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The Ethics of Outdoor Education: Increasing Access while Minimizing Environmental Impacts

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WEST CHESTER UNIVERSITY OF PA
I acknowledge

The Unami People and other members of the Lenapé or Delaware Nation who are the original inhabitants of this land.
My Positionality
“This trip had way more of an impact on me than I anticipated. The beginning of the trip was a little overwhelming for me because it was out of my comfort zone, but I feel like I grew because of that. I learned to be ok with things that aren't "routine" for me. The biggest part about this trip for me was that I really understand now that I should take the opportunity to go for an adventure when I'm given the chance.”

~ OAP Program Participant
“Outdoor recreation is a great stress reliever. It is very nice to be in nature and seeing all its beauty. Another benefit is the learning experience. Through outdoor recreation I learned skills I would have not been able to learn in the classroom.”

~OAP Program Participant
"Outdoor recreation elicits a strong sense of unity. When people are in an adverse or exciting situation, the bonding capability of those individuals increases because they're sharing a unique experience. Time spent with people in an outdoor recreational environment increases the quality of that time, because everyone is able to focus on each other and the activity at hand. Depending on the nature of the activity it increases trust and communication between the group to ensure safety and fun for everyone."

~ OAP Program Participant
Source: Sassaman & Sofis (2018), unpublished analysis of qualitative data collected from OAP program participants over four years
The Challenging History of Outdoor Recreation

Image Source: Imgur
Settler Colonialism Triad

Settler’s Grabbing the Land

Eradicating Indigenous People

"Chattle" Slaves in chains

Adapted from Tuck (2017)
J.S. national parks have never been so popular

Annual recreational visits to national parks since 1904

318 Million Visitors Last Year!
According to a study conducted in Rocky National Park, 55% of those surveyed “felt it was very appropriate ($M = 4.64$) to leave food scraps behind as a food source for animals” (Lawhon, et al, 2013).
Approximately 66% of visitors bring items into the park which are also disposed of in the parks. Lawhon, Taff, Schwartz, Miller, & Newman (2018)
130 miles of trails are damaged due to overuse in the Adirondacks (Adirondack Council, 2018)

Off-Road Abuse threatens Pine Barrens habitat and access for other recreationalists
The Balancing Act
Whose Authority?
Regulation, enforcement, and fee increases tend to reinforce systems of oppression and deviate from the joy of immersing oneself in nature.
The value and challenge of Leave No Trace
What is the value of this space?
110,000 Direct Jobs

$12.3 BILLION In Consumer Spending

$3.9 BILLION In Wages and Salaries

$737 MILLION In State and Local Tax Revenue

Source: Outdoor Industry Association
A price can not be placed on any of the sacred land on this earth.
Our Strategies

- Minimal costs for trips (between $10-$25)
- Free access to all required equipment (tents, sleeping bags, rain jackets)
- Intentional conversations about the why behind our practices (straining food from gray water)
- Overview of the seven principles of Leave No Trace for all programs (all Trip Guides complete Trainer Course)
- Inclusive Language (saying “short torso” rather than women’s packs)
- Non-gendered tenting arrangements
- Marketing focused on wellness language rather than the traditional “thrill and conquering of nature”
- Clearly defined levels of programs (Beginner, Intermediate, Advanced)
- Essential Eligibility Criteria focused on participant ability
- Establishing community standards with the entire group for every program
- Conducting a land acknowledgment for space we recreate
Creating an open learning environment is the key!
Please accept my gratitude and share your insight!


Zak, E. (2017, April 8). Outdoor recreation isn’t free - Why we need to stop pretending it is Retrieved from https://everydayfeminism.com/2017/04/outdoor-recreation-isnt-free/