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## **The Environmental Stewardship Program: Contemplative Practice and Its Application to Outdoor Education**

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and Its Application To Outdoor Education

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### **Abstract**

How might I integrate mindful awareness, benevolent social action, and environmental stewardship into the routine of an outdoor education program? The Flourish Foundation, a social-profit organization based in Hailey, Idaho, helps facilitate a youth service-learning program maintaining wilderness trails for the Sawtooth National Recreation Area called the Environmental Stewardship Program (ESP). This program aims to provide emerging adults with service-learning opportunities in wilderness conservation and outdoor living skills by spending several days living in the backcountry and maintaining wilderness trails. A growing body of evidence supports the age-old understanding that spending time in natural environments is beneficial to our cognitive function, physical health, and psychological well-being and that nature connectedness reinforces environmental awareness and stewardship. Yet, many outdoor programs haven't acquired the language to examine the interconnectedness of the environment and mind. As the ESP is still in development, this project aims to integrate contemplative practice into the curricula of immersive outdoor education. Doing so benefits the direct stakeholders of those involved with the ESP with program structure, the greater outdoor education community with more educational tools, and the collective effort to engender compassion and interdependent responsibility in addressing the ongoing environmental catastrophe.

*Keywords:* Stewardship, Interconnectedness, Compassion, Wilderness, Immersion

## Introduction

Biophilia is the innate human tendency to seek connection to nature. American biologist E.O. Wilson first described this term used in philosophy, psychology, and design. Further research in psychology has shown that this proclivity goes beyond an individual affinity for natural spaces and suggests that connection to nature is a basic human need (Berto 2018). To consider the mere concept humans are separate from nature belays the severity of disconnect. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), a typical American spends 93% of their life indoors. Connecting with nature is critical for the survival of humans and the environment as they are interconnected.

The Environmental Stewardship Program is an opportunity for emerging adults to investigate their relationship with the environment. Using contemplative practice, students will bring awareness to their inner wilderness by detecting their interoceptive and exteroceptive sensations. Students will analyze their *outer* wilderness through social discussions on wilderness management concepts, honing outdoor living skills, considering social justice issues with wilderness access, and acknowledging the colonial occupation of the first people's traditional territories. Over four nights and five days, students will practice letting go of their minds and coming home to the natural world, calling attention to their senses and the interconnectedness of the environment, tending compassionate empathy for life, and embodying biophilia as a way of being.

## Section 1: Putting Contemplation Into Action

### Learning By Being

A common phrase in experiential outdoor education is “learn by doing,” suggesting that immersive experiences in nature are inherently educational. While this is true, many outdoor education programs miss the opportunity for deep reflection, cultivation of attention, and sustained behavioral change. Walking on the trail is a wonderful way to let your mind wander. But taking the time to notice the psychological soundness it conducts is integral to learning.

Letting your mind wander is helpful to a point. People frequently note that spending time in nature helps them “turn their mind off” and allows for daydreaming. However, it too can be maladaptive (Theodor 2022). Sustained periods of daydream are associated with attention deficit disorders like ADHD, depression, and anxiety (Theodor, 2022). Long walks are teachable conditions for developing attention as an effective outdoor educator, for example, guiding students to anchor their awareness to the proprioceptive input of their feet by intentional stepping and noticing the mechanics of each footstrike. Attention is a necessary component for environmental stewardship explored deeply in this project.

### **Teachable Moments**

There are many teachable conditions to blend contemplative practice into the routine of outdoor education. We use nature's restorative qualities to cultivate healthy habits of mind like improving attention, finding emotional balance, and extending empathy and compassion. We take care of ourselves, each other, and the environment, learning through action and contemplation.

## **Section 2: Emotional Intelligence**

### **Beyond Self-improvement**

Using nature to disrupt rumination, improve attention, balance emotion, and get active benefits us individually, but how can we go beyond ourselves? Mindful awareness has become popular in the western world for its utility for healthier states of mind and improved cognitive function. However, westernized contemplative practices are criticized for stopping short of cultivating empathy and compassion, a quality that serves the collective.

### **Emerging Adulthood**

Students involved in the Environmental Stewardship program ages range from 16 to 24. Developmental psychologists categorize this stage as emerging adulthood. In this period, young adults develop their identity in the world. It is a time of instability while they consider what they want out of work, school, love, and life. Naturally, it is a time of self-centeredness while they develop

socio-emotional awareness. Seizing this time to build empathy and compassion benefits emerging adults by strengthening their bonds with each other and the world they interconnect.

### **Enactive Compassion**

Eve Ekman, daughter and protégé of Paul Ekman, and early pioneer of positive psychology, has spent her career researching contemplative science. She has identified three types of empathy: distancing empathy, distressed empathy, and compassionate empathy (Ekman, 2017). Distancing empathy leads to aversive attitudes and avoidant behaviors like; anger, blaming, and ignoring. Distressed empathy leads to emotional resonance, personal distress, and burnout (Ekman, 2017). Compassionate empathy, she argues, leads to the most effective and productive attitudes and behaviors; perspective-taking, curiosity, and enactive compassion. With this insight, she has developed enactive compassion-building programs in partnership with Ryan Redman, the founder of The Flourish Foundation.

Developing the Environmental Stewardship Program curriculum, we have integrated these enactive compassion-building practices. Students will explore their empathy for each other and the environment via facilitated contemplative practice and pro-social activities. We will discuss distressed empathy with climate anxiety and how to move toward compassionate empathy to create sustainable positive behaviors. Research for this project draws from both ancient and contemporary understanding. The ESP will also work with wilderness conservation experts to detail the need for proper trail maintenance and camping etiquette.

## **Section 3: Creative Thinking**

### **Approach With Playfulness**

So much of what we do is fun, which is an essential asset. Playfulness and mindful awareness are two conditions that are especially conducive to creativity. Dutch historian Johan Huizinga describes “playing as our natural way of learning.” Playfulness tests out the rules and finds the boundaries of a game. Any camp counselor, outdoor educator, or generally playful person will tell you that games are a

great way to break down walls giving way to vulnerability and group cohesiveness. Respectfully using nature as a place to play incites joy in new environments allowing us to see the world through a new lens. Through this lens of playfulness, we have joyfully approached our design for the ESP, leaving room for improvisation and spontaneity in the curriculum structure.

### **Non-Dualism**

The Environmental Stewardship Program is not entirely a skills-building program or an environmental ethics program. Finding the interface of these two approaches is unique to the ESP. We find that inner wilderness is intimately interdependent with outer wilderness, and our non-dualistic approach to environment and mind runs throughout the program.

## **Module 4: Your Innovative Solution**

### **Contemplative Extension**

The structure of the ESP is similar to many experiential outdoor programs. Our programming approach could be viewed as a contemplative expansion pack to enrich and deepen the experience. Below is an overview of the orientation and first day as an example of our approach.

### **An Overview**

We begin with an emailed preview of the plan days before, complete with a packing list and summary of the itinerary, and a prompt to consider what *wilderness* means to them before they arrive. We offer gear and advice to anyone in need of assistance. We discuss the access privileges and inequities of outdoor adventure and the opportunity for inclusivity and equity. At the trailhead, we review the overall intention for the program by going over risk management and trail building equipment. We set explicit expectations for expedition behavior, asking the students to be mindful of their risk tolerance. Before take-off, we humbly acknowledge the first indigenous peoples and traditional territories we occupy with respect and solidarity. Once boots are tied and backpacks strapped, we allow for at least ninety minutes of easy walking and undirected attention. Along the way, we engage in playful conversation and stop

self-care opportunities. We begin more directed attention as we venture deeper, encouraging spacial and somatic awareness using our inner and outer wilderness language. Upon finding camp, we discuss Leave No Trace ethics and ask students to consider other occupants of the land with empathy and compassion. Building a base camp and starting dinner is a necessary task and a condition ripe with interdependent accountability. Before eating, we ask each student to express something they are grateful for and possibly one more spontaneous, playful inquiry. We use evenings as an opportunity for contemplative discussion, and we reflect on the day's experiences and observations. Leading by example, facilitators lean into vulnerability, compassion, and trust that the students will hold us in our shared humanity.

## **Section 5: Results**

### **The Stakeholders**

Upon completing the capstone project, I traveled to Hailey, Idaho, to meet with the students in the compassionate leadership program, many of the same students participating in the environmental stewardship program. I wanted to connect with the students and my employers before the summer began to understand their motivations for taking part in the ESP.

### **Student Stakeholders**

The Compassionate Leadership program meets Tuesday and Wednesday each week. In both sessions, I simply participated in the week's discussion, and for the last 15 minutes, I asked who was willing to join the summer program and, if so, why? Their answers varied. Some wanted to learn how to backpack, others wanted to hang out with their friends, and a few wanted to spend time outside. I was careful not to prime them to answer in a way I hoped for, so I didn't go deeply into biophilia and nature connectedness theory. However, I did ask them how the topics of the Compassionate Leadership Program could relate to environmental stewardship. One student said, "to build empathy for nature as we have with each other," another student said, "to be quiet for a while."

**Employer Stakeholders**

This work designing the ESP is clearly in progress. My employer's advice was to be less prescriptive in my delivery. Much of this program is student-centered and should be student-led. They helped update instructional language, maintaining continuity throughout the Flourish Foundation's curricula. Its mission aims to

systemic change through heart-mind cultivation by promoting personal wellbeing, benevolent social action, and environmental stewardship. Much of their programming concentrates on emotional well-being and compassionate social action but lacks a curriculum regarding environmental stewardship. As an organization, it will directly benefit from the framework I have developed by updating its website and promoting outdoor education as a social-profit program offering. Additionally, this project outlines the required skills for an ESP facilitator for effective hiring and training for the job.

**Self Evaluation**

I have benefited as a student by researching, analyzing, and synthesizing the scholarship of psychology, outdoor education, wilderness medicine, social justice, and environmental ethics. This project has improved my writing skills and organizational thinking. Exposure to the incredible work previously accomplished in this area has humbled me. It has illuminated room for growth in my contemplative practice and its application to other professional and educational contexts.

**Section 6: Conclusion**

The sweetness of solitude with nature frees the mind of society's sensory and psycho-social distractions. Utilizing the calming conditions to practice attentive mindful awareness brings control back to our experience. Mindful awareness enables better emotional balance. Emotional balance enhances our ability to empathize with compassion. Compassion illuminates our interdependence and clarifies our connection to life.

Bio means 'life,' and philia means 'the love of.' Biophilia, in its most literal translation, means the love of life. The Environmental Stewardship Program is a meditation on the bidirectional nature of connectedness. It is an opportunity to find the calmness of mind that natural environments provide. To learn how to harness attention to gently examine our inner and outer nature and lead with compassion for ourselves, others, and the environment. If we practice our love of life, we will conduct a life of love.

### Resources

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