Wilderness as Healing Place

by John Miles

For John Muir, wilderness was a restorative place, a place in which he could not only learn and grow but also restore his mental and physical well being. He often wrote of this quality of wilderness experience. In the mountains, “cares will drop off like autumn leaves.” In the “great fresh, unblighted, unredeemed wilderness” people will find hope. “The galling harness of civilization drops off, and the wounds heal ere we are aware.” Muir himself seemed to have a physiological need for contact with wilderness. After he was married and responsible for the welfare of his family and their fruit ranch, he spent long periods away from wilderness. The demands of business and work took its toll, and he would seek restoration in exploration of some wild place. He bid others do the same:

Go now and then for fresh life - if most of humanity must go through this town stage of development - just as divers hold their breath and come ever and anon to the surface to breathe. Go whether or not you have faith. Form parties, if you must be social, to go to the snow-flowers in winter, to the sunflowers in summer. Anyway, go up and away for life; be fleet! (Teale, 1954: 319)

Nearly a century has passed since Muir wrote these words, and in that time many people have followed his advice. In fact, during the latter half of the twentieth century so many people have sought the benefits of contact with nature that Muir would be amazed and chagrined. Outdoor recreation has become an industry, and even the search for “healing” in wild places has become organized and institutionalized. Now we have “therapeutic recreation” and “stress-challenge adventure” programs to assist people in following Muir’s advice. Wilderness as a “healing place” has truly been recognized on a scale beyond anything that Muir imagined.

How Does Wilderness Contribute to Health?

Wilderness experience, many claim, can allow us to build the structure of our being on a healthy foundation and also allow reconstruction and restoration of a cracked or crumbling foundation. Many programs today use wilderness for therapeutic goals of one sort or another. Undoubtedly both the experiences planned and facilitated by the program leaders and the environment itself contribute to the healing effect of wilderness experience. We are concerned here with how the wilderness environment contributes to improvement of health.

First, we should define what we mean by healing in this context. It is a broad and value-laden concept. As Webster defines it, to heal is “to make sound or whole;” it is “to cause an undesirable condition to be overcome;” “to make a person spiritually whole;” or, “to restore to original integrity.” Healing involves an improvement of the condition of our mind-body. We need healing when we suffer pain and a reduction of our ability to live well. When we speak of healing here we are not referring to its usual meaning as applied primarily to our physical selves but to a process involving physical, emotional and even spiritual dimensions. Healing usually involves all of these dimensions simultaneously. The wilderness engages the whole person and thus may be an environment ideally suited to the holistic healing that John Muir experienced and advocated to his fellows.

Psychological Benefits of Wilderness

There have been literary allusions to the restorative and therapeutic values of nature for centuries. This is valuable testimony, but is there any “hard” evidence that wild places contribute to healing? There is, it turns out, not as much such evi-
idence as we believers in the powers of wilderness experience would like, but there is some. Two psychologists recently asked what we know about the psychological benefits of wilderness. Their review of the literature led to the less-than-startling conclusion that people find experiences in natural environments highly satisfying and that they highly value the benefits which they perceive themselves to derive from experiences there. (Kaplan and Talbot, 1983:166) The research literature trying to document the specifically therapeutic value of wilderness experience is generally flawed methodologically. It does indicate that programs like Outward Bound “can and do result in positive changes in the self-concepts, personalities, individual behaviors and social functioning of program participants.” (Gibson, 1979:13,2,30).

The two psychologists, Stephen Kaplan and Janet Frey Talbot, set up their own elaborate study of the psychological effects of wilderness experience, trying to determine how wilderness affects people and what the effects are. In summary, they identified three benefits. These seem to come progressively, beginning with an increased awareness of relationship with physical environment and an increasingly effortless attention to one’s surroundings. Sometimes people find that daily life causes them to have difficulty concentrating, to experience mental work as unusually effortful and to be irritable in the face of noise and distraction. These may all be symptoms of “a fatigued voluntary attention mechanism that has been pushed beyond its effective limits” (Kaplan and Talbot, 1983:188). Wilderness seems to free people from this condition with a functional demand on attention and an interesting environment.

The growing sense of enjoyment is likely to be a reflection of the decreased need to force oneself to attend. There is the discovery, in other words, that in addition to being comfortable and exciting it is also quite safe to attend to what one feels like attending to in the wilderness environment. (Kaplan and Talbot, 1983:193)

Later in the wilderness experience a second benefit appears. People experience an increase in self-confidence and a feeling of tranquility. They come to feel that they can deal with whatever challenges the environment may offer them. This is a profoundly satisfying and even surprising experience for people who have been struggling with their “normal” world. Kaplan and Talbot suggest that these benefits are in part attributable to the realization that one cannot control the wilderness environment:

Although often not a conscious priority, the need for control nonetheless can be an important factor in the way an individual attempts to relate to an environment. Yet the assertion of individual control is incompatible with much of what wilderness offers and demands; rather than struggling to dominate a hostile environment, the participants come to perceive their surroundings as quite safe as long as one responds appropriately to environmental demands. Thus there is a tendency to abandon the implicit purpose of control because it is both unnecessary and impossible (1983:194).

By relinquishing the illusion of control over the environment, the always frustrating drive for it, people paradoxically acquire more internal control, can relax and pay more attention to their surroundings and to their inner selves.

Finally, Kaplan and Talbot note a third benefit which they describe as contemplation. This is made possible by a high degree of compatibility among environmental patterns, the inclinations of the individual, and actions required by the environment. The daily round of activity back home is often anything but compatible. People are bombarded with diverse information and demands and are often unable to do what their environment requires of them and what they desire. They may experience frustrations and tension and be entirely incapable of reflection on their situation.

Wilderness is very different. Kaplan and Talbot note:

In wilderness what is interesting to perceive tends to be what one needs to know in order to act. For many people the purposes one carries into the wilderness also fit closely with the demands that the wilderness makes: What one intends to do is also what one must do in order to survive. (1983:19)

All of this compatibility can be very liberating. It can allow reflection that can lead to discovery of a different self, a self less conflicted, more integrated and more desirable. It can lead to a new intensity of contact with nature. “They feel a sense of union with something that is lasting, that is of enormous importance, and that they perceive is larger than they are.” (Kaplan and Talbot, 1983:195) Thus they tap a spiritual dimension of the human experience that generations of writers have extolled.

At the end of their decade-long research, Kaplan and Talbot had to admit that there was much to learn about the benefits of wilderness experience, but they believed they had documented and described a set of significant psychological benefits. They raised more questions than they
answered, but their work should be encouraging to those who have, on the basis of personal experience, literary testimony, and intuition, been taking people into the wilderness to heal and to grow. Kaplan and Talbot conclude with the observation that "we had not expected the wilderness experience to be quite so powerful or pervasive in its impact. And we were impressed by the durability of that residue in the human makeup that still resonates so strongly to these remote, uncivilized places." (1983:201) Their work suggests how wilderness experience can contribute to healing of people overburdened by demands of the home environment; how it calms them and improves their ability to cope with the stresses of their normal round of activity.

**Wilderness Enhances Self-Worth**

The work of sociologists suggest other ways in which wilderness experience contributes to healing. They describe two conditions from which many people suffer which they call anomic and alienation. An anomic person finds himself faced with myriad possibilities in his life, bombarded by stimuli, moving rapidly through a set of unrelated experiences in a condition of separation from other people. Richard Mitchell notes that such a person finds himself:

"...unsupported by significant others, free to choose from meaningless alternatives, without direction or purpose, bound by no constraint, guided by no path, comforted by no faith." (1983:178)

In such a condition he fears the outcomes of his actions and is plagued by an uncertainty that renders routine and normal tasks very difficult. Such a person may feel desperately in need of stability, security and certainty.

Alienation, on the other hand, may occur when someone finds the world too predictable. Mitchell summarizes the contributing factors:

When people can predict their own behaviors on the basis of the social order in which they are situated, when they perceive their world as constrained by social forces, bound over by rule and regulation at every turn to the extent that personal creativity and spontaneity are stifled, when they know what they will and must do in a given situation regardless of their own interests, they experience alienation. (1983:179)

The effect of this condition on someone is that he or she comes to feel powerless and indifferent, estranged and separate from self and others. Interest in the world lessens and he or she may become depressed, lethargic and uninvolved. The alienated person comes to believe that effort cannot bring about the outcomes desired, so why bother?

We can cautiously say that these two conditions are unhealthy, or at least that they can contribute to a reduction of psychological and even physical well-being. Mitchell and others suggest that people suffering anomic and alienation need to find ways to bring into balance their perceptions of their abilities and the responsibilities and possibilities available to them. They need to reduce the variability of stimuli when too much is present (anomic) and to increase it when there is too little (alienation). In a social sense, notes Mitchell, people are moved to seek competence, a sense of personal worth.

Competence grows from the process of recognizing one’s abilities and applying them meaningfully and completely. Competence means assessing oneself as qualified, capable, fit, sufficient, adequate. Competence emerges when a person’s talents, skills, and resources find useful application in meeting a commensurate challenge, problem or difficulty. In sum, the competent individual’s perceived abilities are roughly equal to their perceived responsibilities. (1983:180)

Mitchell argues that certain activities provide ways for people to seek this competence and to break out of their anomic and alienation. Such activities, and he explores mountaineering in considerable depth in this regard, allow people to enjoy a freedom and creativity that breaks their emotional treadmill and opens new possibilities for them. The anomic person will find a helpful measure of uncertainty. We may add to Mitchell’s contention that certain activities bring these outcomes, the argument that the wilderness environment (in which many such activities occur) contributes to the healing outcomes as well.

Central to the healing property of mountain experience, argues Mitchell, is "flow". Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has described this "flow":

Flow refers to the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement... It is the state in which action follows upon action according to an internal logic which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part. We experience it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next in which we are in control of our actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment; between stimulus and response; or between past, present and future. (p.58)
This sounds remarkably similar to the “fascination” that Kaplan and Talbot earlier described, a condition in which attention flows effortlessly to whatever is being done. Mitchell, though, argues that it is the act of climbing that creates the flow experience, while Kaplan and Talbot suggest that the environment is the principle factor. The latter investigators did not study the action of mountaineering, and Mitchell studiously avoids discussion of environment as a contributing factor in flow. The question of the relative importance of action and environment in helping with such problems as anomie and alienation remains an open one.

Wilderness and the Ability to Learn

Many programs that use wilderness as a healing place seem to assume that the environment contributes to achievement of their goals and that certain activities do so better than others. Outward Bound schools usually use both the opportunity for flow that activities in the wilderness provide, and the fascination effect of the wilderness environment. The combination of these factors may partly explain the power of the Outward Bound process.

This process is being used in many places to help young people who are in trouble, particularly delinquents. These are people who are usually unwilling to take responsibility for themselves and others, and who resent both the situations in which they find themselves and the necessity to work. They are often limited learners, unable or unwilling to collect new knowledge and apply it to their lives. Many lack confidence in themselves and resist the idea that anyone can be of help to them. (Golins, 1978:26) In acting out their resentment and frustration with their lot in life, they often find themselves in trouble with the law and in the court system. As part of their therapy, an increasing number are being provided an opportunity to participate in a wilderness-based adventure education program.

Gerald Golins has reviewed how such programs “...impel a delinquent to rearrange his destructive ways.” (1978:27) He notes how the outdoor environment contributes to this process through its “evocative” quality. The outdoors in general and the wilderness in particular is an unfamiliar and captivating place for most delinquent youth. It engages the participant’s senses and increases his receptivity to stimuli in his environment. The chances of his learning from experience seem to be increased. This may be because the needs and purposes of the moment (to be warm, to stay dry, to curtail hunger) and the demands of the environment are compatible, as Kaplan and Talbot observed. A person usually resistant to learning is made less so when the learning is necessary to solve basic problems of comfort and even survival.

Golins describes another way in which the outdoor environment is conducive to growth:

The outdoors also presents itself in a very physical, straightforward way. There are mountains to climb, rivers to run, bogs to wade through. As an adolescent delinquent whose principal mode of expression is an action oriented one, and whose thinking process is mostly concrete, the possible activities in the outdoors fulfills his developmental capability. He just stands a better chance of excelling here. (1978:27)

The environment may be unfamiliar, but the demand for action is familiar. Those who design the challenges of wilderness-based educational programs are very careful to present the opportunity for success. Usually the learner is presented with a progressively more difficult series of challenges, demonstrating the value of learning and the positive outcomes to be derived from applying what is learned. Outdoors the feedback and reinforcement from successful application of something learned is immediate. Rewarded for learning, the delinquent goes on to the next challenge and the next learning experience.

Yet another way the outdoors may help delinquents is described by Golins. He notes that the “symbolic potential” of the outdoors is greater for the person who has difficulty conceptualizing and generalizing. He argues that if we subscribe to the theory that learning involves thinking about the meaning of experience, then the experiences in nature, by their power and simplicity and concreteness, are easier to generalize than learning experiences in the complex social contexts of normal life. Consider, for instance, a young woman learning to rockclimb. She must learn to depend on her belayer. She must communicate with her, and must care for her in the sense that she must not knock any rocks down or otherwise endanger this person upon whom she is dependent. The problems she needs to solve are simple and straightforward. There is a beginning and end to the task at hand. The difficulties are easy to indentify and define, as are the actions necessary to solve them. Tackling
the rock pitch, the slanting jam crack, the "holdless" section, the climber takes the difficulties one at a time and works them out. She feels mastery and, after the anxiety of the adventure recedes, feels a surge of confidence. "I did that!!" is often the comment, part surprised query, part triumphant exclamation. From all of this the woman may generalize about problem-solving, cooperation, communication and the nature of dependency in certain social situations. The outdoor environment presents these concepts boldly so that they can hardly be missed. It places them in a pragmatic context that increases the likelihood that the learner will think about them in the larger framework of her life. "If these processes have served me here," she may reason, "then perhaps they will do so in my world in general." Golins thinks that such experiences help young people learn to think conceptually and to thereby deal more effectively with situations which have previously baffled and frustrated them.

**Wilderness as a Metaphor for Life**

Stephen Bacon has, like Golins, analyzed the Outward Bound process and how it works, and his thinking reveals yet another way in which wilderness contributes to healing in people who go there. Bacon’s main idea is that the Outward Bound experience can serve as a metaphor for the life of the participant, as a set of experiences that can clarify real-life situations and thereby help the learner contend with them. Most of the metaphorical power of the Outward Bound process, Bacon argues, comes from the conscious programming of the leader, but he also contends that an archetypal quality of the wilderness environment contributes to this power. He takes the foundation of his idea from the psychiatrist Carl Jung who suggested that there are some ways of organizing and understanding the world that are passed down in cultures and individuals from early human experience and that transcend culture to the point of being universal. Jung argued that these original patterns are produced in all of us and are a factor in how we perceive the world.

One such pattern of archetype is Sacred Space. This is a place pervaded by a sense of power, mystery and awesomeness. Such places are not suitable for living, lacking the resources for day-to-day comfort and survival, and the seeker cannot stay there anyway for he has important work to do in the everyday world. If the seeker comes to the Sacred Space with full respect and a clean spirit, he may be empowered in a positive way. Bacon argues that wilderness is Sacred Space.

Anyone who has spent much time in the wilderness can easily recognize the parallels between it and the archetype of Sacred Space. Wilderness is difficult to get to and difficult to travel through. One passes a series of tests in order to exist within it. It is unlike the normal world in hundreds of ways. Above all it is pervaded with a kind of religiosity or mysticism - one of the most compelling things about nature is that it seems to implicitly suggest the existence of order and meaning. (1983:53)

In Bacon’s view, wilderness as Sacred Space is useful to Outward Bound because implicit in this archetype is the concept of transformation and change. If Jung is correct and there is an archetype of Sacred Space within us, then when we go to such a place, especially in the context of programs like Outward Bound or Vision Quest, we accept the possibility that some kind of transformation may occur. This acceptance may not be conscious, but it is there, and it makes change, growth or healing possible.

A central principle of many psychotherapies is that a person does not change unless he or she wishes to change. Despite themselves, people cling to their problematical behaviors. Only when they become willing to change does healing become possible. So it may be with wilderness as Sacred Space. A young person in trouble with the law or plagued by emotional difficulties is given the opportunity by judge or physician to try something new, to go into the wilderness. When they choose to go they accept, perhaps begrudgingly, even unconsciously, the possibility of change. The outcome is certainly not a sure one, but there is the possibility.

...there is little question that certain course experiences do involve the presence of one or more of these primordial patterns...the students covertly participate in age-old patterns of human development. Anyone who has taught an Outward Bound course is aware that the spirit of the course often seems to move beyond the capabilities of the human beings involved. It is in this sense that one can argue that the mountains do speak for themselves. (Bacon, 1983:53)

Kaplan and Talbot, without reference to Jung’s archetype idea, argue that wilderness is suggestive
of a larger framework, of rich possibilities not considered before:

The wilderness experience is "real" in some rather concrete ways, as well as in a somewhat more abstract sense. It is real not because it matches one's ways of the everyday world (which of course it does not do), but because it feels real - because it matches some sort of intention of the way things ought to be, of the way things really are beneath the surface layers of culture and civilization. (1983:190)

In a metaphorical way, the wilderness experience suggests the possibility of returning to the "real" world from this "other world" and finding coherence there. The wilderness traveler recognizes that daily life may not be as chaotic as once experienced. There is, of course, no assurance that the possibility will be achieved, that the perception will be transferred back home. The transfer is possible, especially if part of the follow-up to the therapeutic wilderness experience is aimed at enhancing the possibility of this transference. The key point here is that the experience of the "other world" fulfills the archetypal promise of Sacred Space. It is a change and holds out the possibilities of change to come. When this change helps a person understand and cope with the world, it is a part of healing.

Wilderness and Physical Fitness

A final way in which wilderness may contribute to healing is by the physical demands that it makes upon people who travel there. Wilderness by definition is a place without the amenities of civilization. The wilderness traveler must negotiate rough trails or travel cross-country with no trail. All the amenities and necessities of life must be carried, usually on one's back. Physical effort is needed to satisfy basic needs, as in erecting the tent, cooking dinner, or staying warm and dry in rain or snowstorm. And the ultimate wilderness adventures, like climbing a mountain or rafting a wild and rough river, can demand considerable physical stamina and skill.

So how might the physical demands of wilderness travel contribute to healing? First, and most obviously, the demands of wilderness activity, if faced over a considerable period of time like the three weeks of the standard Outward Bound course, lead to physical conditioning and stamina. A fit body can do much to enhance self-image, and a positive self-image is a boost in confidence. An increase in confidence opens new possibilities of learning and growth both otherwise.

Tom Stich has noted other ways that physical activity can be helpful in dealing with psychological difficulties. (1983:24) When a person gains control over his or her body, as must be done in wilderness travel, there may be a corresponding gain in control in other areas. Perhaps there is also a metaphorical dimension here. Traveling to a wilderness objective requires taking one step at a time, putting one foot in front of the other, pacing oneself. So it may be in daily life in a wide range of tasks. The way to the objective is not impatient rushing but steady effort. Alan Drengson has noted this quality of the physical act of wilderness walking. He calls the process "mindful walking" and points out that while one must be attentive to the physical act of walking, one can still look at the larger view, can even achieve a meditative state: Meditation is an advanced state of psychological awareness and control and wilderness walking certainly does not lead everyone automatically to that state. Some measure of the condition is often achieved, though, with beneficial effects.

Stitch notes also that physical exercise can cause self-expression and be an outlet for aggression and anxiety. All physical exercise provides these opportunities, including that involved in wilderness travel. Self-expression may come in many forms, as in the style in which one climbs a rock or the route one picks on a ski tour. Attacking the difficult pitch on a climb or the physically demanding long, heavy haul can be an outlet for aggression. Struggling with anxiety about bears or exposure or avalanches, pushing down the anxious upwelling while coping with the problem, then screaming with delight when the climb is done or the tricky avalanche slope passed, provides an outlet for anxiety. The coping with anxiety is in part physical, moving beyond the threat to a position of safety. This is a concrete experience, one that cannot be denied. Back home a success (or failure) might be measured on some abstract scale, by someone sitting in judgment. The physical acting on a problem in the wilderness is real and undeniable. For a person who has often failed in society and thinks there can be no alternative, the physical, concrete experience of achievement in a wild place can be very uplifting and restorative.

We can argue with confidence that wilderness has great potential to contribute to improvements in physical well-being. It cannot, of course, "cure" illness, but by its nature it can place demands on
us that force us to call upon physical and emotional potentials often unrealized. It can allow us to release pent-up energy and to feel our bodies, remind us that we have physical powers we may lose if we never use them. In short, the physical demands of wilderness places can remind us of our physical natures and perhaps motivate us to take better care of our own bodies and such physical achievement can lead us to want more of the same and motivate a regular effort for physical fitness. In a world seemingly bent on taking the physical exertion out of every action, wilderness travel can give us a forceful reminder of what we are losing.

6. The concreteness of challenges posed by wilderness experience allow delinquents who usually fail to meet abstract challenges to enjoy success and consequent enhancement of self-image and confidence.

7. The metaphorical potential for learning in wilderness is great and may allow insight into the challenges of normal life back home and how they can be managed.

8. The physical challenges of wilderness travel can enhance physical fitness, which is improvement of physical health, and can also allow expression of frustration and anxiety and thereby reduce stress.

John Muir knew that his wilderness days restored his body, mind and soul. He did not know just how this restoration occurred, but the effect of his wilderness travels upon him was so great that he prescribed the experience to anyone with the means to go there. Today we still do not know exactly how and why nature has curative and restorative effects upon us, but as modern lifestyle and development remove us farther from the natural world, we are consciously seeking the succor of wild places, and inquiring into the possibility that we need contact with nature to be fully functioning humans. We are beginning to understand how we gain from time and energy spent in wilderness places.

References


