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Summary of the Human/Environmental Interaction Discussion

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Summary of the Human/Environmental Interaction Discussion

Karla Henderson and Lisa Bardwell

What We Know?

Intuitively we know a lot about the value and importance of the interaction between humans and their outdoor environment. The empirical and theoretical basis for that knowledge, however, is spotty and fragmented. We do have empirical research on environmental preference, the impact of human use on the environment, and the impact of the environment on humans (physically, psychologically). While we know that "nature matters" our understanding of the spiritual/philosophical dimensions of that interaction has not been systematically studied. The notion of the restorative environment offers a theoretical vantage that may be useful in understanding some of these parameters.

What We Don't Know

There is, however, much we don't know. For example, in terms of the impact of the outdoors or outdoor experiences on people:

1. What are some of the impacts both short term and over the longer term? (a realm we hope the "individual" folks figured out.)
2. What is the extent of the impacts in terms of:
 - a) kind of environment (are there differences if one does a ropes course in the city or a natural setting?)
 - b) time frame/time spent in a setting?
 - c) the sequencing of activities?
3. What are other influences we must consider (e.g., developmental, cultural)? We need to better understand the linkages between outdoor education and adventure education.

What do We Want to Know?

Clearly, there are many questions we can and want to ask. We cannot hope to answer all of the questions in the immediate future. But we need to start somewhere. We could identify a framework(s) that will help us see how we might address the many pieces of the human/environment interaction. The restorative concept, for example, might provide a starting point for developing a research focus. One very timely and pragmatic approach would be to focus on how outdoor education connects with other disciplines. What insights can we offer that others might want to hear (and fund)?

What are Some Research Methodologies?

It is difficult to identify research methodologies without having formulated the research questions. No matter what approaches we take, it is critical to assess:

1. What are some of the impacts are we interested in looking at?
2. How might we best measure/document these impacts?

Certainly, many kinds of research methods will be needed to explore these relationships. Perhaps more important than the specific methodologies will be the thoughtfulness, careful planning and thoroughness with which we conduct that research.

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