Outward Bound and Wilderness

BY KATRINA S. ABBOTT

The story of an orange peel on the ground during an Outward Bound course is a wonderful example of the value of wilderness and its impact on people. I was one of two instructors for an Outward Bound program for a group of thirteen students, one of whom was an intern from a high school in New York City. The intern had been on a similar overnight trip the previous year and except for him, this was the first time any of these students had been backpacking. To many of them, the “ground” was still the “floor.” As I walked at the end of the line, talking with the intern, he stopped and picked up an orange peel that one of his group members had dropped. He turned to me and somewhat angrily said, “What do they think they are doing, dropping orange peels on the ground?” When he asked why they had dropped the peels, his fellow urbanites responded that their habit of dropping trash on the ground was “because there is always someone there to pick it up in the city.”

The power of that moment, for me, was that this young man had internalized an environmental ethic and a sense of responsibility for the natural world during his prior Outward Bound experience, and this quality found expression in action. He intuitively appreciated the value of the natural world and provided his peers with a role model of earth stewardship. During an Outward Bound course, students have the opportunity to experience nature in a way that allows them to understand its intrinsic value, beyond the utilitarian value of providing raw material for human use (Meyer 1978). Invariably, they begin to take an interest in environmental stewardship.

Being in the grandeur and beauty of wilderness is a primal experience. It elicits a sense of connectedness to something greater than ourselves and expands our sense of self. The wilderness, a neutral environment devoid of human infrastructure, demands that individuals adopt responsible behavior to ensure their comfort and well-being. For most, the wilderness is a novel environment that requires new responses and behaviors. Experiencing our self in nature is not easy to do in a world dominated by human activity. Thus, while many seasoned Outward Bound staff have provocatively mused that an Outward Bound course “can be conducted under a kitchen table,” a wilderness setting creates the potential for a profound and compelling experience for each participant.

Outward Bound in the United States and the wilderness are intimately linked. The term “outward bound,” originally used by seamen to describe the moment when a ship leaves a safe harbor and heads into the open sea portending adventure and challenge, is a perfect metaphor for the curriculum of a modern-day Outward Bound course. Today, a diverse group comes together to experience a journey into the unknown—the wilderness.

During an Outward Bound course, students may climb mountains, paddle rivers, and sail the seas, both for the challenge and joy of the experience and, as a means to an end; the reason to climb is not to reach the top, but to acquire the understanding that arises from the journey itself. It has been eloquently said that “Outward Bound trains through the sea and not for it” (Miner 1981). The essence of the Outward Bound process is the exposure of students to activities that require responses that have meaning beyond the activity, thus serving as metaphors which are isomorphic (Bacon 1993), or similar in structure, to responses they might successfully make in their home environment.

In this way, students learn new and better ways of addressing issues, ways that can be transferred to their daily lives.

Outward Bound experiences require sustained physical, mental, and emotional effort over fully scheduled consecutive days. They often take place in an environment unfamiliar to the students, which requires a fresh approach and impels individuals to work together as a team to attain their goals. As knowledge and trust in each other increases, communication becomes more direct and honest, and deeper connections are established among students. The value of individual uniqueness and ability becomes apparent and appreciated and each student comes to understand what they bring to the group. Throughout the experience, activities are reflected upon and discussed so individuals retain their import. “It’s been six years since I’ve been on my course,” a student wrote “and there’s not a day that goes by that I don’t think about it and apply it to my everyday things I have to do—job, school . . . I never forget.”

In the Beginning

The first Outward Bound course was conducted in Aberdovey, Wales, in 1941. It was designed to help young men, who were products of years of depression in Britain, to “defeat their defeatism.” Through sail training and rescue service, the students at the first Outward Bound school cultivated physical health and a sense of moral responsibility. Kurt Hahn, the founder of Outward Bound, believed strongly in the need for value oriented education, with a mix of physical, academic, and service learning. He wrote, “I regard it as the foremost task of education to ensure the survival of these qualities: an enterprising curiosity, an undefeatable spirit, tenacity of pursuit, readiness for sensible self-denial, and above all, compassion” (Sakofs 1988). Hahn, an innovative German born educator, created and developed a number of schools around the concept of experiential education or “learning by doing.”

Josh Miner, an American teacher who worked with Hahn in Britain, brought Outward Bound to the United States, and in 1961, the Colorado Outward Bound School was created. Today, the Hurricane Island Outward Bound School (Maine), North Carolina Outward Bound School, Pacific Crest Outward Bound School (Oregon), and the Voyager Outward Bound School (Minnesota) offer wilderness courses, while the New York City Outward Bound Center and the Thompson Island Outward Bound Education Center (Boston) offer primarily urban programs.

While there are now more than forty Outward Bound schools on five continents and twenty-nine countries around the world, Kurt Hahn’s influence has spread beyond Outward Bound to over 700 experiential education programs and numerous professional associations across the United States, including the National Outdoor Leadership School, Project Adventure, Association for Experiential Education, and the Wilderness Education Association.

The Outward Bound Curriculum

While each of the Outward Bound schools in the United States conducts courses in very different environments, the core curriculum of any course has five basic elements: training phase, expedition phase, solo, final phase, and concluding phase. The curriculum relies heavily on the
instructors use of Socratic questioning for the students’ acquisition of knowledge, guiding students to learn through their own experience.

During the training phase of a wilderness course, students learn skills necessary to safely engage in high adventure activities and become members of a functioning group, with increasing responsibility for leadership of the group. The expedition phase tests the students’ knowledge through opportunities to experience safe, yet real success and failure. A day or two of service work, such as working at a homeless shelter or trail rehabilitation, gives students a chance to understand compassion through service to others and to the land through which they travel. On solo, the student experiences the wilderness in solitude, with up to three days of reflection with a minimum of food and equipment. A final expedition requires the students to use all the knowledge they have gained to safely reach a predetermined destination. A concluding physical event, such as a marathon or a ski marathon, offers the students final opportunity for an individual challenge and a dramatic closure to their course. Reflection and discussion on their experiences and their impact often take the form of metaphors which students can apply to their daily lives, thus allowing the lessons learned and awareness gained during the Outward Bound course to be available for later application.

Although a “standard” course is 23–26 days in length and primarily conducted for youth between the ages of 16–24, Outward Bound courses vary from 4–50 days and serve such diverse populations as families, adults over 55, educators, and corporate work groups, and are offered throughout the United States and in a number of foreign countries including Costa Rica, Mexico, and Nepal.

OUTWARD BOUND AND THE WILDERNESS

With a threefold increase in students over the past 15 years, Outward Bound USA has grown to five wilderness schools and two urban centers and currently serves more than 34,000 students a year (Glenn 1994). Many of these students have an extended wilderness experience, living outside, sleeping on the ground, exploring the land around them, and leaving their Outward Bound course with a much stronger connection to Earth. It is this intimate knowledge of themselves in a natural place, combined with the acquisition and use of leadership skills, that help Outward Bound students internalize care of and concern for the wilderness.

As wilderness use increases, Outward Bound students and others must adopt practices that will minimize impact on our resources, includinguse of state-of-the-art low impact techniques and self-regulation. For example, we have been expanding into water environments through sailing and sea kayaking courses, while consciously traveling less in over-impacted wilderness areas. Outward Bound staff firmly believe that continued access to wilderness areas is a privilege and not a right. This privilege is earned by being exemplary users in the natural environment, and exemplary teachers for future users of the environment (Hart 1993).

In 1990 the Outward Bound Environmental Affairs Committee was formed with representatives from each of the seven U.S. Outward Bound schools. The committee provides national leadership for Outward Bound’s environmental education and stewardship, and addresses the critical public policy issues facing outdoor education and recreation organizations today, including wilderness allocation and management, risk management, user fees and permit standardization, mitigation of environmental impacts (including Limits of Acceptable Change research and “Leave No Trace” education and practice), and climbing and fixed anchors in the wilderness.

The sustainability of wilderness and all natural resources is one of Outward Bound’s highest priorities and we continue to address this issue through four avenues in particular: partnerships, wilderness and environmental education, stewardship, and diversity (Mackey 1994).

PARTNERSHIPS

Wilderness use is projected to increase as much as 135% by the year 2040 and federal funding may not keep up with this increase (Mackey 1994). Partnerships between federal agencies and other organizations can support the stewardship of our resources, given this increased use. Outward Bound, for example, has been working for many years in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) assisting in the education of wilderness users, building and maintaining trails, monitoring campsites, and providing rescue support. A specific project in Colorado gives Outward Bound students the opportunity to work side by side with the USFS employees on the “Fourteeners Initiative,” a project designed to mitigate the human impacts on the fifty-four 14,000-foot peaks in Colorado.

While most Outward Bound courses are conducted on public lands, students in the eastern United States often travel through land owned by corporations and private citizens, with whom Outward Bound has agreements for use. On private lands, as on public lands, continued access cannot be assumed and local Outward Bound site managers work each year to maintain positive relationships with private land owners.

Two top priorities for Outward Bound over the years have been self-regulation of environmental impact and managing participant safety. The privilege of taking students into the wilderness requires that we take care of the
WILDERNESS AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

The majority of Outward Bound program activity takes place in the wilderness. Environmental education is partnered with physical and spiritual self-discovery, enabling students to experience themselves as a part of the natural world. For three decades Outward Bound has been at the forefront of low-impact wilderness education. When students come to Outward Bound, they learn to respect the land, employ low impact skills, and go back to the land through service. Through publications such as Wilderness Ways, a guide for environmentally sound back country travel, and the Earth Book, a book of activities and readings for environmental education, appreciation, and celebration, Outward Bound has been able to share its practices not only with its students but with other organizations worldwide as well.

STEWARDSHIP OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Active service to the environment is part of the Outward Bound student experience. Through service work such as trail and campsite rehabilitation, visitor education and river cleanups, Outward Bound students come to understand that they, too, can make a difference in the stewardship of the natural world. It has been estimated that in 93 alone, Outward Bound students and staff provided 6,500 days of environmental service work, mostly on public lands. This active care for the environment enhances students' sense of responsibility for Earth and is an attitude and understanding which they are likely to take away from their Outward Bound experience. This attitude will help preserve the wilderness for future generations.

DIVERSITY

Diversity is an integral part of all Outward Bound experiences. Kurt Hahn believed that the "student constituency" of every Outward Bound course should be as "broad as possible" (Miner 1991). Today, "Outward Bound aims to provide a diverse mix of participants on its courses, in the belief that a wide variety of perspectives and life experiences contribute to a rich learning environment. Believing the same holds true for our employees, we have made serious efforts to diversify our staff and board of trustees" (Glenn 1995). One of the missions of Outward Bound is to increase the diversity (socioeconomic, physical ability, gender, ethnic, and racial) of its participants and staff at all levels of the organization. To this end, nearly two million dollars was raised in 1993 to fund scholarships for students to attend Outward Bound courses.

The Native, African, Asian, Latin American (NAALA) Institute has been created within Outward Bound to help promote efforts toward increasing ethnic and racial diversity. The Director of Diversity and the NAALA Institute has been hired to support and coordinate efforts toward increasing diversity within Outward Bound USA.

As we continue to teach into totope urban and school environments, Outward Bound has the opportunity to offer an outdoor experience to youth who might not otherwise be able to experience the natural world. Given the increasingly diverse nature of the United States demographics, it is imperative that as many citizens as possible experience and come to understand the value of the natural world so each nill support its protection.

OUTWARD BOUND, WILDERNESS, AND THE 21ST CENTURY

Kurt Hahn, the founder of Outward Bound recounted often that "our disability is our opportunity" and as Outward Bound approaches the 21st century, we are finding that one disability, degradation of our wilderness, is an opportunity to find ways to educate people, locally and globally, about concern and care for the environment.

Environmental stewardship education is most easily understood while in the wilderness. During a course, the wilderness provides...

... Going to the mountains is going home; wilderness is necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life.

-John Muir

Outward Bound students with a profound, life-changing experience and we will continue to look for ways to responsibly offer our students a wilderness experience.

Education about the natural world should not only be offered to those that are or want to venture into the wilderness. Believing that all citizen should know about and experience the natural world, Outward Bound has taken in philosophy and pedagogy to urban environments such as New York, Boston, Baltimore, and Atlanta, and focused on introducing urban youth to the natural world and service.

A new and successful urban initiative, Ex-

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peditionary Learning Outward Bound, is transforming public schools across the country into centers of educational excellence for grades kindergarten through high school. During a multidisciplinary study of the natural world, a first and second grade class focused on a study of human impact on the environment through a six-week "learning expedition" titled "Walk Lightly on the Earth."

These urban programs are strongly supported by wilderness experiences, and often students prepare throughout a year of school for an Outward Bound experience in the wilderness. Teachers, principals, and superintendents associated with Outward Bound work to understand how to transform their schools into learning environments based on Kurt Hahn's philosophy after experiencing a wilderness course. After an Outward Bound experience, a school principal wrote, "I experienced nature on a very personal basis. Metaphors from each day's experiences can fill a book and I will continue to bring those metaphors into my work life and private life every time I encounter a challenge."

Concerns for environmental stewardship are important worldwide, and Outward Bound has taken the initiative to share its best environmental practices throughout its global network of schools. In 1993, Outward Bound staff from the United States and overseas joined with federal agency staff and other environmental educators for the first International Outward Bound Wilderness Programming Conference to discuss land stewardship issues, share best environmental practices, and create partnerships for the future. In October 1994, in Hong Kong, the Fifth International Outward Bound Conference participants focused on global environmental concerns during numerous workshops and forums. In this next century, Outward Bound will continue to look toward stewardship of the global environment through collaboration, partnerships, and education.

Outward Bound will continue to take students into the wilderness, and in doing so, monitor our impact and respect of this limited resource—the wilderness. We will continue to instill a sense of responsibility in our students for care of the natural world, with the hope that they will recognize that an orange peel on the ground is not a part of the wilderness experience. As Outward Bound changes and moves into the 21st century, we need to leave the safety of our harbor and travel into the unknown, always seeking new ways to help our current and future caretakers of the wilderness to intimately understand it with their heart.

"For the care of rivers is not a question of rivers but of the human heart."

-Tanaka Shozo

REFERENCES


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