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Molly A. Baker
Colgate University

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CULTURAL HISTORY INTERPRETATION IN ADVENTURE EDUCATION: PROMOTING “LANDFULL” EXPERIENCES

Molly Ames Baker

Colgate University

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Over a half-century ago Aldo Leopold acknowledged the threat of “landlessness” in our society (Leopold, 1966, p. 210). Today, people are becoming further removed from the land in everyday life and landscapes are becoming more homogenized nationwide (Hilten & Hilten, 1996). This reality has caused Americans to covet the “wilderness experience” and visit wildland areas in record numbers, but not without consequence: This ever-increasing use has resulted in widespread resource degradation (Hammit & Cole, 1987).

Now, more than ever before, adventure-based programs that use the outdoor setting as a classroom have a responsibility to care for and preserve the environment (Cohen, 1990; Haluza-Delay, 1999; Hanna, 1995; Miles, 1990; Miles & Priest, 1999). This call for stewardship has been answered, in part, by the establishment of LNT, Inc., a non-profit organization created to educate public land users about Leave No Trace (LNT) philosophies and techniques that reduce impact on the land. Granted, many adventure programs nationwide have adopted LNT into their curricula. Yet, trip leaders frequently teach LNT practices in a vacuum—as technical skills—rather than in a larger “land” framework that encourages students to think about their relationship to the land.

Ironically, these very outdoor programs that are dependent on the land to meet programmatic goals may be inadvertently excluding it. On a typical adventure-based trip, the first priority is conducting safe activities, and then the focus becomes promoting group development and personal growth of participants (Ewert, 1987; Priest, 1986). Often this results in the land becoming a mere backdrop to the experience (Baker, 1999; Haluza-Delay, 1999). The extent to which adventure programs emphasize the

land—its natural and cultural history—is typically dependent upon the interests and expertise of the trip leader(s), rather than on the mission statement, training and/or curricula of the organization.

Historically, training models for outdoor trip leaders have centered on technical skills, those needed to facilitate safe activities, and, interpersonal skills—those needed to facilitate a positive learning environment and group experience (Graham, 1997; Miles & Priest, 1999; Priest & Gass, 1997). More recently, the traditional skills of an outdoor leader have been expanded to include “environmental skills” (Priest, 1999; Priest & Gass, 1997), and it has been recommended that outdoor leadership curricula cover “environmental issues” (Raiola & Sugerman, 1999). In both cases, however, the definition of “environmental” is limited to minimal impact skills and philosophy. A few voices have acknowledged the need for trip leaders to have competence in areas beyond LNT, including basic ecological concepts, current environmental issues and wilderness-related history (Haluza-Delay, 1999; Hanna, 1995; Miles, 1990; Simpson, 1985).

Currently there is a need, as well as an ethical obligation, to incorporate environmental objectives *beyond* LNT into adventure education on a more systematic basis (Haluza-Delay, 1999; Hanna, 1995; Miles, 1990). In terms of Leopold’s concept of landlessness, it is incumbent upon adventure educators to consider whether their programs are promoting landless or “landfull” experiences (Baker, 1999).

A corollary to the threat of landlessness, the notion of promoting “landfull” experiences in adventure programming, is for the most part, a novel one. A “landfull” experience, relative to adventure programming, is one in which the land plays an integral role. The intent is not to

replace traditional goals of personal growth and group development with an environmental agenda, but rather to supplement them with a "landfull" approach. Leaders purposefully emphasize the unique characteristics of the area—its natural and cultural history—in order to expand the focus of the trip beyond the activity and the group. Students' attention is frequently redirected to the land, so that they consider their relationship to it, rather than just passing through. In this way the land may become more than a backdrop surrounding the experience.

One method of promoting "landfull" experiences that has been used for over a century is that of interpretation. Interpretation has been conducted by naturalists, historians, rangers, and environmental educators in an array of traditional settings, such as historic sites, museums, zoos, visitor centers and campgrounds, and through a variety of methods including living history demonstrations, storytelling, puppetry, and guided tours. The goal of interpretation traditionally has been to connect the visitor with the resource in meaningful ways, to promote an understanding of the site's significance, and/ or to foster stewardship of the resource. An oft-quoted maxim from the National Park Service manual of the 1930's reflects this fundamental goal of interpretive services: "Through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation, protection" (McDonough & Lee, 1990).

Despite its successful adoption by many environmental education programs, interpretation has received little to no formalized attention in adventure programming. Yet, the outdoor setting is conducive to the application of interpretation in that "all land has a history" (Pearsall, 1990) and "every trail has a story" (Henderson, 1999). Moreover, trip leaders can easily become interpreters by using hands-on, interactive teaching methods to spark curiosity about the land. Although some adventure-based programs include natural history and/or ecology in course descriptions, few explicitly list cultural history as a curriculum component. A single voice, Henderson (1990, 1999), has addressed the merits of explicitly highlighting the heritage context during an adventure experience. She proposed that by

sharing stories of adventurers from days gone by, leaders can help participants to stretch their imaginations, to feel connected to their heritage, and to travel "more within the land" (Henderson, 1999).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study was designed to investigate interpretation as a potential method of promoting "landfull" experiences. To date, no studies have explored the application of cultural history interpretation in adventure-based programming. This study investigated the use of interpretive activities that focus on the cultural history of the area during an adventure-based trip and evaluated the impact of this interpretation on participants' experiences. As an exploratory effort, the purpose of this study was threefold: To provide a rationale for the use of cultural history interpretation in adventure-based programming; to create a prototype for integrating cultural history interpretation in adventure programming; and to evaluate the impacts of cultural history interpretation on the experience of trip participants. The study explored the following research questions:

- Does the use of cultural history interpretation on a trip influence the participants' experience?
- If so, what aspects of the cultural history interpretation are influential?
- How is the participants' experience influenced?

METHOD

This study was conducted at Colgate University through the Outdoor Education department in conjunction with Wilderness Adventure, a pre-orientation program available to all incoming students. Due to its exploratory nature, the study was qualitative in design. In August of 1999, Wilderness Adventure participants, in groups of eight to ten students with two to three student leaders, went on 8-day camping trips in the Adirondack Park, located in New York State. During the trips, leaders integrated interpretive activities that focused on the cultural history of

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the area; participants, however, were unaware of the study during their trips.

Leaders received “interpretive training” before the trips in the following areas:

- *Interpretive Theory* — Cultural history interpretation was explained as the use of interactive, creative methods to teach about people who lived/traveled in the Adirondacks in the past;
- *Interpretive Methods* — Demonstrations of various interpretive activities were done (e.g., living history skits, storytelling, games, journal writing, and role plays);
- *Interpretive Materials* — Leaders were given cultural history information packets to take into the field—i.e., a plastic bag containing general and route-specific information, stories, quotations and “fun facts” about the natural and cultural history of the area;
- *Interpretive Goals* — Leaders were to integrate one activity per day, but no pre-set curriculum was given—the “what, when, where, and how” was left to their discretion.

Three weeks after the trips, 20 of the 91 participants were selected through stratified, systematic sampling and contacted by mail to voluntarily participate in the study. Ten of the 24 leaders were selected through dimensional sampling based on their familiarity with the Adirondack region and previous experience with implementing cultural history interpretation in the field. Primary data were gathered from subjects through in-depth interviews with a standardized, open-ended format. During the interviews, probing questions and additional questions were asked as needed in order to pursue and clarify subjects’ responses. Secondary data sources consisted of program evaluations and interpretation logs in which leaders recorded information during the trip.

Data generated from the interviews, program evaluations and interpretation logs were analyzed in accordance to the unitization and categorization process presented by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The data were then analyzed using both within-case and cross-case analyses. A

framework was created based on the hypotheses that emerged from the data analysis.

RESULTS

The majority of participants interviewed (19 of 20) reported that the cultural history interpretation did, in fact, have a positive influence on their trip experience. One participant noted that learning about the history had a negligible, but not negative, impact compared to the overall backcountry experience. In terms of the interpretive activities that were conducted during the trip, participants collectively noted three aspects of the interpretation that were most influential: type of activity, timing and location of the activity, and the manner in which it was presented (i.e., the style used and the approach taken by the leaders). The response categories are further explained and illustrated below:

- *Type*: Stories, initiative-type activities, conversational trail tidbits, and skits were reported as being most influential. The majority of subjects were able to recount skits and articulate their immediate impact in striking detail; some subjects reported skits as being a highlight of the trip (e.g., leaders wearing beards made of leaves, sitting on the ground in a guideboat outlined with bear-bag rope, rowing the boat with oars made of sticks, and acting out how an Adirondack guide would flush a deer out of the woods so that his “sport” from the city could shoot it). For some subjects, group initiatives were most influential, because they were an interactive way to learn about the land and promoted group “bonding” (e.g., the group is handed a bear-bag rope and asked to outline New York State on the ground and locate four cities; a second rope is given and the group is asked to outline the Adirondack Park within NY state and locate the trailhead and landmarks within the Park.)
- *Timing and Location*: Activities taught during the day (e.g., before leaving camp in the morning or during trail breaks) were generally reported as being more influential than those done at nighttime after dinner. Activities done at unexpected times (e.g., during the gear shakedown, the leader asks if everyone has their Turkish drawers, gauntlets

and rubber blankets—gear that would be packed for a similar outing in the 1800's) were reported as having a greater impact. Frequency of activities was important—on trips where leaders integrated activities early on and then consistently throughout the trip, participants viewed cultural history as an everyday occurrence. Subjects recollected site-specific activities readily and articulated how the activities had not only an immediate impact, but also a longer-lasting impression (e.g., a subject reported that it was powerful to be standing at Indian Pass and hear the leader tell a legend about how it got its name, more powerful than if they had been in camp and heard the story about a place “over there”). Several subjects reported that when solo time was structured after a site-specific activity, it provoked thought about the past (e.g., whose footsteps were they walking in).

- *Manner:* When small amounts of cultural history information were covered and then re-addressed incrementally in greater depth, participants were more articulate in expressing how this information influenced their experience. In contrast, when leaders did one large “token” activity per day, subjects were more likely to view it as “cultural history class time.” Both leaders and participants remarked that when the cultural history was presented in a creative, engaging, and non-school-like style, it was most effective. Moreover, when students were involved with the teaching of the history, it was said to increase receptivity.

The above findings can be summarized in a food analogy: Pepper it! The data show that when cultural history activities were “peppered” throughout the trip—spread frequently throughout the day, in small doses, at appropriate times and places, and with creativity (pepper is a spice!)—their influence was greatest. When the “meat and potatoes” approach was used—large, infrequent chunks—cultural history was viewed as being less integrated into the trip, and leaders reported that it was awkward to facilitate.

In terms of how the interpretation influenced participants' experiences, all 20 subjects reported an increased knowledge of the area. Be-

yond knowledge, subjects were influenced in different ways and to varying degrees. Over half of the participants ($n = 11$) reported that the interpretation had an impact on them in more than one way. The most frequently reported impact was an increased awareness of the Adirondacks as a unique place ($n = 15$). Nearly half of the participants ($n = 8$) noted that it engaged their sense of wonder about the past, and over one-third of the participants ($n = 7$) reported that it promoted a connection to the Adirondacks. Several participants remarked that it enriched the trip by adding a learning dimension ($n = 5$). A couple of people ($n = 2$) reported that it was interesting. Of the seven participants who noted a connection, however, none reported that the history was interesting. Likewise, of the 15 people who reported an awareness, only one noted interest in the history. It can be inferred, to some extent, that the participants who experienced an increased awareness or a connection due to the interpretation also found it to be interesting.

An additional and unexpected finding was reported by several participants regarding a link between learning cultural history and receptivity to Leave No Trace. Their comments explained that knowing how others had cared for the land in the past made them feel more inclined to uphold LNT practices. Some participants noted that they were greatly influenced by their leaders, who were especially knowledgeable about the area or who conveyed a personal connection to and respect for the land.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study shows that adventure-based programs should consider incorporating cultural history interpretation into trips, because, in this particular case, the participants reported that it had a positive influence on their trip experience. Trip leaders should consider incorporating the aspects of interpretation that were shown to be influential in this study, including the type of activity, the timing and location of it, and the manner in which it is presented. To increase effectiveness, leaders should “pepper” the cultural history interpretation: Integrate it in small bits and pieces rather than large chunks over the course of the trip; start early on and pepper consistently at different times each day; and use

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creative, interactive methods that engage participants in a fun and memorable learning process. Preferably, interpretation should be done along the trail and at site-specific places where there is a visible and, therefore, tangible means of relating to the past. In addition, stories should be used whenever possible, as they were shown to be a universally engaging way of relating to the past.

Adventure programs should consider including cultural history as a curriculum component alongside other environmental topics, such as Leave No Trace and natural history/ecology. Furthermore, program administrators should provide their trip leaders/field staff with training in interpretive techniques and/or adequate information on the area's history that is readily accessible and in a usable format. In this way, adventure-based programs can send leaders into the field who have a baseline knowledge that, as shown by this study, will serve to increase their ability to teach the land's history in an effective manner.

Once in the field, leaders should not only consider the three aspects of interpretation found to be pertinent to adventure-based settings in this study, but also the "Landfull Experience" framework that was generated in response to the data (Figure 1). Analysis of the data revealed that participants reacted to relatively similar information in different and, more importantly, very personal ways. By combining the salient themes that emerged from participant and leader responses with aspects found in the sense of place literature, a framework was created to provide a tool to be used by trip leaders in order to facilitate the relationship of people and the land.

The Landfull Experience Framework delineates three stages—Being There, Land History, and Sense of Place—with Sense of Wonder serving as a catalyst for moving between stages. The stages are not linear, but cyclical and interactive in nature. For example, when participants spend time in a place and learn about its land history through interpretive activities, their sense of wonder will, at some point, be engaged; only by spending more time, learning more land history, and further wondering about the place, will they begin to contemplate what the place means to them personally and, thus, be propelled into

the sense of place stage. In this framework, sense of wonder represents the reflection/processing step that is integral to the experiential learning process (Kolb, 1984). It also is noteworthy that the framework acknowledges that at the center of any adventure-based trip is the tendency to focus on the activity and the group. By using interpretive activities to highlight the land's history, leaders might increase participants' awareness of their surroundings in order to promote a sense of place. The three stages are illustrated below.

Being There: When a trip arrives at the trailhead, participants find themselves at a place with a name on the map that might mean nothing to them personally. The focus of the trip is primarily on the activity, and in terms of a topographic map analogy, a student might think of the land as a backdrop, from a "summit mentality" perspective. When a trip leader facilitates an increased awareness of the surroundings, it serves to engage a sense of wonder that will move the participant into the next stage.

Land History: When trip leaders teach Land History—the natural and cultural history of the area—it serves to redirect attention from the activity and group toward the land itself. As trip leaders gain a better grasp of the material and become more comfortable with interpretive techniques, they are better able to use teachable moments and spark the curiosity of students. At this point, Land History no longer relays facts and figures, but shares the stories of land and people over time. By posing questions that provoke the participants' sense of wonder, trip leaders propel students into the third stage.

Sense of Place: At this stage, students think of the land in personal terms—they are able to articulate their connection with, relationship to, and feelings about the place. A sense of place within this model is defined as a type of connection between oneself and the land that can be articulated through knowing what a place means to you, because you have spent time there, have learned about its past and are aware of why it is unique. In terms of a topographic map analogy, a student in this stage has gained appreciation of the entire mountain; they are as interested in the marshes at the base of the mountain as in the peak itself.

Landfull Experience Framework

Sense of Wonder – actively thinking about the land – serves as a catalyst for moving between the stages of Being There, Land History, and Sense of Place.

The stages are not linear, but interactive and cyclical in nature.

Promoting Landfull Experiences

Being There

Where am I?

Who is around me? What's around me?

Land History (Natural & Cultural history)

How has this land changed over time?

Past: What & who used to live here?

What was their relationship to the land?

How did this land become what it is today?

Present: What and who lives here today?

What is their relationship to the land?

What are current issues facing this land?

Future: What and who will be here in 10/50/100 years?

What will become of this place?

Sense of Place

Why is this place unique?

What does this place mean to me?

What is my role in the land history of this place?

Being There

Sense of Wonder

Land History

Sense of Wonder

Sense of Place

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Even with limited knowledge of an area, leaders might be able to promote landfull experiences by simply posing the framework questions: Where am I? How has this land changed over time? Why is this place unique? What does this place mean to me? What is my role in the land history of this place? In this way, leaders might encourage students to think about the land and what it means to them rather than just passing through it.

Future research in this area is much needed, as this study was exploratory in nature and reportedly the first to apply cultural history interpretation to the adventure-education setting. Specific recommendations for future research include the following:

- Replicate this study to further explore whether and how cultural history interpretation influences participants' experiences and to test whether the methods suggested herein do, in fact, increase its influence.
- Explore other aspects of interpretation that might increase the influence of cultural history interpretation in the adventure education setting.
- Implement the Landfull Experience Framework in order to assess whether using it increases the influence of the cultural history interpretation.
- Implement the Landfull Experience Framework in order to assess whether using it promotes the development of a sense of place within participants.
- Explore the reported link between cultural history and Leave No Trace to assess whether learning the history increases participants' receptivity to LNT.

This study shows that the focus of an adventure-based trip can be broadened beyond the activity and the group to include the land. By teaching students about cultural history through interpretive methods, trip leaders were able to highlight the unique aspects of the land in order to add a learning dimension to the trip, generate interest in the land's history, engage a sense of wonder about the past, increase awareness of the land, and/or promote a connection to the land within participants. In this instance, cultural

history interpretation was shown to be an effective means of promoting a landfull experience for participants. Rather than just passing through, participants were incited to think about the land in some way, shape or form.

Today, landlessness is no longer a threat to America but an emergent reality. An irreversible loss of undeveloped lands combined with a marked change in Americans' relationship to land has created a dilemma that adventure educators are obliged to face. This study has shown that by incorporating cultural history interpretation into an adventure-based trip, leaders may take a tangible step towards solving the dilemma of landlessness.

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Molly Ames Baker has co-directed the Outdoor Education program at Colgate University for six years. She is completing her MA degree from the University of Minnesota and is also a NOLS instructor. She can be contacted at Colgate University Outdoor Education, Base Camp, 13 Oak Drive, Hamilton, NY 13346, Phone: (315) 228-7972, Fax: (315) 228-6323, e-mail: mbaker@mail.colgate.edu.