of a male-only or female-only group has also played an important role in spiritual outcomes (Fox 1997; Fredrickson and Anderson 1999; Heintzman 2008).

In some cases a balance of solitude and group experiences is helpful to spirituality (Heintzman 2007): “There is a dynamic of tension between interaction and solitude: Both enable a spiritual meaning” (Marsh 2008, p. 292).

Spiritual outcomes

The combination of antecedent conditions, setting, and recreation components may lead to spiritual outcomes. Spiritual experience in wilderness has been characterized by emotions of awe and wonderment at nature, feelings of connectedness, heightened senses, inner calm, joy, inner peace, inner happiness, and elatedness (Fox 1997); intense and often positive emotions (Stringer and McAvoy 1992); peacefulness, including peace with oneself and the world (Heintzman 2007); and religious-like or self-transcending feelings of peace and humility (Fredrickson and Anderson 1999). McDonald et al. (2009) discovered that participants’ peak experiences in wilderness facilitated the sacredness of life, meaning and purpose, and transcendent “unseen” dimensions of spirituality.

Some studies suggest spiritual experiences in wilderness influence daily life. Fox (1999) claimed that feelings of empowerment, clarity, and inner peace led to inner strength and self-control, which affected both work life and family life by making participants feel more in control and stronger regarding relationships, roles, and personal goals. Stringer and McAvoy (1992) used post-trip interviews (i.e., 3–45 days after the trip) to conclude that wilderness experiences appeared to have some impact on participants’ lives one month later. Just over half of the participants in McDonald et al.’s (2009) study observed that their wilderness peak experiences were significant in their life because the restorative elements of wilderness, such as the absence of distractions, human-made intrusions, and time constraints, along with solitude, provided time and space to think about meaning and purpose in relation to suffering, the limits of human life, and nonmaterial pleasures.

The impact on spiritual well-being for men on a wilderness canoe retreat 5–7 months later was associated primarily with the memory and recollection of the experience and less with specific behavioral change. Development and enhancement of spiritual friendships were the main impact on spiritual well-being 8–10 months after a different men’s wilderness canoe trip (Heintzman 2008). Ninety percent of participants in a 20-day wilderness expedition believed the expedition had long-term value or life significance in terms of greater awareness of God, nature, and self (Daniel 2007). Eighty percent of 429 participants in a national study of wilderness experience reported a greater spiritual connection with nature as a result of their experience (Kellert 1998).

“Leisure-spiritual coping” refers to the ways that people receive help, in the context of their leisure, from spiritual resources (e.g., higher power, spiritual practices, faith community) during periods of life stress. Women who had experienced a major life change (e.g., deterioration of personal health, major career change, death of a loved one) found a wilderness trip provided the opportunity to leave everyday life stresses and experience spiritual rejuvenation (Fredrickson and Anderson 1999).

Conclusions

These research findings may be most beneficial to wilderness managers in terms of their understanding of the wilderness and spirituality relationship rather than their ability to provide specific guidance to bring about spiritual outcomes. Research indicates that the wilderness experience–and–spirituality relationship is multifaceted and complex. Thus, wilderness managers need to keep in mind this complexity and the components of the framework presented in this article. Managers should be aware of the important role that antecedent conditions play in wilderness spiritual outcomes, and that spiritual outcomes are associated with a wide range of wilderness recreation activities (e.g., Stringer and McAvoy 1992), but that certain activities (e.g., more nature-oriented activities) tend to be more associated with spirituality than are others (e.g., Heintzman 2002, *in press*).

To some extent research suggests that promoting spiritual outcomes amongst wilderness visitors may be related more to choices that visitors make than to management actions. However, wilderness managers, through educational programs and materials, can empower visitors who seek spiritual outcomes to make choices that will result in these types of outcomes.

In regard to setting characteristics, the following implications are particularly relevant in countries other than the United States that do not have wilderness legislation. First, given that nature and naturalness, as opposed to developed recreation areas, have been found to be associated with spiritual outcomes, the naturalness of wilderness needs to be upheld (Riley and Hendee 2000). Second, because being away in a different environment is important for spirituality, distractions and developments associated with civilization should be minimized. Third, given that spirituality tends to be associated more with nature-oriented activities (e.g., viewing/photographing nature) than with activities that are less focused on nature, providing opportunities for nature-based recreation is relevant. Fourth, since solitude in wilderness is important for spirituality (e.g., Heintzman *in press*), and visiting wilderness “to develop personal, spiritual values” is correlated with increased support for restrictions to ensure solitude (Cole and Hall 2006),

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actions to maximize solitude are encouraged. Given these implications, wilderness management focused on maintaining solitude and naturalness, as the U.S. Wilderness Act of 1964 requires, along with inclusion of spiritual outcomes in classifications of wilderness benefits and in the use of limits of acceptable change (LAC) and similar planning frameworks, is recommended (White and Hendee 2000).

Some research suggests that a focus on an overall high quality of service rather than on specific management actions may be the best strategy to enhance spiritual outcomes (Heintzman 2002, *in press*). Nevertheless, as a significant positive relationship has been found between spirituality and participation in activities such as guided hikes, visiting historical/nature displays, visiting viewpoints/lookouts, and viewing/photographing nature (Heintzman 2002, *in press*), provision of nature interpretation and educational opportunities by wilderness managers may enhance spiritual outcomes. These interpretation and educational activities could also include facilitation of introspection for wilderness users (Brayley and Fox 1998).

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