Wilderness Inquiry

BY GREG LAIS

Introduction

N 1077, PRIOR TO THE PASSAGE of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness Act, a U.S. senator from Minnesota stated that reducing motorized use in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness would discriminate against "the handicapped, the elderly, and women." Over the years many people have claimed that wilderness designations discriminate against people with disabilities, the elderly, and anyone else who is not young and physically fit. This charge has been difficult to answer. But it is also the notion that sparked formation of the Minnesota-based, nonprofit group called Wilderness Inquiry (WI).

I was in college at the time, and had been involved with a group of friends in the fledgling WI organization. Having just returned from a winter camping trip with 11 and 12 year-old girls, the notion that wilderness was inaccessible to women seemed out of place. It occurred to me that the rest of the senator's quote was inaccurate too.

Being young and perhaps a bit overconfident, some friends and I decided to test the hypothesis that wilderness was not accessible to people with disabilities. In August of 1977 we planned a 100-mile wilderness trip involving two people who used wheelchairs, as well as two young men who were deaf. To make a long story short, with a huge expenditure of energy, we succeeded in traveling over 80 miles. But, in the end, we rented motor boats to take us the last 70 miles.

At that tender age we were forced to eat crow, but we also stumbled upon something that was far more meaningful than simply proving a U.S. senator wrong. We discovered that traveling in the wilderness with an integrated group of people was a tremendously powerful personal experience for everyone involved. It opened our eyes. We wanted more.

Almost 20 years later, more than 30,000 people have had the opportunity to share this kind of experience in wilderness throughout the United States, Canada, Australia, and Europe. WI has grown beyond its fledgling state. Yes, some people are still saying that wilderness designations discriminate against people with disabilities and the elderly. If we measure progress in incremental steps, we can at least take some satisfaction in the fact that no one today would dare claim that wilderness discriminates against women.

Dispelling Stereotypes

In utilizing integrated wilderness adventures to dispel stereotypes, we've encountered an interesting irony. When trying to explain the mission of WI, I often see people focus on the issue of serving persons with disabilities. They frequently grab that notion and stereotype WI as the program that serves "the handicapped." While this is understandable, it misses the point.

On our first trip we learned that the world is not easily split into disparate camps such as "the disabled" and "the able-bodied." The lesson that comes through so clear in the contrast of a wilderness environment is that each person has their own unique abilities that defy stereotyping. If the desire is there, every person can go out and discover the beauty and mystery of wilderness, regardless of their level or ability. Wilderness Inquiry simply makes it possible for this to happen.

"I learned that I could get along with people who have disabilities. They became 'so and so' and not the person in the wheelchair or the person with down syndrome or whatever disability, which was something I never experienced before."

-Kelly, a nondisabled WI participant

Shared wilderness experience can be an extremely effective means of breaking down the stereotypes we have of our fellow human beings. It can be more effective than busing students to different school systems to integrate cultures and races, diversity training, or all of the other means currently used to bring diverse groups of people together.

As one WI participant put it, "I gained a better understanding of the whole is greater than the sum of the parts it's made of. I realized that despite our individual needs, age differences, backgrounds or economic status, we all have in common such tremendous capacity to learn from one another. We became wiser and we learned a greater sense of trust."

Why Does Wilderness Unify People?

Since that first trip, we have asked what it is about wilderness that helps to facilitate this "coming together" of diverse people. Can this be accomplished in other environments? If not, why not? We do not claim to have the answers; however, we believe
that the wilderness environment itself is a key element in the process. As environments go, wilderness is indifferent to our existence. In the context of this indifferent environment, our common human needs become self-evident, and they far outweigh our differences—whatever those differences may be.

One of the many lessons learned by involving physically disabled persons, is that wilderness appreciation is not at all limited to those who are independently mobile in the woods. In fact, often the opposite is true. People who infrequently visit the wilderness often cherish the opportunity more.

As our society has become less dependent upon muscle power due to technical innovation, people go more places with less effort. Wilderness travel takes us back to different modes of transportation and makes us rely on our bodies to provide the energy to move—a notion that intimidates many who are unsure of their physical capabilities. Instead of being an obstacle, this can be an exciting means to discover what we are in fact able to do.

In wilderness, the traditional yardstick by which we measure the value of our fellow human beings is somehow different. This, we think, has important—if unexplained—social ramifications. At the very least, wilderness travel with diverse groups of people can be an excellent means of facilitating a process called social integration.

Wilderness Facilitates Social Integration

"When I first became disabled I was afraid of the physical challenges, but I had no idea how tough the social challenges would be. Marriages break up, old friends no longer feel comfortable. Medicine can rebuild the body, but they cannot rebuild a social life. My trip with Wilderness Inquiry gave me the tools to start this long process."

—Jay Johnson, a WI participant with a spinal cord injury

Social integration is a term widely used among groups serving persons with disabilities, especially those serving persons with cognitive impairments. In brief, it means overcoming stereotypes, usually negative, based on perceptions of physical differences. It stems from the reality that many people with disabilities suffer some form of social ostracism simply because they look different than the norm.

This social ostracism can take many forms. From outright avoidance to well-meaning but misplaced displays of patronizing behavior toward those considered "less fortunate." It is a very real form of discrimination, just ask someone who has a disability. Moreover, the concept transcends disability issues to encompass many forms of discrimination based on the perception of physical differences, including racial, religious, and cultural differences, as well as others.

For the last 15 years, especially since passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, the concept of social integration has been pushed to facilitate inclusion into schools, team sports, and the workplace. For example, today it is not uncommon to catch a glimpse of a person who uses a wheelchair in an advertisement.

WI believes that integrated-wilderness experiences are one of the most effective tools at facilitating social integration. Others believe it too. As evidenced by the growth of other programs with similar ends, such as SPLORE, N.E. Passage, C.W. HOG, and Environmental Traveling Companions, WI, the University of Minnesota, and others have conducted some research on the effects of integrated wilderness travel. More studies need to be done, but based on the research and our own observations over the years we've come to the following conclusions:

1) Social integration is easier to achieve when people are further removed from their everyday existence, patterns, and behaviors.

The routines of daily life often dictate our perceptions and stereotypes. If you see a lawyer, a police officer, or a politician on the street you probably have a set of beliefs about how that person may act. The same is true if you see a person with a disability, or someone else who is physically different than you. Wilderness travel, of course, tends to break the routine of daily life, at least for most of us.

2) Social integration is easier to achieve when all participants are able to compete or participate equally—when their contribution to the outcome of the experience is equal.

Wilderness travel can accomplish this participatory function far better than any other recreational activities. Unlike competitive sports, wilderness travel allows far more opportunities for contributions that are not based upon group members' physical capability, or their intellectual capability. Participants can play different, but equally valued, roles on a wilderness adventure. On a WI trip, we can have physical workers, attitude shapers, navigators, skills contributors, and group skills workers. Everyone is encouraged to contribute to the good of the group according to their means.

3) Wilderness is indifferent which reinforces common human needs.

We all have basic needs for food and shelter. Because we often have to work a bit harder in wilderness to accommodate those needs, this makes it an ideal place for us to explore our common humanity. Unless you're living on the street, urban settings cannot easily replicate this.

4) The beauty of wilderness builds a common bond of appreciation.

Most wilderness areas are naturally beautiful. This is what draws many people to visit wilderness. People who share these beautiful places together often form an intangible bond, a form of spiritual renewal, that brings them closer together.

There are also other reasons why wilderness facilitates social integration. For example, Alan Ewert (1989) describes the contributions of wilderness to the develop-
Audiences Served

People of all ages and abilities throughout the world participate in Wi adventures. The wide mix of people typically found on Wi trips allows for reflection and discussion about the nature of human differences and stereotypes about them. This mixing of people from all walks of life is essential to our mission of integration.

In addition, Wi maintains active partnerships with a number of organizations for a variety of purposes. Working cooperatively with other organizations has always been the way Wi does business. These strategic partnerships help to further our mission of making integrated outdoor adventures accessible to everyone.

Wi typically integrates people with a variety of disabling conditions in each activity, including people with spinal cord injuries, multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, mental retardation, deafness, Parkinson's disease, and other disabling conditions. Most trips are integrated to include approximately 50% people with disabilities, and 50% people without disabilities. A typical group would include 12 people as follows: one person who uses a wheelchair; two people with a sensory, cognitive, or other type of impairment such as coronary disease, epilepsy, mental retardation, etc.; one person who ambulates with canes or crutches; six nondisabled participants; and two Wi staff people. Participants are mixed by age and gender. The average age is in the mid-30's, with a range from 2 to 85 years old. In addition to this mix of disabilities, Wi adventures are integrated to include people of diverse cultural, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The following demographic breakdown for 1994 is typical:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>50%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>50%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Under 22</td>
<td>39%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Over 60</td>
<td>3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disabled</td>
<td>52%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nondisabled</td>
<td>48%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Racial minorities</td>
<td>15%</td>
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One of the subtle factors in Wi's success is that the experiences are offered as appealing "recreational" programs that are open to everyone regardless of their ability. People participate simply because they want to share the recreational adventure. There is no stigma of "therapy" attached to these experiences. Wi was founded on the premise that these socially integrated experiences are the true building blocks of self-esteem, confidence, and greater sensitivity to the needs and potentials of others.

In addition to the obvious physical challenges involved in wilderness travel, able-bodied and disabled participants face many emotional challenges. Difficult physical conditions demand cooperation which in turn fosters understanding. The stereotypes, discomfort, and emotional distance that sometimes exist between able-bodied and disabled persons are reduced and usually abandoned during the course of a trip. Regardless of one's ability level at the beginning of a trip, participants usually find that the preconceived limits of their own capabilities were far too conservative.

The Methodology

Water is the key to accessing wilderness for persons with limitations in mobility. Water-based activities, such as canoeing and kayaking, provide the means to travel great distances with relative ease. People who push their own wheelchairs generally have more than enough upper body strength to paddle a canoe. The greatest physical difficulty facing some persons is with back support and balance, but with simple adaptations these problems can be remedied.

Winter camping provides a different set of conditions and problems. To increase winter mobility, persons with mobility impairments use one-person "pulk" sleds pulled by dogs to travel along the frozen lakes and trails. Sliding through the woods on a dog sled is a truly thrilling experience, one that is available to most anyone who makes the effort to try.

Whether it is winter or summer, by working together and experimenting with new ideas, participants on Wi trips team up to overcome the challenges of wilderness travel. People with balance problems, for example, often team up with persons who use wheelchairs to cross "portages"-trails between bodies of water. The wheelchair provides a stable base for the person with balance difficulties, who in turn helps give the extra push needed to get over the many rocks and bumps along the way.

These "symbiotic" relationships develop naturally on mixed ability wilderness adventures. The key ingredients to success are cooperation, trust, and allowing enough time for the tasks to be completed. The means for successful wilderness travel by mobility impaired people are no secret: hard work and determination. The payoffs are the same: beauty, solitude, and
the confidence in knowing that you can do it yourself.

Within the context of the WI program there are several major initiatives. These include:

**Extended Tripping Program**—WI currently offers 125 extended trips annually, including canoe, kayak, raft, and dogsled adventures throughout the United States, Canada, Australia, and Europe. Financial aid is provided for those who need financial help.

**Outdoor Skills Workshops**—WI offers free canoeing, kayaking, dog sledding, and outdoor skills events on public lands. They are designed to introduce people with severe disabilities and others to the sport of canoeing and to the programs of WI.

**Youth Programs**—Through WI's outdoor education and recreation programs, youths with and without disabilities learn new skills, gain confidence, and become more tolerant of differences. The goal of WI’s youth program is to empower youths with disabilities to become socially integrated and move into the mainstream of community life.

**Universal Program (UP)/Training**—Since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1000, WI has received countless requests for training from outdoor recreation service providers and other groups. UP/Training is designed to assist these organizations in designing programs that are universally accessible to everyone. For example, WI and the University of Minnesota teamed up to provide a two-week "short course" for federal, state, and local land managers on UP design.

**Project PILOT**—A three-year project (September 1993 through August 1996) made possible by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. The goal of Project PILOT is to train people with disabilities to become "Integration Specialists," who will, in turn, train other outdoor service providers (e.g., U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Park Service, and others) in the concepts and practices of UP design in an outdoor recreation context.

**Veteran Programs**—For the past four years, WI has received funding from the Agent Orange Class Assistance Program (AOCAP) to serve Vietnam veterans and their families. This funding will end in January 1996. Work is in progress to find new funding sources to replace AOCAP funding.

**Wilderness Access Decision Tool**—With funding and assistance from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service, WI has developed a decision tool for federal land managers regarding use of the National Wilderness Preservation System for persons with disabilities. Presented at the Sixth National Wilderness Conference in Santa Fe, New Mexico, this tool will help federal land managers develop consistent policies regarding accessibility in the National Wilderness Preservation System.

**Adaptive Equipment Development**—Over the years WI has developed many pieces of adaptive equipment to assist persons with disabilities. With funding from the STAR Program (a System of Technology to Achieve Results), WI and Tamarack Habilitation Technologies developed a bow stern seat, a sling seat and ear lock frame, and a portage carrier.

**Curriculum Development**—WI has published several curricula on various topics, including issues related to integration and outdoor skills. With funding provided by the state of Minnesota Department of Education, WI published a leadership development curriculum for youths with disabilities. In cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service and America Outdoors, a national trade association of outfitters, WI produced a "how to" manual for outfitters wishing to make their programs and services more accessible for persons with disabilities.

## Results

Over the years WI has conducted several studies in cooperation with the University of Minnesota, the U.S. Department of Education, and other agencies to document the effects of integrated adventure experiences toward achieving these goals. Results of a three-year longitudinal study conducted by the University of Minnesota show participants in WI programs experiencing positive changes over time in major life areas such as:

- Interpersonal relationships
- Attitudes towards those with disabilities
- Tolerance of stress
- Approaching new situations
- Social activities
- Ability to live independently
- Education
- Mobility
- Employment

While we believe that empirical documentation of integrated wilderness experiences is critically important, we know that measuring these types of "intangibles" is difficult to accomplish. We also know, as evidenced by the concluding participant anecdotes, that the program works. Now we have to work harder at proving it.

"I have just had the most meaningful event of my life for the past eighteen years. Eighteen, because that is my life span as a physically disabled adult. It is unfortunate that I had to become disabled to enjoy outdoor activities on such a magnificent scale as Wilderness Inquiry offers."

—Natalie, a WI participant

"This experience in the wilderness has helped me to grow stronger. This feeling of accomplishment is wonderful. I also saw others with disabilities share their skills, participate, and grow as people this summer. We all paddled, set up camp, portaged, cooked, and got to know each other. Before my trip, I knew people with disabilities could do challenging things, but I didn't really believe it. Now I know and believe.

—Patricia, a WI participant

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"The Boundary Waters bill was passed, and the senator lost his bid for reelection."

**REFERENCES**