

## **Women, Wilderness, and Everyday Life: A Documentation of the Connection between Wilderness Recreation and Women's Everyday Lives**

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Past research provides evidence that outdoor recreation can aid in our deconstruction of gender and gender stereotyping (Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw, & Freysinger, 1996). Outcomes from recreational experiences can transfer into other realms of daily life, resulting in a heightened sense of empowerment and social change for women (Henderson, 1996). Scarce, however, are conceptual frameworks for understanding *how* and *why* meaningful changes take place when women experience the outdoors. In examining the connection between wilderness recreation and social change for women, data were collected from twenty-four qualitative interviews with women who recreate in wilderness. Analysis indicated wilderness recreation can influence women's everyday lives in the forms of self-sufficiency, a shift in perspective, connection to others, and mental clarity.

**KEYWORDS:** *Women, wilderness, recreation, empowerment, benefits, transferable skills, therapeutic value*

### **Introduction**

All of my wilderness experiences have been very reinforcing that it's O.K. to be a woman, that women are important and strong, and that we can do anything we put our minds to no matter what the society is telling us. And wilderness particularly, we don't have those societal structures pointing fingers at us, saying that we shouldn't be doing this, or we should be doing this instead. In particular I guess it's how I see myself. You know, what is acceptable for me.

*Amanda Lynn*

Past research has shown that outdoor recreation can aid in our deconstruction of gender and gender stereotyping (Henderson et. al., 1996). Outcomes from recreational experiences can transfer into other realms of daily life, resulting in a heightened sense of empowerment and social change for women (Henderson, 1996). Although the literature examines some of the positive outcomes or benefits of leisure and outdoor recreation, most of these explanations do not focus specifically on the realm of wilderness<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The term "wilderness" is used to denote areas designated by the 1964 Wilderness Act, as well as other wildland settings such as backcountry locations in National Parks, National Forests, etc.

In addition, while some research documents the transference of wilderness related outcomes to everyday life, we still lack a framework for how these benefits relate specifically to women. Because wilderness offers a unique setting, it also offers unique outcomes, and the therapeutic value of these outcomes may be particularly beneficial for women (Angell, 1994; Bialeschki & Henderson, 1993; Kohn, 1991; Mitten, 1994). This project primarily seeks to uncover some of these positive outcomes that are beneficial for women and then to explicitly document how these outcomes contribute to women's everyday lives.

### Background

Women today experience a seemingly endless list of social injustices and inequities (Blum, Harrison, Ess, & Vachon, 1993). Social, political, economic, sexual, and religious discrimination filters into all realms of women's lives - *personally, interpersonally, and systemically*. Because discrimination is often the result of socialization, it may be possible for some women to break out of the *status quo*, become empowered and liberated, and in a sense "reclaim their voices" (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). One possible method through which women are able to reclaim their voices is by participating in wilderness recreation (Bialeschki & Henderson, 1993; Henderson, 1996). Henderson (1996) explained how outdoor recreation was conducive to resisting traditional female roles, that can lead to discovering a new sense of self. She said, "In nature, conformity to traditional female roles is not required. In the outdoors, women often discover aspects of themselves that they did not know existed prior to challenging themselves in this environment" (Henderson, 1996, p. 196). Thus, wilderness provides a context where women may go directly against the grain of what they have essentially been socialized to be.

#### *Frameworks Addressing the Therapeutic Value of Leisure*

An almost unending list of benefits<sup>ii</sup> of leisure has been recognized. These benefits range from physiological to psychological, from sociological to economic, and from spiritual to developmental (Driver, Brown, & Peterson, 1991). Some of the social or relational benefits of leisure include building and maintaining friendships, interacting with others, addressing major life transitions, and integrating in one's community (Henderson et al. 1996). Other frameworks attempting to explain the therapeutic value of leisure (but not exclusive to wilderness) include Csikszentmihalyi's (1982) flow theory, Haggard and William's (1992) theory of

<sup>ii</sup> Literature that deals with leisure in general, rather than wilderness recreation specifically, is included because of the similarities with regard to positive outcomes and constraints, and because there is relatively scarce information with regard to women and wilderness. In this sense it proved to be helpful in generating specific research questions. In spite of their similarities, it should not be inferred that leisure activities and wilderness recreation result in the same outcomes.

self-identification through leisure activities, and Ragheb's (1993) theory linking leisure participation and leisure satisfaction to perceived wellness. While much research has focused on the benefits of leisure in general, many studies focus on the benefits of outdoor leisure or recreation, specifically.

#### *The Therapeutic Value of Wilderness Recreation*

According to Driver et al. (1987), most therapeutic benefits of Wilderness would be characterized as personal (as opposed to social or intrinsic). Examples of such benefits include developmental benefits (Burton, 1981) such as self-actualization or skill development, physical health benefits, self-sufficiency benefits, social identity benefits, educational benefits, spiritual benefits, aesthetic/creative benefits, symbolic benefits (i.e., just knowing wildlands exist), commodity-related benefits, nurturance benefits, and therapeutic/healing benefits (Levitt, 1994). Other previously documented effects of wilderness therapy include sustained increases in self-esteem and assertiveness, significant reductions in trait anxiety and expectations that powerful others and chance would have less control in one's life (Ewert, 1988; Marsh, Richards, & Barnes, 1986). Additional postulated explanations include Scherl's (1989) suggestion of self-control as a concept that characterizes individual-wilderness relationships, Powch's (1994) theory that the wilderness experience provides opportunity for self-relevant, immediate feedback and Kaplan and Kaplan's (1982) theory that wilderness facilitates a clearness of perception.

#### *The Value of Wilderness Recreation for Women*

Although past research has chipped away at many of the ambiguities surrounding the therapeutic value of wilderness, researchers fail to completely explain not only the full therapeutic potential of wilderness, but also the potential value of wilderness *in relation to gender*. With regard to women specifically, a handful of studies discuss the therapeutic value of wilderness. Many of these explanations focus on empowerment (Angell, 1994; Bialeschki & Henderson, 1993; Kohn, 1991; Mitten 1994; Powch, 1994). For example, Bialeschki & Henderson (1993) focused on the aspect of challenge encountered in outdoor settings. Successfully facing these challenges may help women rid themselves of self- and societally imposed limitations, and going beyond these limitations contributes to higher self-esteem and self-reliance that, in turn, lead to a greater sense of personal empowerment.

In addition to the above "empowerment through wilderness" studies, other assessments of the therapeutic value of wilderness include using wilderness recreation to transform perceived body image (Arnold, 1994) and facilitating empowerment through challenge models such as ropes courses (Hart & Silka, 1994; Stopa, 1994). While past research lends explanation for how the positive influences of adventure programming affect women within the realm of wilderness, few explain how skills gained in wilderness are transferable to women's everyday lives.

There is a need for research to focus on how those positive outcomes affect women's everyday lives, and what that means for women and society at large.

*The Lack of Theoretical Frameworks Explaining the Relationship between Wilderness and Benefits to Life*

Although many of the above explanations for the therapeutic value of wilderness are limited to the domain of wildlands, one study by Yerkes and Miranda (1982) showed that women are less inhibited by gender roles in their everyday lives after returning from their all-women's wilderness experiences. While it can be suggested that wilderness is an effective environment for facilitating liberating experiences, little is known about how that phenomenon occurs (Bedell, 1997; Priest, 1993; Wichmann, 1991). Scherl (1989) described a similar lack of knowledge concerning the connection between wilderness recreation and psychological well being.

There have been few conceptual attempts to explain how and why wilderness promotes psychological well being and why individuals change as a consequence of being in that setting. Investigators in the area have acknowledged a need for better understanding of the nature and dynamics of the wilderness experience (Scherl, 1989, p. 123).

*Aim of the Research*

Given that wilderness recreation may aid in our deconstruction of gender and gender stereotyping, this study aims to understand women's wilderness experiences and how they may relate to social change within women's everyday lives. Guiding questions include:

- How do women describe their wilderness experiences?
- What are the outcomes of wilderness experiences that may lead to social change for women?
- Do the outcomes of wilderness recreation transfer into women's everyday lives?
- What are the contributing factors that lead to positive outcomes of wilderness recreation for women?

*Methodology*

The research used a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis (Tesch, 1990; Henderson, 1991) including in-depth interviews (Kvale, 1983; Rubin & Rubin, 1995) and two content analysis organizing systems for further categorization (Miles & Huberman, 1984). A qualitative interviewing methodology was imperative for this research because it allowed data to emerge throughout the interviewing process. Interview questions were designed to capture the above guiding questions. From the transcribed interviews, content analyses was done, and this surfaced categories and factors that affected the women in this study, both

within wilderness and within society. The results section organizes and describes the relationship between wilderness experiences and the interviewees' everyday lives. While it was important to this study to remain as objective as possible, it should be noted that personal backgrounds of the researchers may shape the content and analysis of the data. Because the primary researcher is a feminist and works as a backcountry instructor, presuppositions and biases of these natures may be inherent in the research. Measures taken to minimize biases are explained later in the data analysis section.

#### *Data Collection: The Interview*

The interview guide (Figure 1) was created and revised so data from the interviews would reveal answers to the study's guiding questions. Initially, three practice interviews were conducted to "test" the quality of the research questions. After these interviews were conducted, an additional question was added to the interview guide: "As a woman, do you feel like your wilderness experiences have affected you?" This question was added so the interviewees could assess whether they felt their experiences specifically related to them *as women*. After these initial interviews, 21 additional interviews were conducted, totaling 24. Interviews were conducted in the winter of 1998 and ran approximately one to one and half-hours in length. Interviews took place in the homes of the interviewees, in the home of the interviewer, or at quiet coffee shops (depending on the preference of the interviewee).

Questions were non-directive and general, while probing was more specific. The interview guide was designed to provide introductory questions to immerse the interviewees into memories of their wilderness experiences, find the meaning of wilderness to them, assess their perceptions of whether wilderness experiences transfer into their daily lives, probe for causation, and explore how wilderness experiences affected them as women.

#### *Study Participants*

A pool of potential interviewees was generated through posting a call for subjects using recommendations from members of the field of recreation management, from women who recreated in wilderness, from acquaintances of the interviewer, and from responses to posters placed at local outfitting organizations, outdoor equipment shops, and recreation facilities (e.g. climbing walls). Aiming for a stratified and diverse sample of women, the original pool of approximately 45 women was reduced to 24. Stratification of this pool aimed for diversity (racial, sexual orientation, age, ability level, marital and family status, and socioeconomic status) and women who have a moderate to great amount of wilderness experience (self-defined by the interviewee, but at least one year). While it was important to the researchers to attain a diverse sample, the only sociodemographic characteristic that was asked of the interviewees was age. Paramount to this study was refraining

- 1) How long have you been recreating in wilderness?
- 2) Could you tell me about your most recent wilderness trip?  
(P1) What was it like?  
(P2) What is it about that trip that stands out?
- 3) How does that trip compare to your *favorite* trip?  
(P1) Could you tell me about that trip?  
(P2) How does your favorite trip compare to other wilderness trips?  
(P3) Why was this trip so special?
- 4) Do wilderness experiences carry over into your everyday life?  
(P1) If so, could you explain how?  
(P2) What do you carry back from your wilderness experiences?  
(P3) What does it teach you?
- 5) What does wilderness mean to you and your life?  
(P1) Does wilderness shape who you are? If so, how?  
(P2) Does it remind you of some aspect of who you are?  
(P3) Does it change the way you live your life?
- 6) Does your wilderness let you express certain behaviors that are important to you and your life?  
(P1) Do your experiences in wilderness change the way you act when you return from wilderness?  
(P2) Are these lasting effects when you get back?
- 7) (*Optional-if answers aren't revealing causal factors*) What conditions in a wilderness experience seem to lead to the most positive outcomes?
- 8) (*If interviewee "found" wilderness later in life-Question #1*) Tell me the story of how you first "found" wilderness. Because you mentioned that wilderness recreation has not always been a part of your life, have you noticed any changes or shifts in your life that are the result of wilderness and your wilderness experiences?
- 9) We've been using the term wilderness throughout our conversation. What does that term mean to you? In other words, what's *not* wilderness, and how do you tell the difference?
- 10) How do wilderness experiences differ from leisure experiences in *other* settings?
- 11) Throughout the conversation I've been trying to understand how your particular wilderness experiences affect your life. Given what we've covered, is there anything else you'd like to add to help me understand the importance of wilderness to who you are?
- 12) As a woman, do you feel like your wilderness experiences have affected you?
- 13) Is there something that I should have asked you? Could you respond to that question?

*Note:* Probes were used in relation to most questions and are denoted by "P" above.

*Figure 1.* Interview Guide for Women and Wilderness Recreation Study

from making assumptions about the impact of sociodemographics upon one's wilderness experience. Although there was not equal representation from all age groups, study participants represented most phases of life and ranged from age 21 to age 78 (20-29  $n = 10$ , 30-39  $n = 5$ , 40-49  $n = 6$ , 50-59  $n = 1$ , 60-69  $n = 0$ , 70-79  $n = 2$ ). Because the sample in this study was too small for analysis based on sociodemographic characteristics, these are not associated with the quotes in the Results section. To insure confidentiality for the women interviewed, they either chose or were given pseudonyms.

#### *Data Analysis*

With the permission of the interviewees, interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Using NUD\*IST software, transcribed interviews were then entered into a computer database. Analyzing interviews one at a time, the primary researcher broke down the data into sentences and paragraphs, attempting to capture and organize all themes mentioned by the interviewees. This method allowed the researchers to isolate individual themes and further analyze them. Virtually all information was coded, however excessive detail was omitted in some cases. Many statements were initially coded as more than one theme, due, in part, to the large unit of analysis (a paragraph) and the information it contained. To avoid overlap, to break down the data into smaller units of analysis, and to categorize data more discretely, a manual organizing system was used. The system entailed highlighting sub-themes within themes and recording the frequency of how often these sub-themes were mentioned. While the electronic and manual systems were similar, they were used to collect and organize varying degrees of detailed information. NUD\*IST software was used to organize the data into general themes, and a manual organizing system was used to break the data down into specifics. For example, NUD\*IST software assisted the researchers in isolating all information pertaining to self-sufficiency and printing out a hard copy or report. Later, the researchers were able to go through this hard copy and highlight detail and sub-themes that would better explain the data (7 people mentioned that self-sufficiency in the backcountry gave them more confidence in life, 5 said it made them feel more independent, etc.). Data analysis yielded a tremendous amount of information, and by no means do the following results incorporate all themes that surfaced in the data. While all the data has been categorized and analyzed in the same amount of detail, some themes are more pertinent to this study's focus and have therefore received more attention. Results focus on themes that explain the connection between wilderness recreation and women's everyday lives.

Validation of the results manifested in two forms: As the interviews were being conducted, the interviewer reaffirmed or reworded any ambiguous statements made by the interviewee, and second, after the data were analyzed, the interviewer's conclusions were taken back to the interviewees so the latter could affirm or deny that they had been accurately represented.

While the study participants were asked to contact the primary researcher if they had any questions or concerns, approximately half of the interviewees responded and reported that they approved of the analysis and conclusions. Of the women who responded, one woman provided additional clarification of her story, and this is included in the subsequent analysis of the interviews.

## Results

The results document the impact of 24 women's wilderness experiences, including the transferable outcomes they accrue from such experiences, what contributes to experiences that result in these transferable outcomes, how wilderness recreation affects their everyday lives, and how wilderness and wilderness recreation can be particularly conducive toward providing the women interviewed with such outcomes. Included also are the frequency of responses. It is important to recognize that in interpretive research, frequency of an incident does not necessarily legitimate a theme (although this may be one justification for including it). Rather, the centrality of a meaning to an individual's discussion of her understanding and interpretation of her wilderness experiences may justify it as a theme (Freysinger, 1995). The following framework for the results is based on the data collected from the 24 women interviewed and is illustrated in Table 1. This diagram is a four-stage model and is the basis by which the data is presented. This figure explains how the *characteristics of wilderness and wilderness recreation* (explained in the following section entitled "Characteristics of Wilderness") can lead to some of the *contributing factors of the transferable outcome*. From there the model illustrates how the main transferable outcome *affects women's everyday lives*. For example, wilderness may present a new atmosphere (characteristic of wilderness) and therefore call on different "woods wisdom" skills (contributing factor to transferable outcome) in order for one to survive and be comfortable. These skills, in turn, can contribute to feelings of self-sufficiency (transferable outcome), which can build confidence (effect on life) in an individual in her everyday life. To keep the results concise and to avoid redundancy, characteristics of wilderness and how they affect the transferable outcome are combined in the written analysis.

### *Characteristics of Wilderness*

Although each wilderness area is different, and there will be variation from one wilderness trip to the next, interviewees were able to summarize the fundamental characteristics that wilderness and wilderness recreation can offer. These characteristics and their sub-components include:

1. *Escape* (from norms, everyday demands, and distractions)
2. *Challenge and Survival* (physical and mental)
3. *New Opportunities* (learning new skills)
4. *Natural Awe and Beauty* (connection to nature)
5. *Solitude* (isolation, time to focus, mental revitalization)

TABLE 1  
*Relationship between Wilderness and Everyday Life (frequencies in parentheses)*

Characteristics of Wilderness/ Wilderness Rec. →	Contributing Factors to Transferable Outcome →	Transferable Outcome →	Effect on Life
Skills (8) Challenge (5) Isolation (2)	Personal Responsibility (8) Physical Competence (6) Problem Solving (6) Preparation/Planning (3)	<b>SELF-SUFFICIENCY</b>	Confidence (7) Solve Other Problems (5) Challenge Norms (5) Independence (5) Self-Trust (3) Freedom (3) Assertiveness (3) Self-Worth (2) Liberation (2) Innovation (1)
Escape (9) Connection to Nature (2) Simplicity (1) Solitude (1)	Gauge Wild. to Life (5) Slowing Down (4) Increased Awareness (3) New Angle (3) Absence of Rules (1)	<b>CHANGE IN PERSPECTIVE</b>	Re-Prioritize (8) New World View (6) Bigger Picture (5) Grounded (4) Confidence (2)
Free from Distractions (5) Time (5) Challenge (2)	Female Environment (9) Support (4) Increased Intensity of Interaction (5) Common Experience (2) Deeper Conversation (1)	<b>CONNECTION TO OTHERS</b>	Strengthen Relations (9) Commonality (2) See Others in New Light (2) Seek Similar Relation (1) Patience (1)
Solitude (8) Free from Distractions (6) Time (4) Simplicity (1)	Freedom of Mind (3) Absorption (3) Quiet (2) Slowing Down (1) Seeing More (1)	<b>MENTAL CLARITY</b>	Problem Solving (7) Self-Reflection (9) Grounded (2) Peace (2) Seek More Solitude (2) Self-Worth (1) Purpose (1)

These elements are salient to future discussion of the causal factors of the transferable outcomes.

#### *Transferable Outcomes*

The outcomes focused on in this study are considered "transferable," meaning that they can and often do carry over into women's everyday lives. Outcomes of wilderness recreation focused on in this study include self-sufficiency, change in perspective, connection with others, and mental clarity. The interviewees either mentioned these outcomes directly or used terminology and phrases that were synonymous with these categories. The outcomes focused on in this study were chosen because of their therapeutic value, their link to daily life, and their frequency of being mentioned by the interviewees.

## Self-Sufficiency

Self-sufficiency ( $n = 17$ ) is regarded in this study as an individual's ability to rely on her own resources and provide for herself. It is vital in assigning self-worth, creating a positive sense of self, finding a true sense of self, and helping women rid themselves of self- and societally-imposed limitations.

### *Wilderness and Self-Sufficiency*

Particular characteristics of wilderness contributed to self-sufficiency. For example, a variety of "woods wisdom" skills (i.e. carrying a pack, gathering firewood, lighting a stove) associated with backcountry travel are required for being able to rely on one's own resources. Learning these skills contributed to physical competence, feeling successful, and also helped one solve problems that arose in wilderness. Heather explained how the knowledge and the ability to do things on her own made her confident in wilderness. This self-confidence allowed her to feel comfortable hiking with other people (even if they are faster than she) and also hiking independently.

I can camp. I can do it myself I know what I need to bring. Nobody has to tell me how to do it, and you know, I can probably keep up if you're not hiking super fast, and if not I can find my way there, and I think it's a lot of like just confidence in general.

Included in learning wilderness skills were being prepared and planning ahead, and these contributed to feeling responsible for oneself. In wilderness we find isolation, which may be necessary for feeling truly on one's own. This reality of being isolated combined with the element of challenge contributed to a heightened sense of accomplishment and self-reliance, as was explained by Mare.

I've always been self-reliant in town I guess, to some degree. And I've always felt that way, that I could always take care of myself. But being able to do that in the woods is definitely another step beyond doin' it in town.

### *Self-sufficiency and Everyday Life*

The self-sufficiency that was required for one to survive in wilderness filtered into everyday life, resulting in a healthy independence from others. Gaining self-sufficiency through wilderness recreation also made one more comfortable with critiquing and rejecting societal norms and sometimes going against the *status quo*. Furthermore, accruing self-sufficiency skills in the backcountry contributed to assertiveness, as explained by Caren.

I think because I have done a number of trips with other people and on my own and have learned self-reliance that is required for enjoying yourself while you're out there, that I'm fairly outspoken. I'm confident in my abilities, so I don't hesitate to speak up and offer to do things or to provide ideas for others. 'Cause I feel pretty sure of where I am and what I think I believe.

Learning how to do things on one's own in the backcountry contributed to self-trust and self-worth. Cedar explained how trusting herself made her feel liberated and offered her the confidence and freedom to try anything.

I try as much as I can to maintain that concentration of trusting myself [when I'm back in society] and understanding that I'm completely capable and competent if I choose to know how to take care of myself without some ... things ... I think it's such a great experience to learn how to trust yourself . . . And then it's so liberating and exciting ... Like whoa I can do whatever I want!

It was also highlighted by some of the women interviewed that solving problems in wilderness entailed innovation. A few women felt that successfully solving problems on their own in wilderness gave them the confidence to solve problems at home, and this sense of being innovative in wilderness helped them solve problems in their everyday lives.

### Change in Perspective

A change in perspective (n = 17) was described by study participants as a shift in their point of view in understanding or judging things. It may be necessary for a reevaluation of societal norms, the self, and what is deemed important to the self. It is a critique of the *status quo*, and complimented by other positive outcomes of wilderness recreation (such as empowerment, confidence, and problem solving skills) it can lead to social change for women and society.

#### *Wilderness and Change in Perspective*

Wilderness provided an optimal setting for inducing a shift in perspective because it offered one escape and reprieve from daily life. Being able to step back from many of society's rules offered one a new angle on life. It also contributed to challenging the state of society because one was able to "gauge" or compare society to wilderness, which seemed more "real" or "the way life should be lived." This was explained by Lydia.

I think it gave me a little perspective of what I think's important in life and what I don't ... I use that as ... criterion to measure other things that [I] do.

Wilderness was an important environment for a shift in perspective because it entailed simplicity and solitude, which contributed to slowing down and increased one's awareness of what was going on around oneself. In addition, wilderness recreation facilitated a deep connection with nature. One woman explained how this connection with nature inspired her to reevaluate her position within society.

#### *Change in Perspective and Everyday Life*

A shift in perspective resulted in feeling calm and grounded and confident about one's place in the world. One woman mentioned that wilderness provoked her

to re-evaluate her position in the world, causing her to feel more humble. In addition, a change in perspective led to changing one's priorities and formulating a new world-view, as explained by Lynn.

When I was seventeen was ... my big formative [wilderness] experience. That . . . certainly changed my life in a direction that it wasn't headed ... So it fundamentally changed, I think my world-view, and where I was heading, and my priorities, a lot of things.

This new world view entailed critiquing norms about materialism, body image, and acceptable social conduct. Changes to the individual spilled over into everyday life, and sometimes the individual was able to contribute to changing her environment as well as its rules and expectations. Cate elucidated how stepping away from daily life and into wilderness allowed her to examine her everyday life with "new eyes." In this sense, she was able to see the "bigger picture."

I almost feel like I'm a spectator on this society when I come back. And I look at it in the same way that I described standing on top of a mountain. You kind of have a bigger picture of things because you've had a reprieve from it. And I don't think you can truly know something until you walk away from it and turn around and look back at it ... And so when I go into the wilderness, and I come back, I feel like I have stepped away from it, and I come back and look at it with whole new eyes.

### Connection to Others

For the women interviewed, wilderness recreation contributed to connecting with others ( $n = 14$ ) in that it supported 1) relationships with others that increased comfort with oneself and others, 2) relationships centered on healing and bonding with others, and 3) relationships where one was able to speak and be heard (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). These relationships may be between women and men, between women, between friends, and between dating or married partners.

#### *Wilderness and Connection to Others*

Wilderness's ability to promote a distraction-free environment was often ideal for connecting with others. Furthermore, wilderness was particularly conducive to promoting group connection and growth in that it incorporated shared goals and a common experience (such as a physical challenge), sometimes leading to a supportive atmosphere and increased communication. In addition, the longer time factor commonly involved in wilderness recreation contributed to having deeper conversations and increased the intensity of the interaction, as was explained by Paige.

I think generally when you're in the wilderness, you're in a small group of people, and things are so much slower. If you take the time to all cook a meal together or spend ... large amounts of time together doing one particular thing, . . . or people's goals are focused towards one thing ... And often I think a lot of times people are a lot more open and listening to each other and discussing.

Nine of the 24 women interviewed mentioned that conversation and connection with women was different than conversation and connection with men while on wilderness trips. They felt that sometimes there was more open communication between women, stating that women were more egalitarian with each other, more willing to show emotion, and less willing to take over. In addition, they characterized all-women's trips as being more supportive than mixed groups.

#### *Connection with Others and Everyday Life*

A number of the women interviewed noted how some of their strongest relationships in life revolve around sharing periodic trips with others in the wilderness. Lydia explained the importance of sharing wilderness experiences with her husband and family. These experiences and their memories continue to be an important part of their lives.

And opportunities to build ... a store house of experience shared with your first friend ... and your children. And you go with them, and you share these experiences with them all their lives, 'cause we still talk about our trips.

Connection to others through wilderness recreation spilled over into the study participants' everyday lives in the sense that they sought other groups of people with whom they could have relevant conversations. The commonality some found on wilderness trips led to seeing others in a new light. One individual expressed that she became more patient with others when she returned from her wilderness trips.

#### Mental Clarity

Sometimes when one travels into wilderness, one may experience an overwhelming sense of intellectual clarity ( $n = 16$ ) or a heightened sense of mental awareness (James, 1961). Interviewees described mental clarity in terms of mental cleansing, mindfulness and mindlessness, freedom of the mind, and mental health.

#### *Wilderness and Mental Clarity*

Aristotle argued that leisure should result in excellence of the soul and mind, this result being much higher than skill development, social interaction, escape, and other values sought in leisure (Driver, Brown, & Peterson, 1991). It is interesting to note, however, that some of the values that Aristotle would have considered "lower" in pursuit are those which directly lead to attaining mental clarity. These catalysts revolved around solitude, freedom of the mind, absorption, quiet, and escape from distractions. Kay, explained how the physical plane of wilderness allowed her clear access to her mind.

And then when all [technological distractions are] gone, and you're left with nature, you know that's ... when all your cares fall away. And then that's when ... that physical plane allows me to do the mental trip of letting it all go too. You know, it takes a couple days for me to finally let go of everything ... back home waiting. But then when it does, it's so rewarding, just you and nature, you know. I mean that's wilderness for me.

Absorption in the environment and slowing down allowed one to become fully involved in the moment, experiencing everything. In this sense, one knew more by experiencing more.

#### *Mental Clarity and Everyday Life*

The mental clarity that some of the interviewees accrued from being in the backcountry filtered into their everyday lives. For example, freedom from distractions and solitude contributed to self-reflection, offering one insight into self-purpose and self-worth. Mental clarity also resulted in feeling at peace and feeling grounded. Two of the women interviewed expressed a desire for additional solitude in their everyday lives, noting the energy and mental inspiration they got from being alone in wilderness. Furthermore, clarity of thought led to solving problems (such as rationalizing future decisions, deciding what is important, processing significant life events, or addressing fears) and applying these solutions to life.

#### Conclusions

Results from this study confirm past assessments linking wilderness to self-esteem and assertiveness (Ewert, 1988; Marsh, et. al., 1986), self-control (Scherl, 1989), self-identification (Haggard & Williams, 1992), transformation of body image (Arnold, 1994), clearness of perception (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1982), and facilitating change through challenge (Hart & Silka, 1994; Stopa, 1994). Further, wilderness recreation can nurture empowerment (Kohn, 1991; Mitten, 1994; Powch, 1994) because it involves: (1) developing attitudes and beliefs about one's efficacy to take action, (2) developing critical thinking about one's world, (3) acquiring the knowledge and skills needed to take action, (4) supporting others and having mutual aid of one's peers, and (5) taking action to make change (Parsons, 1991). While empowerment is often the focus of outcomes from wilderness recreation, this study found that that is too narrow a focus for capturing the essence of women's experiences in wilderness.

This study supports that participating in wilderness recreation may play a part in deconstructing gender roles and improving the status of women in society in general (Bialeschki & Henderson, 1993; Henderson, et. al., 1996). Figure 2 summarizes the transferable outcomes of wilderness recreation and their effect on everyday life. Results from this study show that wilderness recreation affected the women interviewed personally, interpersonally, and perhaps systemically. For example, we find that *personally*, women gained confidence, assertiveness, problem

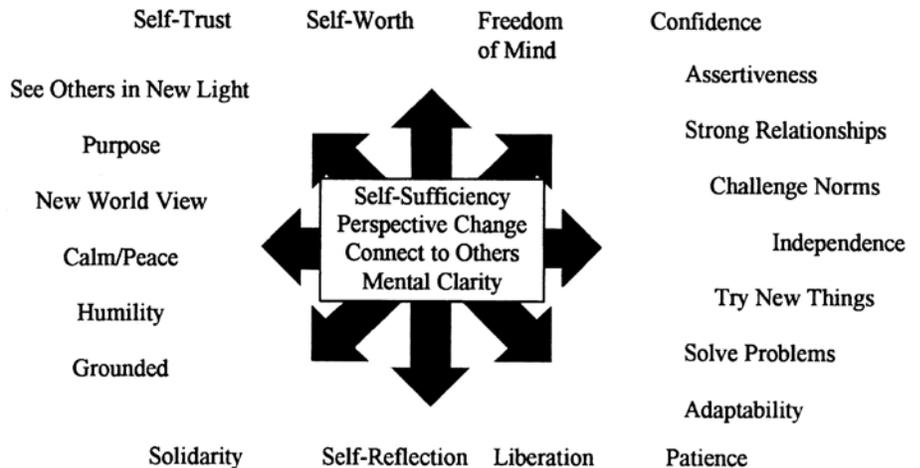


Figure 2. Summary of Transferable Outcomes and Their Effect on Everyday Life

solving skills, self-trust, and self-worth. *Interpersonally*, wilderness recreation strengthened bonds between individuals, and it allowed the women interviewed to see others in a new light. *Systemically*, it may be that the personal is political, and many of the outcomes effecting women on the personal and interpersonal levels could effect them on a systemic level as well. Wilderness offered women opportunities to challenge norms, try new things, and find a new world-view. These outcomes may not only shape the individual but also the very system in which she lives and interacts.

An additional conclusion from this study indicates that wilderness and wilderness recreation can contribute to rectifying some of the social injustices and inequities from which women suffer today. These injustices are socialized within society and lead to oppression for women and other marginalized people (Blum et al., 1993; Frey, 1983; Pharr, 1993; Smith, 1987). This socialization affects women's:

- **Self-esteem** (Bedell, 1997),
- **Authority** (Blum et al., 1993; Smith, 1983),
- **Freedom** (of body, mind, and movement) (Young, 1990), and
- **Independence** (Brown & Gilligan, 1992).

The data gathered from this research suggests that wilderness and wilderness recreation are particularly conducive to facilitating liberation for some women in the sense that wilderness experiences contribute to recognizing our importance and rejecting some of the institutional regularities that oppress us. A conceptual framework explaining the connection between wilderness and liberation for women who recreate in wilderness is provided below. This framework examines

some of the oppressive socialization that women experience today, and it explains how wilderness can contribute to combating some of these injustices.

*Self-Esteem.* Wilderness recreation can improve self-esteem for women because it can lead to self-sufficiency and mental clarity. The personal responsibility and physical competence required to be self-sufficient in wilderness can filter into everyday life, enhancing one's confidence, self-trust, and self-worth, thus resulting in a positive view of self or self-esteem. The mental clarity that can result from recreating in wilderness can lead to self-reflection and having healthier ideas about self-worth. Further, mental clarity can contribute to feeling grounded or at peace with oneself and finding a purpose in life.

*Authority.* Recreating in wilderness can contribute to feelings of authority about oneself and about other women, because it can result in self-sufficiency and connection with others. Problem solving and gaining new skills in wilderness contributes to self-sufficiency and being a leader and role model in both the backcountry and in everyday life. In addition, self-sufficiency gained in the backcountry can help women become more confident and assertive, thus giving them authority. Women are able to connect with others in wilderness through wilderness recreation, and if this connection entails improved listening skills and important dialogue, it can contribute to women's abilities to see themselves as authority figures with knowledge. Furthermore, if this connection occurs *between* women, they are able to see one another as authority figures and take each other seriously. Through mental clarity and self-reflection, women can formulate positive ideas about self-worth. This sense of self-worth combined with assertiveness can lead to an ability to take oneself seriously and be taken seriously by others.

*Freedom.* Wilderness recreation offers women freedom of body, freedom of mind, freedom of movement, and freedom *from* societal constraints. This freedom of body might be viewed as being comfortable with a healthier version of self. Wilderness recreation (because it contributes to a change in perspective and a new world view) can contribute to a healthy change in appearance, to an ideal of body function over body fashion, and a rejection of norms about the way one should look. Because wilderness offers women solitude, absorption, and freedom from the distractions of everyday life, it can also contribute to mental clarity or freedom of thought. Feeling self-sufficient in the backcountry and being able to choose one's route and its physical duration and difficulty can contribute to feeling free to move. Corinne explains how the freedom (away from societal constraints) that she experiences in wilderness can give her freedom of bodily movement. Additionally, she hopes to share this sense of freedom she finds in wilderness with other women.

I think it provides an absolute free arena for spontaneity ... there just are not the societal expectations or regulations, relatively speaking, in wild places ... I

can howl at the moon ... in the wilderness ... I don't feel constrained in wilderness ... As a woman ... it kind of ties back into because of my comfort and ease of movement in the wilderness. I hope to emulate that, share that, nurture that within other women.

*Independence.* At first glance, it may appear that two of this study's major outcomes, self-sufficiency and connection to others, do not co-exist without contradiction. It may seem that connection with others may foster dependence on others. However, the types of relationships interviewees referred to were not ones of dependence, but rather ones that were healthy, mutually empowering, and supportive. On the flip side of forming relationships with others was also forming a trusting relationship with oneself. Relying on oneself gives one the freedom to be alone and the freedom to be independent. Learning new skills and solving problems in the backcountry further promotes independence and often contributes to a willingness to try new things and tackle problems in life. Given that women oftentimes define themselves by their relationships to other people (Brown & Gilligan, 1992), independence can be a positive outcome of wilderness recreation. Wilderness can simultaneously offer women assertiveness, self-trust and confidence along with opportunities to work and bond with others.

### Discussion

While this study contributes to the growing body of literature revolving around wilderness recreation and women, in the end we find it provokes more unanswered questions. In terms of generalizing about groups of women, would we find the same results in other areas of the country (outside Montana)? While this study used a stratified sample of participants, it was not large enough to make inferences about the impact of sociodemographics upon the transferable outcomes of wilderness recreation. What effect might race, ability level, or age have upon the connection between wilderness and women's everyday lives. Using a larger sample or perhaps quantitative measures to assess the ability to generalize about specific populations would be a valuable contribution to our knowledge.

In addition, just as women derive different kinds of benefits from different settings, different women derive different benefits from various settings and activities. Not every person enjoys being in the woods, confronting wildlife, or being in sometimes difficult situations. It may be that one gains more from a weekend getaway at the spa, from eighteen holes of golf, going to a movie, or taking a bubble bath. What effect do this study's results have upon women who do not desire or are not able to recreate in wilderness? What, are other ways for women to "reclaim their voices?"

Further, personal growth is not simply an outcome of wilderness recreation, but may also *cause* one to recreate in wilderness. As illustrated in the results section, wilderness recreation can lead to self-sufficiency, connection with others, perspective change, and mental clarity. Some of these outcomes or a desire to further attain these outcomes can drive one back into wilderness.

It may also be the case that one already attained some of these outcomes from experiences outside of her wilderness experiences. For example, one may have gained self-sufficiency from growing up on a farm or mental clarity from studying philosophy in college. It may be that having some of these qualities allows one to feel comfortable going into the backcountry. These qualities, in turn, are perpetuated or stimulated by wilderness recreation. While wilderness recreation and personal growth function reciprocally, causing and affecting each other, it would be interesting to discover which comes first, the chicken or the egg.

### Implications

Researching the gendered meanings of leisure is of little consequence unless it can be and is applied in practice to improve the quality of life for all people (Henderson, 1994). While this study used a feminist approach to research, it is most likely that wilderness can produce transferable skills and have value for all populations. Understanding how women may apply outcomes from wilderness toward their everyday lives may be an important step toward understanding wilderness recreation as a mechanism for building transferable skills for a number of populations.

When examining the efficacy of wilderness recreation in making social change, it is important to address the notion of "blaming the victim" or internalizing the problem inside women rather than changing the society that oppresses us. In other words, personal change through wilderness recreation does not address the systemic root of the problem. There is still a current need for social change, and wilderness recreation is by no means the full solution to this change.

What wilderness recreation can do for society is provoke our desire and efficacy to act, change our modes of communication, and change what we see as desirable human qualities. Wilderness recreation (because it offers opportunities for self-sufficiency, change in perspective, connection with others, and mental clarity), contributes to assertiveness, challenging norms, and gaining a new world view. This, in turn, can catalyze one's desire to change the world and can contribute to how effective she believes herself to be. In this pragmatic sense, outlook can affect outcome. Results from this study indicate that wilderness and wilderness recreation may be important today as never before.

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