



# Urban youth's experiences of nature: Implications for outdoor adventure recreation



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## ABSTRACT

This study examined ways in which urban youth participating in a long-term outdoor adventure recreation program ( $N=36$ ) perceived and experienced nature. Participants were ages 14–19 and had attended monthly group outings for 3–7 years (median=5.3). Small group and individual interviews were used to obtain data related to their involvement in the program. On the negative side, urban youth associated nature with fear and danger; dirt, disgust, and discomfort; and physical endurance and challenge. On the positive side, they associated nature with fun and enjoyment, a contrast with everyday living, and a place that deserves respect. Former experience in the program helped shape positive views, a realistic understanding of risks, and a greater appreciation of nature. Findings support previous work in this area and call for additional research to understand human–nature interactions and beliefs in the early part of the life span, particularly for youth with limited experience in outdoor settings.

## MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

In order to improve the outcomes associated with long-term outdoor adventure programs, leaders and staff should acknowledge that youth attending these programs differ in their perceptions and experiences of nature. They should make an effort to understand youth's predominant views, both positive and negative. Staff should recognize how their own perceptions of nature may differ from perceptions of the youth and be cognizant of messages they give about nature. Programming can be designed to help transition youth to more positive and realistic views through experiences that youth regard as safe and non-threatening. Activities can start locally and gradually progress to more challenging outdoor environments such as woods, streams, and trails where a more meaningful involvement with nature is possible, and a perception of greater adventure can be conveyed. Additionally, staff should be aware of group dynamics and messages that peers give to one another throughout the recreational experience. Debriefing sessions and discussions can provide opportunities for youth to talk about their perceptions of nature and examine how their views may differ from family members and peers not participating in outdoor recreation.

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## 1. Introduction

Motivations for participating in outdoor activities are varied, with some individuals seeking adventure, challenge, and physical activity; some seeking wonder and awe; some seeking opportunities to learn about and enjoy nature; and others seeking restoration and escape from normal routines (Driver, Tinsley, & Manfredro, 1991; Driver, Manfredro, & Tarrant, 1996). Engaging youth in outdoor adventure recreation has been a means to build

confidence, trust in oneself and others, and mastery of skills and abilities (Cason & Gillis, 1994; D'Amato & Krasny, 2011; Ewert, 1989; Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997; Kaplan & Talbot, 1983; Kimball & Bacon, 1993; Talbot & Kaplan, 1986). Additionally, attention has been given to the connection between different kinds of recreation and positive youth development (Bocarro, Greenwood, & Henderson, 2008; Caldwell, 2005; Caldwell & Witt, 2011; Sibthorp & Morgan, 2011; Roberts & Suren, 2010), as well as ways young people can develop bonds with the natural environment (Chawla & Derr, 2012; Cheng & Monroe, 2012; D'Amato & Krasny, 2011; Kaplan & Talbot, 1983; Talbot & Kaplan, 1986). Studies have also indicated a link between childhood outdoor recreational experiences and pro-environmental attitudes

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in later life (Chawla & Derr, 2012; Ewert, Place, & Sibthorp, 2005; Wells & Lekies, 2006), more positive perceptions of natural environments and phenomena (Bixler, Floyd, & Hammitt, 2002), and a heightened interest in environmental professions (Chawla, 1999, 2007; James, Bixler, & Vadala, 2010; Tanner, 1980). Understanding encounters with the outdoors is important for recreation scholars and planners, particularly when considering the needs of individuals and groups who have had little prior experience with natural environments.

Outdoor adventure recreation activities take place in a variety of settings, including forests, lakes and waterways, backcountry trails, state and national parks, mountainous terrain, and remote wilderness areas. These places not only provide opportunities for recreational involvement, they also allow for personal growth and learning in unique ways. Nature offers real or apparent risk, a novel and unfamiliar physical environment separate from the routines of everyday life, unique rules to be followed, esthetic and spiritual qualities, and physical and emotional challenges. Participation, therefore, requires specific knowledge, skills, and abilities related to outdoor environments. Furthermore, social interaction and interdependence are required of group participants and leaders (D'Amato & Krasny, 2011; Ewert, 1989; Ewert & Hollenhorst, 1989; Ewert & Sibthorp, 2014; Kaplan & Talbot, 1983; Kimball & Bacon, 1993; Hattie et al., 1997; McKenzie, 2000). Individuals come to (and leave) the recreational experience with ideas about nature and how it should be interpreted. Is nature loved, loathed, feared, or respected? Is it a place of danger, or one of enjoyment or solitude?

Outdoor adventure recreation has been described as a “merging of personal attributes with certain activity and setting attributes” (Ewert & Hollenhorst, 1989, p. 217). Individual characteristics, abilities, preferences, background experiences, and expectations combine with program goals, activities, real or perceived danger, and social and environmental factors to produce outcomes that are uncertain (Ewert, 1989; Ewert & Hollenhorst, 1989; Ewert & Sibthorp, 2014). Successful recreational experiences, therefore, depend upon the ability of program staff to accurately assess individuals' attributes and match them with appropriate recreational opportunities (Ewert & Hollenhorst, 1989).

To date, little research discusses the perceptions and meanings of nature held by children and youth in outdoor adventure recreation programs. What is nature? How is it experienced? Are there multiple natures in a person's mind that influence, define, and result from outdoor recreational experiences? Furthermore, do programs and activities accurately take into account the participants' attitudes, beliefs, and prior experiences? An understanding of the ideas about nature that young people develop and hold is important in understanding human–nature interactions across the life span, as well as for designing meaningful outdoor activities (Bonnett & Williams, 1998; Haluza-Delay, 2001; Keliher, 1997; Payne, 1998; Simmons, 1994; Wals, 1994).

This study focused on the perceptions and experiences of nature as identified by adolescents from a large metropolitan area who participated in a long-term outdoor adventure recreation program. Many urban youth are believed to have limited or restricted access to nature in the neighborhoods and communities where they live (Aaron & Witt, 2011; Wals, 1994). Prior to participation in outdoor activities or programs, they may have misperceptions about outdoor environments obtained through television, horror movies, hearsay, and other indirect sources (Bixler, Carlisle, Hammitt, & Floyd, 1994). In adolescence, increasing autonomy allows adolescents to choose their leisure activities more freely than in early or middle childhood. For young people who have not had opportunities to engage with the outdoors, either through free play or family activities, outdoor adventure recreation opportunities in adolescence can provide an additional means of connection and lead to a sustained interest in

the outdoors that continues into adulthood (Chawla, 1999; James et al., 2010).

Wals (1994, p. 5) suggested that nature as a concept is a “dynamic mental construction that is the result of one's interactions with a changing world.” Additionally, it is a social construct formed through interaction with family and peers, local traditions, educational programs, literature, the media, culture, and nature itself (Aaron & Witt, 2011; Anderson & Moss, 1993; Bixler et al., 1994; Chawla, 1999; Cronon, 1994; Greider & Garkovich, 1994; Keliher, 1997; Wals, 1994). The subject also has been approached by historians, who have examined childhood nature experiences in the past, as well as changing attitudes about nature and children's relationship to nature over time (Mergen, 2003). More insights are needed about the ways children and youth develop understandings of nature and their environments; how these constructions change throughout childhood; and the role of influential factors such as visits to natural places.

### 1.1. Perspectives on nature

Wohlwill (1983, p. 6) referred to nature as being “among the more elusive and vaguely defined concepts in our vocabulary”. While nature can be differentiated from the human-made environment, or set apart from human activity and influence, the distinctions are often unclear. For example, he asked if cultivated fields and man-made lakes or gardens and parks in urban areas could be considered “nature”. Additionally, different meanings can be attached to nature at different times throughout history and among cultures. Wohlwill proposed three views of nature: nature as a manifestation of processes of growth and change; nature as a refuge from modern-day pressures and tensions; and nature as a symbol that is shaped by our intellect, imagination, and cultural filters. Conceptions of nature are formed through past experiences and belief systems, as well as the characteristics of nature to which an individual gives attention. Furthermore, these conceptions continuously evolve through new experiences with natural settings, changes in the built environment, the ability to reduce dangers and discomforts, and increased knowledge of natural areas, leading Wohlwill (1983, p. 28) to suggest that “there is ample room for differing conceptions of nature to emerge.”

Similarly, Mergen (2003, p. 643) referred to nature as an “abstraction” and raised questions about the way we think about children's experiences in the natural world. Using a historical lens, he drew upon autobiographies from the past two centuries, as well as past and present scholarly work, to illustrate different interpretations of nature in children's lives. Wild places, for example, are typically associated with images of streams, woods, and fields, but the assumption cannot be made that these are exclusively rural places and amenable to recreational activity. Accounts of recreation and play have indicated children find dirt, water, and other natural elements in urban settings that include pathways, parks, school yards, abandoned places, and other areas to explore within the urban built environment.

Greider and Garkovich (1994), using a symbolic interactionist perspective, described nature as landscapes that are transformed through social interaction and cultural symbols. Humans give meaning to nature that is filtered through individual and cultural beliefs and values. Thus, the same landscape—forests, fields, plants, and land itself—can be imbued with different interpretations. Symbols and meanings are negotiated and renegotiated across time and place, and with changing definitions of the self.

Cronon (1994) proposed that not one, but many different natures exist. He identified eight interpretations of nature, including nature as pristine, perfect, and idyllic; a commodity capable of being bought and sold; a “demonic other” in the form of floods, earthquakes, and natural disasters out of human control; and often

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