

[Editor's Note: Wilderness therapy programs, which provide emergency intervention and treatment of primarily adolescents with substance abuse and other problem behaviors, are growing steadily. Perhaps up to 30 wilderness therapy programs provide the most intensive group among 500 "wilderness experience for personal growth" programs nationwide. This excludes commercially outfitted wilderness recreation programs, adventure camps, and youth organizations such as Boy Scouts. Clearly the use of wilderness for healing and personal growth is a big enterprise, one important to humanity, and a growing challenge to wilderness stewards and wilderness program leaders. This article by Rob Cooley explains wilderness as a healing resource for adolescents with problem behaviors, served by his organization, Catherine Freer Wilderness Therapy, in more than 40 trips per year. The *International Journal of Wilderness* will continue to feature articles on the use of wilderness for personal growth as an emerging trend and value of wilderness.

-John C. Hendee, UW Editor-in-Chief]

Wilderness Therapy Can Help Troubled Adolescents

By Rob Cooley



Wilderness author Rob Cooley and his son.

On the way to my doctoral degree in counseling psychology, I browsed through sociobiology and anthropology and wrote a dissertation on how hunting-and-gathering cultures occupy the natural human econiche. I argued that a better understanding of human roles and behaviors in that niche could help modern therapists understand their clients' basic needs and problems. That was radical stuff back in 1977, and I was unable to convince my doctoral committee that it had any relevance to counseling. But I did convince myself while writing my dissertation, and it has guided much

of my counseling work. It also has contributed to my starting a wilderness treatment program for adolescents ten years ago.

Returning to it we feel ourselves reattaching to our roots, our natural state of being: "going home" to a situation where our essential emotions, behaviors, needs, and spiritual strivings make far more sense than they can in our urban worlds. As with most returns home, the feelings are, if all goes well, mostly positive and renewing, but not without ambivalence. Wilderness serves to remind us of our essence and to clarify how we have changed and individualized, adding new levels of (we hope) mature sophistication and independence since leaving our childhood home, while losing the comfort of our easy, unconscious attachment to home.

This rich social-psychological matrix with wilderness has proven valuable for renewal to many individuals since the Romantic era of the early 19th century. It has enriched our modern culture with a growing awareness of our deep attachment to nature even as we veer ever further from tribal hunting-and-gathering ways.

For troubled adolescents in wilderness treatment programs, this awareness is especially valuable. Living outdoors in small groups led by adults in their 20s and 30s, they experience something very close to the lives of adolescent youngsters throughout our preagricultural evolution. Once participants have gotten past feeling simply deprived of their urban comforts and afraid of the unknown dangers of the wild, they settle into a sense of secureness and archetypal "rightness" from which they can reach to explore what the new/ancient world of wilderness has to offer. Outwardly this includes meaningful exercise, hunger for nourishing foods, and freedom to be a human child. Inwardly wilderness offers access to the essential meanings of human

Wilderness Is Our Cradle and Childhood

It is not surprising that modern man-once far enough removed from outdoor living not to feel threatened by brief returns to it-has found wilderness such a source of solace, spiritual contact, and healing. For genetically, wilderness is our cradle and childhood. It has shaped us into the beings we are, as surely as our individual early years shape our personalities.

life, as revealed both by the natural world and by their inner archetypal lives, and on that foundation it offers an examination of how their personal lives and values fit with the underlying structures of humanness. Probably all of us who are reasonably reflective experience some of this when we spend a week or more living simply in wilderness. But for an adolescent, who is in the process of constructing a sense of his/her identity, who is wondering about the broader meanings of life and culture, and who is also experiencing substantial difficulties in navigating the adolescent passage into adulthood, the impact of wilderness time is far more powerful.

Making the Wilderness Magic Work for Adolescents

For the wilderness setting to have maximum benefit, several factors are necessary. On one hand, the young people must feel challenged and somewhat at risk, as any band of young hunting or gathering apprentices over the last few million years of history would have felt. On the other hand, participants within this setting must feel secure that they are supported and are being taught how to manage competently and comfortably in it. Otherwise, the specific wilderness magic will not work. If the experience is only an endurance contest or is felt as significantly punishing and depriving, they may learn some useful behaviors (which they may also learn in a traditional hospital in-patient setting), but they can neither relax into this homecoming nor can they reach their roots to discover their true spiritual nature and capacities. If the experience is too easy, however, similar to a summer camp episode, they may learn some camping and social skills and some natural history, but they will not pop out of their suburban behaviors and assumptions to experience the deeper realities offered them by the wilderness.

The youngsters must also feel confidence in their adult leaders. They must know that these men and women are wise in the ways of the woods and of young humans, that they are firmly in control of the situation and are warmly nurturing, that they are dedicated to the well-being and good teaching of their young

charges. Beyond human safety and comfort within the environment, "secure" does not mean "safe," exactly. Life in the wilderness and in the inner emotional/archetypal world is never wholly safe. Life becomes embraced in a wilderness setting that comes to be familiar and manageable—just as the youngsters' inner lives are explored and made conscious, their currents identified, and the tools for their understanding and managing are learned. For example, coming to the point of being able, on a dark and damp Oregon evening, camped alone by a huge ancient fir amid the myriad, small, but now known and no longer frightening noises of twilight forest, to kindle a fire, to make light and warmth and a source of hot, nutritious food. This is virtually identical to the process of remembering, say, early sexual abuse and exploring later depression and self-destructive teen-years' attitudes and behaviors. This is coming to understand how those things relate to each other, and how one can manage one's life in new ways that are warm and nurturing rather than cold and frighteningly self-destructive. It is mastery of the darkness, using new knowledge and available resources, to create light and safety that is useful.

These adventures of the young into the dimly known provide the outer work of coping adequately with the wilderness environment. They support the inner work of nurturing that personal adult flame of consciousness that enables us to see and to manage, and to usefully employ those inner forces, which are our gifts from our eons-long heritage as natural, spiritual beings. As they gain these twin masteries, many of the young people on these trips come to feel not only more confident, but more truly safe than they



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have felt for years. For now their safety is consciously in their own hands.

Finally, to be fully effective, such programs must provide education and counseling that enable their clients to become aware of just what it is that they are experiencing, to reflect on it, and to consider how to apply it to their future lives. An experience of required behavior change is helpful. But an experience of self-understanding based on new knowledge, and assistance toward insight leading to intentional choices to take personal responsibility, are far more so. Thus, mastering life in the wilderness can provide the keys to mastering life in modern society, but only if the participant is guided toward understanding how to use those keys.

Development of Wilderness Treatment Programs

Many outdoor treatment programs have developed in the last 25 years, which,

building on the bases of adolescent outdoor experience provided by the Boy Scouts, camp experiences, and Outward Bound, have extended the rich experience of "touching our roots" into specifically healing modes for youngsters who need this voyage of discovery far more than do healthier young people. These programs vary substantially. Many programs provide weekend to three-week experiences in outdoor activities aimed at developing self-confidence and teamwork. Outdoor base camps in the southern United States expose adolescents to living simply for 6 to 18 months in large tents out in the woods, where they are in tune with the weather, with no electrical distractions or comforts and must cook and warm themselves with wood fires. Western wilderness treatment programs generally provide three- to eight-week experiences of backpacking, mostly in jeep-track areas but some of them in roadless and wilderness areas.

The clients in such programs at first were delinquent children paid for by public agencies, primarily "at risk" youngsters thought to be well on their way toward long-term detention. The hope with these young people is that they can learn enough self-management of their behavior and their emotions (particularly anxiety and anger), and enough social skills including trust of authority, to keep themselves out of juvenile jails. In the last 15 years many programs have developed to serve private pay clients with behavioral and drug-related problems. These children generally are not violating the law in serious enough ways to get the attention and services of juvenile authorities, nor are they sufficiently emotionally disturbed to qualify for hospital treatment in this era of cost-control. What they have in common is self-destructive behaviors-failing in school or dropping out, serious drug abuse or addiction, destructive sexual promiscuity, running away, and defiance of parental and community authority-plus refusal to cooperate with out-patient treatment and community programs that might help them. Parents of such children, having no recourse to legal or medical settings and having failed to obtain sufficient community help to stop their children's course of self-

destructive behavior, must choose between letting them go to life "on the street" or placing them in private programs, primarily residential drug treatment, special schools, or wilderness programs. In the last five years some insurance companies have tentatively concluded that wilderness programs are often more effective and less expensive than the alternatives and have been willing to pay for wilderness treatment when significant drug abuse issues would otherwise require payment for hospital or residential drug treatment. A few outdoor programs on the leading edge are providing true psychotherapeutic treatment for adolescents with serious emotional disorders, particularly major depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, who would otherwise be served in psychiatric hospital settings.

How Many Are Served by Wilderness Therapy

Wilderness therapy is not an organized field yet, and it is more difficult to estimate use-figures than for, say, whitewater river use. A conservative estimate, which surely omits dozens of programs, would be 10,000 public and private clients per year, generating around 330,000 user-clays and \$60 million in revenue. This figure includes only adolescent wilderness treatment, meaning programs that have specific treatment purposes and active field participation or at least clinical supervision by professional therapists. It does not include youth adventure camps or personal growth programs for which an estimate of 500 programs has been developed by the University of Idaho Wilderness Research Center (Friese et al., 1998.)

Given reasonable support from our land management agencies, outdoor and wilderness therapy should grow into the preferred paradigm for (at least) adolescent treatment of many problem behaviors and one of the major uses of our public lands and wilderness areas. Securing access to and nondegrading use of wilderness and related public lands for treatment and personal growth programs will be a challenge for all parties, but the effort reflects discovery of an emerging value of wilderness for humankind.

Wilderness Will Benefit

Wilderness stands to benefit as much from this new use as do the young clients who voyage into it. Wilderness treatment makes perfectly clear the underlying value to our culture of wild areas, which is less obvious in adult recreational and youth camp use. Wilderness has the potential to provide a kind of essential healing through a partial return to our natural human econiche, which cannot be provided in any other way. While wild areas have other important uses, such as to preserve habitats, species, and health) aquatic systems, it is crucial for their long-range preservation that our culture fully grasp how meaningful they are for humans too-not just for casual recreation, but for basic healing and renewal that are vital to our success as a human community **IJW**

ROB COOLEY grew up on the McKenzie River in Oregon, where he learned to row a McKenzie boat at age four and did his Boy Scout camping in what was then the "Three Sisters Primitive Area." In college summers, he set chokers for small logging outfits and built backcountry trails for the U.S. Forest Service. He earned a Ph.D. in counseling psychology from the University of Oregon in 1979. Since then he has specialized in family and adolescent therapy, at Oregon's child protective services agency and in private practice, while taking summers off to run a whitewater rafting outfit. In **1988**, he combined his outdoor and therapy interests in founding Catherine Freer Wilderness Therapy Expeditions, a 3-week adolescent program with a strong therapy emphasis, which is licensed in Oregon for both chemical dependency and mental health treatment. He can be contacted at Catherine Freer Wilderness Therapy Expeditions, P.O. Box 1064, Albany, Oregon 97321, USA. Telephone: (541) 926-7257. E-mail: cfwte@proaxis.com.

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