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THE WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE PROGRAM WEP INDUSTRY IN THE UNITED STATES:  
CHARACTERISTICS AND DYNAMICS

by

Greg Friese, John C. Hendee and Mike Kinziger\*

ABSTRACT:

Wilderness experience programs [WEPs] are organizations that conduct outdoor programs in wilderness or comparable lands for purposes of personal growth, therapy, rehabilitation, education or leadership/organizational development. More than 700 potential WEP's were identified thru search of multiple sources and then surveyed, with promotional materials and response forms received from 70 percent of them. From these data WEP's are characterized as to the number of trips offered per year, number of clientele served, kind of areas used, a typology was developed to categorize how they used the wilderness--whether as a teacher or as a classroom--and a directory of WEPs was compiled. Dynamics of the WEP industry are inferred from these data, other studies and the literature.

At the time of this study, 1994-96, Greg Friese was graduate research assistant. John C. Hendee is Professor and Director of the University of Idaho Wilderness Research Center in the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Range Sciences. Mike Kinziger is Assistant Professor of Recreation in the College of Education.

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For several years we suspected, and managers and program operators had been telling us, that the use of wilderness for personal growth was increasing. The popularity of the large programs such as Outward Bound and National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), publicity over some unfortunate but highly publicized accidents, and our perception that a great many diverse wilderness experience programs were evolving and operating whetted our curiosity as well as our concerns. How many programs are really operating? How different are they in terms of the methods they use? How many operate in designated Wilderness? How many practice “Leave No Trace” methods to minimize their impacts on the wilderness and other users? How many programs are really viable economically? Who are the clients? Collectively, what are the characteristics and dynamics of the Wilderness Experience Program [WEP] industry that these programs represent?

To answer such questions, we began collecting the names and addresses of all the programs we could locate and surveyed 700 potential programs we identified using this “snowball sampling” approach.

## DEFINING WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE PROGRAMS: WEP's

Wilderness experience programs [WEP's] are organizations that take paying customers into wilderness or comparable lands in order to develop their human potential through personal growth, therapy, leadership and/or organizational development activities [Hendee and Brown 1987; Roberts 1989]. Therapy and rehabilitation, changing delinquent behavior, chemical dependency recovery, acceptance and adjustment to disabilities and loss, spiritual renewal, team building, physical challenge and character building are potential aims of WEPs which use the healing and inspirational elements and challenge opportunities of wilderness experience to accomplish these goals. Technical skills instruction and practice may be an integral part of a WEP, but such activities are secondary or focused on supporting the central goals of personal growth, therapy, education, and leadership or organizational development such as team building. WEPs use either designated units of the National Wilderness Preservation System [NWPS], roadless lands or other public or private lands that have the wilderness qualities of naturalness and solitude.

## RESEARCH METHODS:

We began identifying WEPs in fall 1994, finding names and addresses of programs in a variety of sources, including previous research, advertising and listings in popular literature, association directories, and WEP referrals. Through this snowball sampling approach we identified over 700 potential WEPs. In the Spring of 1995 potential WEPs were contacted and asked to respond to a short survey postcard and return examples of their promotional material. Nearly 70% (484) of the programs contacted responded. Of the respondents, 366 were classified as WEPs using the above definitions. The organizations classified as WEPs did not include Boy Scout and Girl Scout Troops, camps, community or church recreation programs, commercial outfitters and guides, adventure travel businesses or wilderness skills instruction or work programs.

We also created and tested a conceptual model to classify WEPs based on their approach to using wilderness, “as a teacher” at one extreme vs. “as a classroom” at the other extreme (Figure 1). The typology embraces program differences in their participants’ relationship to self, the group, nature and trip leaders. We tested the typology by classifying 246 programs for which we had sufficient information, checking our classifications against codes assigned to a sample of WEPs by students in our class on “Use of Wilderness for Personal Growth.”

## RESULTS-CHARACTERISTICS OF WEP INDUSTRY:

To describe the WEP industry, the data gathered from the survey of WEPs and their promotional materials were analyzed, and supplemented by a literature review for additional information to help understand the dynamics of the industry. Following are findings and discussion of the number of trips and clientele; industry leaders; the frequent turn over of smaller WEPs; land areas used; training

provided; and a proposed conceptual model of how WEP's use wilderness (as teacher versus classroom) to help better understand the growing WEP industry.

#### ANNUAL NUMBER OF WEP TRIPS AND CLIENTELE:

Nearly one-fourth (25.2%) of the WEP respondents offer five or less trips per year, and nearly 40 percent (38.9%) offer less than 10 trips per year (Table 1). This is balanced by the one-third (32.8%) of the respondents who offer more than 31 trips or programs annually. These larger operators include many of the prominent WEPs, such as the Wilderness Education Association, Wilderness Inquiry, and the North Carolina Outward Bound® School.

TABLE 1. NUMBER OF TRIPS OFFERED AND NUMBER OF CLIENTELE SERVED BY WEP RESPONDENTS.

| Number of Trips                                 |                        | Number of Clientele   |                        |
|---|------------------------|---|------------------------|
| 1994 Trips or Programs Offered by WEP's (n=329) | Percent of Respondents | 1994 clientele that Participated in trips or programs (n=328) | Percent of Respondents |
| 0-5   | 25.2%                  | 0-25  | 17.1%                  |
| 6-10  | 13.7                   | 26-100  | 23.5                   |
| 11-30   | 28.3                   | 101-500   | 29.3                   |
| >31   | 32.8                   | 500+  | 30.2                   |
| Total   | 100%                   | Total   | 100%                   |
| Mean 52.7                                       |                        | Mean 1435   |                        |
| Median 15                                       |                        | Median 169  |                        |
| Max 2500  |                        | Max 70,000  |                        |

Additionally, 17.1% of all WEPs had less than 25 clients participate in their trips or programs and 40.6 percent of WEPs served less than 100 clients in 1994. About one third (30.2%) served more than 500 clients per year (Table 1).

The large mean (1435 clients), and modest median (169 clients), reflects the influence of the large organizations on the industry totals. For example, some large operators, such as the Glacier Institute and Teton Science School, couple wilderness trips with education programs, visitor and interpretive centers, conference facilities, or other non-WEP attractions. Thus they are able to serve thousands of participants.

During the examination of promotional literature and the literature review, it became clear that WEPs serve a broad spectrum of people in society, including youth, executives, women, persons in therapy, persons with disabilities, and many more. The leading clientele categories for all types of WEPs were either youth, youth-at-risk, or college/university students.

#### LARGE ORGANIZATIONS ARE WEP LEADERS:

Several large, well known organizations, such as Outward Bound® and NOLS, lead the industry. Their leadership is apparent for several reasons. Their visibility is the greatest in the media, research and popular literature, and land managers know more about them (Friese 1996; Gager 1996). Their leadership is also evident in the large number of clients they serve, their prevalence in the research and popular literature, and by the example they set in high operating standards for the rest of the industry.

For example, since 1962, more than 300,000 people have participated in U.S. Outward Bound® programs (New York City Outward Bound® Center 1995). The term Outward Bound® has become so widely replicated by the organizations offering wilderness programs for outdoor education and personal growth that it has been trademarked. Outward Bound® looms large in the research and popular literature, and may contribute to the inaccurate notion among the public, researchers, and land

managers that WEP organizations are few in number, large and have similar aims and methods.

Widespread adoption of the Outward Bound® model, philosophies, and methods by WEP'S that are also focused on self-improvement and behavior modification has occurred in institutions throughout the country. The exact number of direct adaptations and modified adoptions of Outward Bound® by public and private schools, colleges, universities, correctional institutions, and private organizations has been estimated as 200 or more (Conger 1992; Krakauer 1995; Messier 1984; Powch 1994; Wilson 1981; Zook 1987).

#### FREQUENT TURNOVER OF WEP'S:

The WEP industry is characterized by frequent turnover of smaller programs entering and exiting the industry. Others studies have discussed the difficulty in using past inventories to identify current WEPs, because of this frequent turnover. Miner (1993) found that providers of outdoor based training disappear rapidly. "Only 20% of provider organizations appearing in a 1989 listing of outdoor based training providers remained in the 1993 edition" (Ibid, p.175). O'Keefe (1989) was disturbed to discover that in three years, 20 of 58 academic organizations were no longer offering a WEP, mostly due to financial and staffing problems. Davis-Berman and Berman (1994) also commented that "because of "the popularity of WEPs any comprehensive listing will soon become outdated (p. 86).

#### WEP LAND AREAS USED AND MANAGEMENT ISSUES:

Over half (56.9%) of all WEP survey respondents indicate they used designated wilderness and more than half (60.9%) of all WEPs said they used private land. Slightly less than two thirds of WEPs (64.7%) said they provided minimum impact training to their clients.

## DISCUSSION of RESULTS:

The WEP industry, despite serving a full spectrum of people, is primarily focused on youth, youth at risk or college/university students, and youth have always been the key client groups as the WEP industry has evolved.

The frequent turnover in the WEP industry has made it difficult for previous studies to remain current. Thus, the *Directory of Wilderness Experience Programs*, assembled by Friese (1996) for use in this study will soon be obsolete as WEPs continually enter and exit the industry.

It is difficult for WEPs to achieve financial success while gathering revenue from only a small number of participants and trips. There are numerous barriers to increasing the number of trips and participants. Many WEPs have a limited operating season because of the areas they use and the time constraints of their candidate participants. For example, WEPs who primarily serve youth are limited to the summer or non-school season. The time required for WEPs may limit trips and revenue, such as Wilderness Transitions, Inc. (1994) vision quests which require a two month trip cycle, including four pre-trip meetings, an eight day wilderness trip with a four day solo fast, and a post-trip reunion two weeks after returning (Riley 1997).

The fact that more than half the groups responding said they used private lands may be misleading, indicating only that respondents have offices, ropes course facilities or staging areas on private land, not just that they run trips on private land.

Despite the large number of WEPs using designated wilderness, less than two-thirds (64.7%) of WEP respondents said they provide minimum impact training. This could be unsettling to managers charged with protecting wilderness. A recent study of wilderness managers of areas reporting WEP use found that over half of managers think WEP wilderness use is increasing and that WEPs frequently

dodge the permit system (Gager 1996; 1998). Better understanding of the WEP industry will help managers improve communication with WEPs so they can help reduce WEP impacts on the land and other users, as well as addressing other WEP issues.

#### A TYPOLOGY OF HOW WEPs USE WILDERNESS: AS TEACHER VS. CLASSROOM

To further describe and characterize WEP's, we created a conceptual model based on how we perceive WEPs use wilderness, a continuum of methods with "Wilderness as teacher" at one extreme and "Wilderness as Classroom" at the other extreme (Figure 1). The typology includes proposed differences in the participant's relationships to self, group, nature, and the trip leader. *Self* refers to the role of the individual participant in creating and benefiting from the experience and with what or who they are engaged. *Group* refers to the role of others and its importance to participant engagement. *Nature* refers to the type of environment in which the participant engages to have the desired individual, group, or program experience. The proposed differences are described in Figure 1.

A WEP method is a procedure or a way of doing something; in essence it is the way a WEP accomplishes its goals. WEPs employ a variety of methods which help determine activities, setting, leadership, outcomes, learning transfer, and goals. While it is difficult to pinpoint any single WEP at one place on the continuum, because many programs use wilderness as both teacher and classroom, the promotional materials for most programs identified their main emphasis quite clearly. We have used this typology as a useful tool in teaching, and for discussing such issues as WEP dependency on wilderness, recruitment and training of leaders. We have found that our colleagues and students can use the typology reliably to characterize WEPs as to their main emphasis and discuss their attributes, recognizing that most WEPs have some qualities that may fit at several points on the spectrum.

The distinguishing characteristics of the “wilderness as teacher” and “wilderness as classroom” approaches are described in Figure 1. The characteristics are not perceived as absolute qualities in describing wilderness as teacher or classroom but as relative, associated attributes. For example, *trip leadership* refers to how active or passive a trip leader is in facilitating or guiding participant outcomes. The passive trip leader role allows wilderness to teach, therefore making the program’s success much more dependent on wilderness characteristics. Kent Mountain Adventure Center (1995) states, “We provide the gear and the supervision--but the wilderness is the big teacher.” Passive trip leadership and “wilderness is teacher” lends itself to soft skills and reflective activities. Active trip leadership sets up activities and situations in the wilderness classroom. Wilderness thus becomes a classroom for learning, combining the qualities of wilderness, components of the activity, and an active teaching role by the instructor. The S.O.A.R. program (1996) brochure states, “The out-of-doors provides an ideal classroom where relevant learning can occur and life skills can be taught.” Active trip leadership and using “wilderness as classroom” lends itself to challenge adventure and hard skills activities.

The Kent Mountain Adventure Center, a program on the “Wilderness is a Teacher” end of the spectrum (See Figure 1), states the following in the brochure:

“We deeply believe in the power of wilderness experience to enrich and guide young lives; wilderness is the big teacher; students set individual goals; we travel into spectacular wilderness areas chosen for their beauty, their privacy, and the challenging experience they offer; empowered by the wilderness, they come away stronger, more ready to meet change and challenge in their daily lives; group leaders don't really lead--they assist; teaching fundamentals, laying out options and ensuring a safe experience” (Kent Mountain Adventure Center 1995, p. 4, 7).

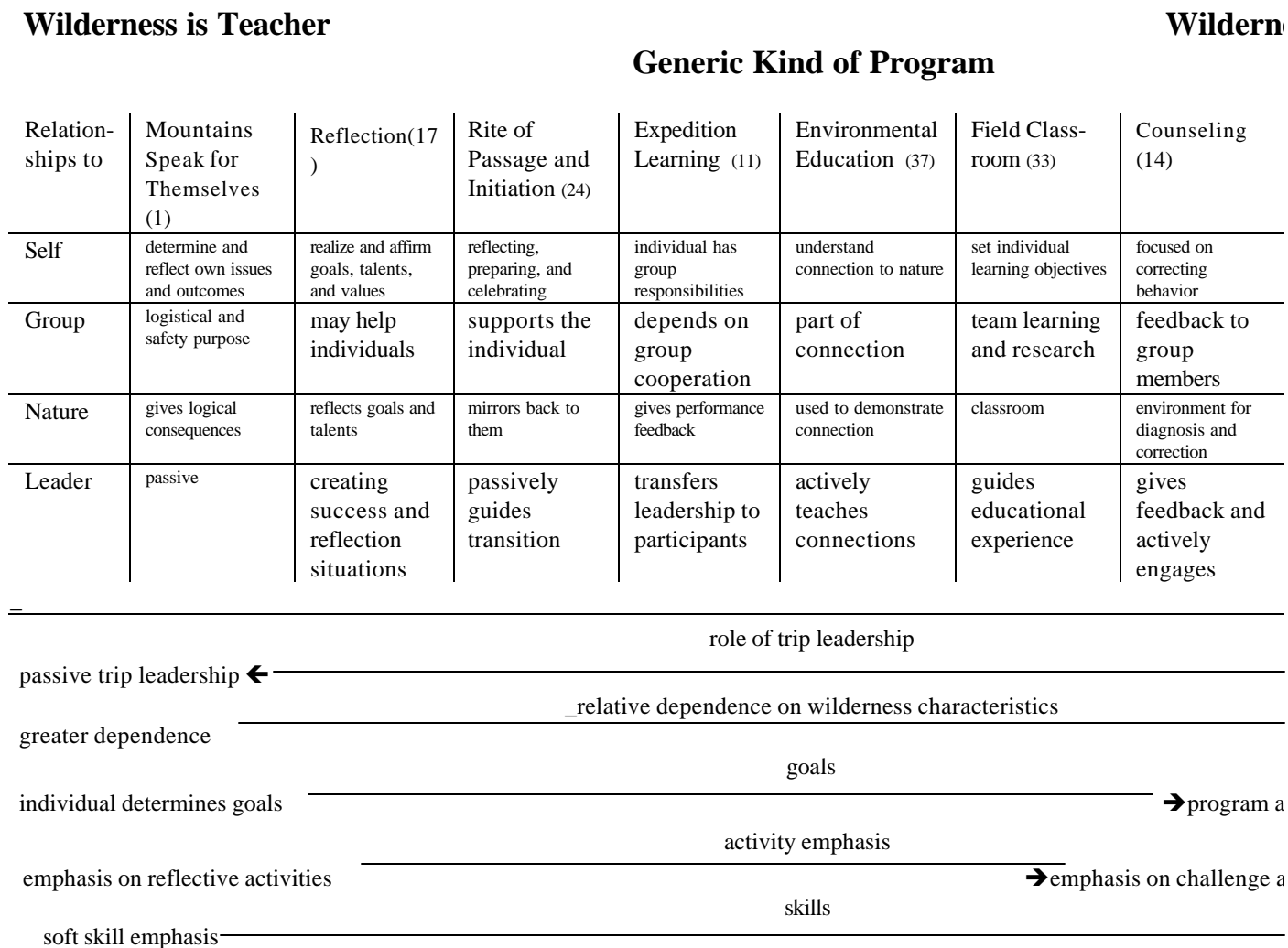
NOLS combines wilderness as classroom and teacher. The NOLS (1995) course catalog states, "Our classroom is the wilderness." Every NOLS course, regardless of length, includes in its core curriculum, safety and judgment, leadership and teamwork, outdoor skills, and environmental studies.

Challenge adventure activities, such as rock climbing or white water rafting, are used to build qualities such as self-esteem, group problem-solving, and leadership skills in the "wilderness as classroom" method. The Mountain Workshop (1995), a personal growth WEP, uses caving, canoeing, climbing, and more to help students "learn a new skill, develop positive communication, take initiative, encourage others, and be willing to risk."

#### WEP WILDERNESS DEPENDENCE:

Relative dependence on wilderness characteristics refers to the WEP's dependence on the defining characteristics of wilderness, such as naturalness and solitude. The typology implies that "wilderness as classroom" methods have relatively lower wilderness dependence. But it is clear from promotional material that wilderness characteristics are promoted by almost all programs as an attractive feature of their experience, and are seen as vital for designing metaphors, creating a positive environment for growth, and providing opportunity for running challenge adventure activities. Further, the physical features on which challenge adventure activities rely, such as white water rivers or mountain peaks, are often only available in wilderness.

**Figure 1: A Continuum of WEP Methods, from “Wilderness is Teacher” to “Wilderness is Classroom,” with number and Generic Kinds of Programs Classified (n=246)**



## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION:

In summary, WEPs are numerous and diverse. For example, the Wilderness Education Association (1995) “promotes national wilderness and preservation programs...by providing expedition based wilderness leadership courses through affiliated colleges, universities, and private organizations nationwide” (p.3). At Catherine Freer Wilderness Therapy Expedition (1995) students “learn to recognize and deal with their behavioral and emotional problems throughout the trek”. Wilderness Transitions, Inc. (1996) describes their vision quests as “time and a natural, quiet place to look within and see again who you are, what you think and feel, where you are going.” During the Earlham College Southwest Field Studies Program, students “study natural history, resource management, and outdoor education while backpacking through American deserts” (Earlham College 1995). Longacre Expeditions (1995) employs challenge adventure activities, such as “ropes and initiatives, backpacking, mountaineering, rock climbing, and white water rafting,” to meet their personal growth goals.

A quarter of WEP respondents can be considered small operators. They offer less than five trips per year and many serve less than 25 clientele, suggesting they are either part time operators or will have limited program success, thus contributing to rapid turnover in the industry. While WEPs serve a diverse spectrum of society, youth are the dominant clientele group for all types of WEPs and have been the leading clientele group throughout the history of WEPs. Despite the diversity of the industry, a few large WEPs are leaders and account for the most use, have been the focus of most of the research, and are most familiar to land managers.

Growth in the WEP industry, by the number of programs and trips visiting wilderness, suggests that training of trip leaders and clientele in minimum impact methods and a positive and cooperative relationship with agency wilderness managers will be increasingly important. The fact that less than two-

thirds of WEP respondents provide such training, and that over half of wilderness managers in another survey think WEP's dodge the permit system, should be matters of concern to both the WEP industry and managers (Gager 1996; Gager et al 1998).

The conceptual model proposed in a typology of how WEP's use wilderness, "as teacher or as classroom," rests on relationships we tested by classifying 246 programs. The relationships in the typology should be considered hypothetical at this point, but we are finding them a useful framework of ideas for teaching, and believe they will be useful in helping frame research and policy issues. For example, as the wilderness grows more crowded, we would suggest that wilderness dependent, WEPS, i.e., those that require wilderness characteristics of naturalness, solitude and primitive challenges, and use the wilderness as teacher, will have the most difficulty finding substitutes for wilderness as suitable locations to operate.

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