



Outback can alter your outlook.

WILDERNESS and the Human Spirit

By MARLA KALE

Something powerful is happening out there as programs like Wilderness Discovery help disadvantaged kids find new horizons.

FRIENDLY HOOTS, whistles, and applause filled the dining hall as students at the Curlew Job Corps Center operated in Washington State gathered recently for an afternoon honors assembly. Peers and teachers demonstrated their approval as name after name was called to recognize leadership, most improved students, and best students in academic subjects and vocational fields. Despite audience enthusiasm, some of those young achievers received their certificates with heads lowered, unwilling or unable to meet the approving gaze of the audience.

It's obvious that Curlew's staff is working to build students' confidence, and these young people need all the support they can get. Some have been fortunate enough to participate in the Wilderness Discovery program, which sends Job Corps youth on backpacking trips into wilderness areas, where they learn about themselves, taste success, and grow in confidence.

Wilderness Discovery, a program of the University of Idaho's Wilderness Research Center (WRC), was designed by WRC Director John Hendee and former student Randy Piststick, who believe wilderness is a classroom for

personal growth.

"There is a large industry of literally hundreds of organizations that run wilderness-experience programs," Hendee said. "The use of wilderness as a teacher and classroom to heal the human spirit has developed quite rapidly in the last 25 years. It's becoming a major use of wilderness, and it has evolved almost entirely in the private sector, where thousands of satisfied customers provide data indicating that something powerful is happening.

"Those of us who have worked with wilderness know how powerful that experience is and how valuable and healing a 'back-to-basics' can be. We want to build a model program and lead the research that will clarify and explain how wilderness works for personal growth, therapy, and leadership development."

Hendee believes that economically disadvantaged kids deserve a wilderness experience as much as anybody and need it more than most. That's why the WRC is working in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Labor on several national forests to develop Wilderness Discovery with Job Corps youths. The WILD Foundation is a

Journal Entry:

*"Discoveries
from within,
and as the darkness falls,
when the stars come out and nature rests,
when the Beauty is only
what you feel inside,
and passion is but the flame of the fire,
and peace of all your senses
is overwhelming you,
only when you find yourself
become one with who you are
and what you know—
that is Discovery."*

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Journal Entries:

"My feet are tired and they hurt, but it felt good knowing that I can do it. So far I have learned my limits. And the secret is that I have no real limits, besides the ones I make for myself."



"I did better than I thought I could do—there were so many times I felt like screaming for joy."



Patrick Powell won't soon forget the panoramic vista from Windy Peak in Washington State's Pasayten Wilderness. More lasting, perhaps, is the view within, as experienced by these Job Corps participants in Wilderness Discovery.

supportive partner in the venture.

The 110 Job Corps centers nationwide serve young people ages 16 to 24 who are under- or unemployed or from impoverished backgrounds, and who, for a variety of reasons, have missed out on many social and educational opportunities. Some have come from abusive families; others have been homeless or suffered with drug and/or alcohol abuse. Job Corps provides the opportunity for young people to complete a high-school education, to get vocational training, and to build social and living skills—but students must supply their own will to make it happen.

WILDERNESS DISCOVERY is a low-risk, low-stress experience. Each trip takes small groups of up to 10 young people backpacking in the wilderness for a week. Students—most whom have never had such an opportunity—hike no more than five to seven miles a day carrying their own packs. They learn “leave-no-trace/minimum-impact” camping techniques and how to travel safely in the wilderness.

Currently in its developmental stages, Wilderness Discovery is offered on a limited basis. First tested during the summer of 1993 at the Curlew Job Corps Center, the program was expanded last summer to include the Trapper Creek Job Corps Center in the Bitterroot National Forest of Montana and the Timber Lake Job Corps Center on the Mount Hood National Forest in Oregon. Next summer, a fourth, eastern center will be added.

Participants and alternates are selected from a list of volunteers that represent the full range of Job Corps students, including all vocational specialties and a balance of behaviors ranging from leaders to “problem students.” At a pre-trip meeting, students learn about safety and receive a list of items they can take into the wilderness. Because leaders try to make the experience as natural as possible, they ban many items: No games. No flashlights. No watches. No drugs or alcohol. No junk food.

Staffers prepare all backpacks with uniform camping gear, food, and healthy snacks. To reassure students they will have what they need, a

trip leader at the trailhead dumps one backpack out, explaining the contents item by item. Students then add their personal items to the packs.

A Wilderness Discovery leader, an assistant, and one Job Corps staff person accompany students on each trip. Sometimes they break into three groups, though everyone camps at the same site. Students sleep under tarps—not in tents, which could take them “out of the wilderness” psychologically, according to Piststick.

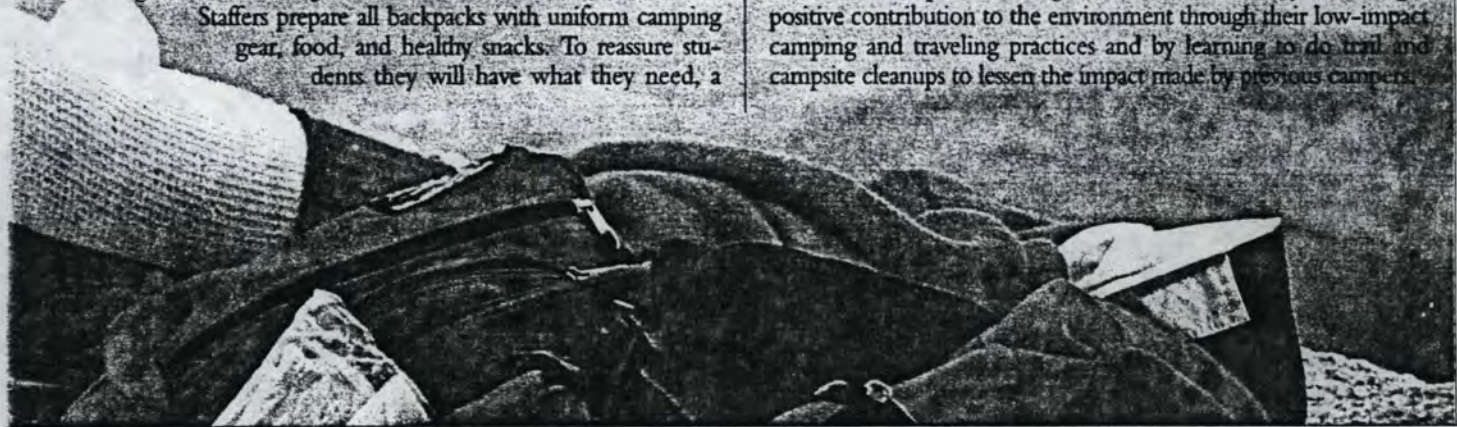
“I slept with my head outside the tarp so I could look at the stars,” said 24-year-old Tony Brown, who grew up in Portland, Oregon, and plans to take his own sons camping after he completes his Job Corps training. “I’d slept in the backyard at my parents’ house, but it was nothing like this.”

In addition to introducing students to the natural world, Wilderness Discovery offers many their first taste of success.

All day, every day, students have opportunities to succeed and to get positive feedback for tasks completed, whether they’ve worked at picking up garbage, filtering water, putting up a tarp, building a fire, or cooking. Their sense of accomplishment grows as they begin to realize their physical capabilities. Given their ages, many of the students are in poor physical condition and initially are daunted by the challenges involved in backpacking over rugged terrain.

“I never really believed if you put your mind to anything, you could do it,” said 17-year-old Joy Brady (not her real name), who is studying business and working for her GED at the Curlew center. “But I really put my mind to this, and I did it. I succeeded. And I loved it. It’s a great natural high to be out there. You’ve got a 35-pound pack on your back, and you’re just chucking along up those hills—through rain and sleet and thunder and lightning and anything. It’s not something I ever thought I would do, you know? Now I look around here at the center and imagine, hey, I could hike all those mountains and keep going. It kind of makes me feel now that I could conquer anything.”

On the trips, students get a real sense that they’re making a positive contribution to the environment through their low-impact camping and traveling practices and by learning to do trail and campsite cleanups to lessen the impact made by previous campers.



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"The biggest thing I learned about wilderness is you have to take care of what you live off of," said 20-year-old Sean Hull of California, who at Job Corps is studying carpentry and working on his GED. "We did a lot of rehabbing of old campsites. It makes a big difference on the land, and you can instantly see it when it's done."

Self-esteem also grows when students get the chance to express themselves in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Community-building activities begin at the start of the trip when each participant signs a pact agreeing to a set of group expectations drafted by all students and leaders. Throughout the trip, students call on each other to live up to the agreement, and any differences that arise are resolved at each day's end around the campfire, where each person gets a turn to speak uninterrupted. At these and other "circles" or meetings called by leaders, students also discuss issues important to their lives and learn how to listen to others in the group.

ON HER TRIP, Brady was surprised to find herself becoming friends with young women she previously "hated" and got into fights with in the dorm: "After circle, we were like best friends. We were hanging out and kickin' it and talking. I think it's because you're a team up there.

"You hike together, you walk together, you gotta do stuff to stay warm, you gotta do stuff to help feed each other, to keep the fire going. You gotta help people put up the tarp when they can't do it, and help them pack their packs. I think helping people and the little games we did and the discussions brought everybody together to realize we can't do everything on our own, that we do sometimes need somebody to help us."

In addition to spending time with the group, students are asked to spend time alone, to keep a journal, and to reflect on their Job Corps efforts and on the direction of their lives.

Before the trip, Brady was in danger of being expelled from the Job Corps because of behavior problems. Since then, she has made so many changes that she's been selected for a leadership position in her dorm. She hopes one day to work with other youth-at-risk, "to help them go through life a little easier."

Patrick Powell, 18, gets a faraway look in his eyes when he remembers his favorite moments of solitude at Windy Peak in the Pasayten Wilderness of north-central Washington. At 8,000 feet, he

MARLA KALE—
is a public information specialist
with the University of Idaho's
communications department.

could see hundreds of miles in any direction—the northern Cascades, the Okanogan National Forest, and into British

Columbia. He sat there drinking in the view, eating trail mix and thinking.

HE FOUND THE WILDERNESS solitude gave him the inspiration he needed to keep moving toward his goals. He'd only recently ended three years of living as a homeless person on the streets in San Diego, Los Angeles, and Portland. At the center, he's in the Alcohol and Other Drugs of Abuse Program, working toward his high-school diploma and receiving vocational training in culinary arts. Since the trip, he has become a member of the center's Academic Olympic Team, which competes with students from other centers. He hopes one day to go to college and pursue a degree in fine arts. In the meantime, he admits he's still struggling.

"I plan to make the best of it [Job Corps], to get the training I can, and to build my readjustment as high as I can, so I can live a stable life after I get out of here. I have thousands of long-term goals I want to achieve, but my most primary one is not going back to the streets. What keeps me here is the thought of sitting comfortably in my own apartment with a cat. . . I want self-earned stability."

Because of similar wilderness experiences and newfound ambitions, those who have gone on the trips believe the program is worth continuing. Hendeer hopes that when the pilot program is completed, he can provide wilderness-experience training to Job Corps leaders nationwide and to leaders from other youth-at-risk organizations.

Said Sean Hull: "It's almost as if this experience shows you the path you're going to take in life. It really helped me. I learned while I was up there that being close to people you feel for is important." Hull is saving his money to transfer to the Job Corps center near his parents' home in Kansas. Meanwhile, he promotes the Wilderness Discovery program to other students on center.

"We had a blast. We were tired and sore when we got back, but it's all part of the growing up and learning we did up there. I think more people should definitely get into it because you learn more about yourself and the land and how to take care of it."

Job Corps staff are convinced about the multiple values of this program. They say that when students return from Wilderness Discovery trips, they are refocused, redirected, and more socially outgoing—and they stand a little straighter. **AF**

THE ULTIMATE CLASSROOM

A more traditional form of wilderness discovery takes place at the Taylor Ranch, deep in Idaho's Frank Church/River of No Return Wilderness. The nation's only university-owned research station within a federal wilderness area, the ranch is one facility of the University of Idaho's unique Wilderness Research Center (WRC).

WRC director John Hendee, who has the best job in the world (a claim he doesn't dispute), is fond of making such pithy comments as "Wilderness speaks to all of us." It fairly shouted to me last July as the little Cessna 206 ferried us from the college town of Moscow, Idaho, to the ranch. After passing over a high saddle, we seemed to drop like a stone to our feet on the little grass-and-rib-strip hills, curving like a boomerang around a bend in gorgeous Big Creek. The air is a granular haze that predates the Wilderness Act. The only other way in is a 34-mile hike on horseback (up from the town of Big Creek).

Nothing fancy here—eight rustic buildings, no phones, solar power to run the computers and lights. But this is

a special place. According to wildlife professor Dr. Jim Peek, "The Big Creek drainage is as close to an undamaged ecosystem as there is left in this country." For example, nine

cougars are known to be resident here.

Ranch manager Dr. Jeffrey Yeo says that in spring it isn't uncommon to see 300 to 400 head of elk, deer, and bighorn sheep on the open hills above the ranch. In very few other places in the world can wildlife research be done in such undisturbed conditions.

Each morning for a good part of last summer, Jim Peek and his wife Pat—a willing and enthusiastic volunteer—climbed those steep hills to a brushy slope to measure the clumps of bunchgrass there. The goal: to better understand the relationship of wild sheep to their habitat and forage base. And perhaps to get a line on just how intrusive that rank should be to its management of natural resources.

Another chapter was graduate student Gary Wagner, who watches and electronically monitors bighorns as they feed. Each time a sheep, radio-collared by fish-and-game biologists, lowers its head to grab a bite of grass, its collar pulses a tiny flash. Wagner counts the bites and watches the animal's behavior.

Far above ranch buildings, Jim and Pat Peek study bunchgrass to better understand bighorn sheep.

Down along Big Creek and its feeder streams, undergrad intern David Dubeau made his mark recently by discovering a harelots-walchown population of tailed frogs, a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act. This finding is one more bit of information that may one day help us to discover why animals are declining around the world.

On my final afternoon in the wild place, Iiked downstream to see photographs made by the sheep-stealer Indians and to catch some of the stream's gemlike cutthroat trout. At several places on the trail, I had to dodge large piles of fresh bear dung and saw tracks of the creatures that had deposited them. And I wondered if perhaps the large mammals of the Big Creek Basin were doing some research of their own. —Bill Root