

Outdoor adventure recreation and social integration: A social-psychological perspective.

A study documenting skill acquisition and life-style changes through participation in Wilderness Inquiry programs.

This study reports on the efficacy of an integrated outdoor adventure program (Wilderness Inquiry, Inc.) in creating positive change for people with and without disabilities. Over the course of the 2 1/2 year period, 12 participants with disabilities and 14 participants without disabilities were involved in the study. Due to the longitudinal nature of the study, some of the subjects dropped out and were replaced by others. Thus, the total sample of 26 participants included 17 who completed the entire study and 9 who completed part of the study. Disabilities represented in the sample included amputation, ataxia, bipolar disorder, blindness, cerebral palsy, diabetes, epilepsy, hearing impairment, hemiplegia, mental retardation, post traumatic stress disorder, speech impairment, and traumatic brain injury.

Five subjects used wheelchairs. The age of subjects ranged from 22 to 65 years. The primary settings for the study were wilderness or back country areas in northern Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa. Baseline sessions were conducted in parks with lakes in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area. Data collection methods included task observations of canoe skills, attitude surveys, assessments of relationship development, and interviews to assess influence of participation on quality of life indicators.

Results

- The study confirmed many of the benefits documented in previous Wilderness Inquiry studies reported by McAvoy et.al. (1987), and also found that integrated programs resulted in increased outdoor recreation skills, improved sensitivity to the needs of other group members, and an increased respect for nature among the participants with disabilities.
- Canoe Skills: participants with disabilities showed a definite acquisition of canoeing skills following participation in the wilderness trips. The improvement in canoe skills was maintained from the first to the last trip, with only minimal loss of skills between trips. By the end of trips studied, participants with disabilities were executing 82-95% of canoe skills correctly and independently.
- Other Skills: Participants with and without disabilities cited many additional skills they developed over the course of trip experiences, including camping skills, the skills to stay comfortable in harsh or uncomfortable conditions, disability accommodation skills, minimum impact skills, and safety skills.
- Attitudes: The attitudes of participants without disabilities towards those with disabilities were quite high coming into the program, and they tended to stay high throughout the program. Attitudes remained positive over time, even after spending several days together in challenging situations. The insights that participants gained (and revealed in interviews) helped to possibly redefine their attitudes to a more individualistic and less stereotypic way of thinking about people with disabilities.
- Relationships: Participants in the study made choices to include people with disabilities in their lives as friends. The shared time and recreational experiences of the trips

resulted in friendships being formed and people with disabilities being accepted as valued members of the group.

- Life-Style Changes: Most participants reported lifestyle changes as a result of their trip experience (see figure below). The lifestyle areas most positively affected were: recreation, employment, education, mobility, planning/organizing one's life, and desire for a more simplified life-style.
- Wilderness Values: People with disabilities in the study reported that the wilderness environment was a critical ingredient to them realizing some of the major benefits of a wilderness canoe/camping experience. They indicated that the wilderness environment intensified and focused individual efforts producing a dramatic impact on group development and enhanced social integration of group members. The wilderness setting appeared to be crucial in helping groups form and perform together. The theme of "the wilderness" seemed to permeate the journal entries and interview transcripts that were analyzed for this study.

Anderson, L.S. (1994). Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

The description and results of this study appeared in the literature as:

Anderson, L., Schleien, S., McAvoy, L., Lais, G. & Seligman, D. (1997). Creating positive change through an integrated outdoor adventure program. *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, 31 (4), 214-229.

(See table below)

Figure 1
Average Percent of Participants With and Without Disabilities Reporting a Positive Change in Life Areas Over Two Years

