

Contact with Nature and Community Building at Outward Bound Canada

By Kyle Horvath and Nevin Harper

Outdoor programs increasingly face demands from government, funders, researchers and the community to demonstrate concrete outcomes. The onus has been placed on organizations such as Outward Bound Canada (OBC) to perform well, and also to prove their effectiveness in achieving outcomes. OBC's 2012 *Impact Report* (www.outwardbound.ca) provides a snapshot of the tangible educational outcomes of OBC programs. Additionally, the report identifies visible gaps in programming, gaps that potentially reduce overall effectiveness. One notable factor—the role of contact with the natural environment, and, subsequently how it relates to reaching educational and developmental outcomes—lacks adequate attention in both program evaluation and public recognition (Harper, Carpenter, & Segal, 2012). This paper will explore how OBC demonstrates the quintessential role of the natural environment through programming, and how this role relates a commonly cited outcome of outdoor education programming: the development of community (Garst, Scheider & Baker, 2001).

OBC: The Outward Bound Community

The 2012 *Impact Report* identifies that over 85% of OBC's 2,745 participants across 177 programs expressed satisfaction with their courses, and 86% of participants found the programs very worthwhile (Harper, 2013). Thematic analysis from open-ended questions provided testimony to the community that is fostered and developed during OBC programs. Offering insight into both personal growth and this sense of community, one participant recounted, "I learned a lot about myself and how I operate in a group setting."

Conclusions drawn from the final report indicate that group dynamics and interpersonal relationships are not only the most challenging component of

the program, but also the area in which participants learned and developed the most over the course of their journey. Previous research continues to demonstrate that it is the program design of OBC and similar outdoor programs that develops this sense of community and interpersonal connection (Garst et al., 2001; Greenway, 1995; Ungar, Dumond, & McDonald, 2005). If this is the case, how does our connection to the natural world relate to outdoor education programming?

Programs at OBC are developed to meet the organization's mission: "To cultivate resilience, leadership, *connections*, and compassion through inspiring and challenging journeys of self-discovery in the *natural world*." Each program is designed to promote community development with guiding principles that support the development of core values and outcome objectives. A focus on the three principles of learning through experience, challenge and adventure, coupled with a supportive environment, fosters the sense of community developed at OBC.

Scores from the Outward Bound Outcome Instrument (OBOI) reported that these objectives have been achieved (Harper, 2013). Designed by Outward Bound USA researchers, the OBOI aims to measure outcomes such as character development, leadership and service to the community as outlined in the Outward Bound Educational Framework (see 2012 *Impact Report* for further details). The factors of the OBOI provide the foundation for how community is developed in each program with OBC (OBOI are designed for courses five days or longer). For example, character development and leadership were measured through a combination of factors including self-confidence, goal setting, effective communication and group collaboration. By the end of the program, participants experienced improvements in character

development and leadership, as well as environmental awareness.

Notwithstanding, these results do not indicate how community is developed, nor how contact with nature provides this opportunity. Similarly, although 81% of participants would recommend OBC to others, this is not enough to justify what the program aims to accomplish, or how it does so. With community connection intrinsically written into program design, it becomes increasingly difficult to demonstrate the unique role the natural environment plays in creating community in programs at OBC.

Furthermore, research in the field of outdoor programing continually questions the utility of a natural setting in producing results (Harper, 2012). Although OBC demonstrates how participant interaction strengthens interpersonal skills, how does the natural environment contribute to further participant development and the formation of community? What is the role of the environment in building community within programs at OBC?

Recommendations from the results of the report include an exploration into "the role of nature in the OBC student experience," as it will "better inform practice and contribute to the broader literature of the fields of outdoor education, adventure therapy and ecopsychology" (Harper, 2013). Perhaps the report already contains some of the basic tenants of providing this evidence: contact with nature as the source for connecting to a broader community.

Taken from a proposal by Harper (2012) contact with nature may perhaps be treated as an indivisible research variable. By examining how OBC provides opportunities to explore in a natural setting, and what this natural setting provides intrinsically, it may be possible to reframe how the design principles of OBC provide an opportunity to connect with nature, and thus promote a broader sense of community.

Community through Connecting with Nature

Outdoor programing offers an unparalleled opportunity to connect with a world outside of ourselves (Ungar et al., 2005). Current research on and analysis of outdoor adventure programs demonstrates that programs contribute positively to participants' social and emotional growth (Harper et al., 2012). One participant from an OBC program stated that "being in nature is extremely beneficial to my mental and physical and emotional well-being." Studies of other programs have also demonstrated that being in nature improves attention, the ability to cope with and recover from stress; enhances social relationships, and interpersonal skills; and improves community connectedness (Berman, Jonides, & Kaplan, 2008; Harper et al., 2012; Garst et al., 2001).

A review of over 1,300 participant responses and 52 longitudinal studies evidenced that 80% of outdoor program respondents identified "community" as the third-most important experience of their journey (Greenway, 1995). A separate review of 12 different adventure programs with a total of 207 participants by Ungar et al. (2005) identified that feeling like part of the group, and developing trust were some of the most meaningful and valued aspects of the programs. The community at OBC is no exception. Results of the impact report indicate that participants truly discover "how important community and selflessness is," as stated by one participant and echoed by many others.

The OBC Environment

Group cohesion that develops during outdoor programs is a consistent and indescribable experience, where community seems to just "happen" in natural settings (Greenway, 1995). But perhaps this sense of community is not coincidental, and the natural environment has meaningful contributions. At OBC, each program is designed to include the use of unfamiliar settings that provide students with mental,

emotional, and physical challenges and opportunities for growth (Harper, 2013). Natural spaces offer a novel and unfamiliar environment that fosters an opportunity to connect with unknown elements such as the surrounding environment (Garst et al., 2001). In comparison to urban living, the unfamiliarity of wild spaces offers a previously unseen place for individuals to explore, and remain open to new experiences and challenges (Greenway, 1995; Harper et al., 2012; Ungar et al., 2005).

At OBC, both urban and wilderness programs provide the opportunity to explore unfamiliar and novel settings. Although over half of the programs at OBC are provided in urban locations, through spaces such as Brick Works—an environmental centre in Toronto, Ontario—the emphasis is on deepening participants' connection with nature. One participant stated: "I learned how nature can teach you about yourself, I learned to be more independent and to work effectively in a team; I was able to connect with nature." At OBC, the community is not just between people, but includes all of nature. This contact with nature is imbedded in each program, and purposefully included in each course.

Natural spaces also offer an escape from urban pressures and stressful life circumstances. Without the pressure to perform, individuals are able to explore new interests and discover new capabilities that can produce the catalyst necessary to try new roles and work together for common goals (Garst et al., 2001). Participants at OBC express gratitude for being offered this freeing opportunity. Greenway (1995) states that it is the activity of the journey that entices participants to an outdoor program, but what resonates most in participants' memories is the peacefulness and the calm—a sense of freedom in the natural environment. Several open-ended participant responses offer remarkably poignant examples that illustrate how the program offers this freedom. One participant, when asked what he would tell others about the program, said, "It is such a

wonderful chance to find yourself and your purpose in life without the pressures and influences of the people you know at home. It is so cool to spend time with yourself in a different environment."



Recommendations and Future Directions

It has been said that growth can occur through the development of meaningful relationships within outdoor education programs (Harper, 2009). With this understanding of interconnectedness, human relationships can be imagined to include the more-than-human—to include plants and animals, the natural world. Immersion in nature can make us aware of not only our relationship with our natural environment, but also our relationships with each other, because in recognizing how to care for the natural world, we understand how to better care for ourselves and one another (Garst et al., 2001; Greenway, 1995; Harper et al., 2012; Ungar et al., 2012).

This community is also recognized as what Greenway (1995) describes as "systemic communion" whereby each participant

coexists, not in a duality but intrinsically linked to a broader biophysical and even social context within which each organism is embedded. Perhaps it is this connection to a broader community that contributes to participants feeling more deeply connected to one another. At OBC, the program design provides participants contact with nature in unfamiliar and novel settings. From previous research, and results from the 2012 *Impact Report*, participants continue to acknowledge the importance of the natural world in building a meaningful sense of community.

At OBC, contact with nature plays a vital role in creating community. For all outdoor education to benefit, this premise demands further research to substantiate the claim. If not everyone has the opportunity to participate in an OBC experience, perhaps we can all benefit from the wisdom that came from a participant who offered the following advice: "Immerse yourself in the wilderness and nature and let yourself be taught what the wilderness can teach you."

References

- Berman, M. G., Jonides, J., & Kaplan, S. (2008). The cognitive benefits of interacting with nature. *Psychological Science, 19*(12), 1207–1212.
- Garst, B., Scheider, I., & Baker, D. (2001). Outdoor adventure program participation impacts on adolescent self-perception. *The Journal of Experiential Education, 24*, 41–49.
- Greenway, R. (1995). The wilderness effect and ecopsychology. In T. Roszak, M.E. Gomes, & A. D. Kanner (Eds.), *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, healing the mind*. Berkeley, CA: Sierra Club.
- Harper, N. J. (2009). The relationship of therapeutic alliance to outcome in wilderness treatment. *Journal of Adventure Education & Outdoor Learning, 9*, 45–59.
- Harper, N. (2012). Contact with nature as a research variable in wilderness therapy. In A. Pryor, C. Carpenter, C. L. Norton, & J. Kirchner (Eds.), *Emerging Insights: Proceedings of the 5th International Adventure Therapy Conference 2009*, European Arts & Science Publishing, Prague, CZ.
- Harper, N. J., Carpenter, C., Segal, D. (2012). Self and place: Journeys in the land. *Ecopsychology, 4*, 319–325.
- Harper, N. (2013). *2012 Impact Report*. Toronto, ON: Outward Bound Canada.
- Ungar, M., Dumond, C., & McDonald, W. (2005). Risk, resilience and outdoor programmes for at-risk children. *Journal of Social Work, 5*, 319–337.

After completing his BA in Psychology from Brock University in Ontario, Kyle Horvath moved west to Victoria, British Columbia where he is currently living. Between working as the leader of an outdoor adventure program, a support worker, and several research positions, Kyle hopes to one day combine the benefits of outdoor adventure-based learning and traditional therapeutic techniques. Kyle can be reached at ky.horvath@gmail.com.

Nevin Harper is a canoe guide and wilderness skills instructor-come-academic who is questioning his career move and anticipating a return from PFDs to PDFs and back again. nevin_harper@outwardbound.ca

