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ABSTRACT

The National Audubon Society Expedition Institute utilizes an outdoor experiential program which allows people and nature to achieve dynamic equilibrium and has been demonstrated successfully with high school through field programs led by Master's students. The Institute works with the premise that truly sustaining and potent education is the process which aids humankind in developing behavior congruent with maintaining the Earth as a living organism. Assumptions are (1) Earth is seen in its entirety as a living organism; (2) nature and human nature are one; (3) people are an organ of the organization of the Earth; (4) all elements of the Earth-organism system are interrelated; (5) our culture, language, and symbols are presently inadequate to explain Earth as a living organism; (6) sensing the totality of the Earth as a living system involves sensing the wholeness of yourself; and (7) the life of the planet is in continual fluctuation between tension and tension-release of energy. These assumptions are used to create a conceptual framework that accepts tension as the common denominator between people and the rest of life and a methodology which encourages people to experience and express feelings and thus reduce interpersonal tensions and become close to nature and animate feelings of self-preservation. (MH)

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In Wilderness Is Our Self Preservation

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In Wilderness Is Our Self-Preservation

For the past two years I have utilized an outdoor experiential curriculum which not only offers new insight on working with common psychological problems, but completely eclipses many current working concepts utilized in personality counseling and group therapy. This original approach, which allows people and nature to achieve dynamic equilibrium, is being demonstrated successfully with high school through Master's students on the field programs of the National Audubon Society Expedition Institute.

Over years of working with a wide range of young people, from diverse socio-economic and geographic areas, we have found that much of their background in education, parenting, and counseling did not aid them in dealing with the maze of bewildering problems they have to assume as members of society.

Many students, although far from clinically ill, have moderate to severe difficulty with the negative spinoffs of our culture: dyslexia, substance abuse, depression, anorexia nervosa, political apathy, irresponsibility, academic disinterest, et al. We have found that our impact on these problems is to some extent penetrating and lasting with all individuals. Often the effect is profound.

The Institute works with the pervasive premise that truly sustaining and potent education is the process which aids humankind in developing behavior congruent with maintaining the Earth as a living organism. It is assumed that:



1. The planet Earth is seen in its entirety as a living organism.
2. Nature and human nature are one and the same.
3. People are an organ of the organization of the Earth.
4. All elements of the Earth-organism system are interrelated.
5. Our culture, language, and symbols are presently inadequate to explain the Earth as a living organism.
6. Sensing the totality of the Earth as a living system involves sensing the wholeness of yourself.
7. The life of the planet is in continual fluctuation between tension and tension-release of energy; e.g. weather patterns, tides, thirst, and emotions.

Simply put, this suggests that realizing your interdependence and connection to nature can help you achieve mental stability. If you locate personal congruency with the planet, many culturally induced phobias and neurosis are subdued. This may be the underlying reason why wilderness programs have had such a therapeutic effect on people with and without institutional problems. We are better off conditioned to the stability of the planet than to the unstable socio-economics of our culture.

Tension, and its companion tension-release (T-R), can be shown to exist in all substances. Geologists find tension in the earth's crust and deep within its core. Physicists have shown that tension exists within and between all molecules, including supposedly inanimate minerals. Astronomers can illustrate how the T/T-R mechanism operates throughout the universe. Importantly, psychologists also find tension in people. Ordinarily it is expressed as hunger, thirst, emotion,

excretion, etc. Where the tension-release process is blockaded neurotic behavior is initiated. This can lead to disharmonious or disruptive feelings and lifestyle choices.

Our previous seven assumptions offer a tentative solution to this all-too-common theme. If trees, rocks, birds, and people all experience and deal with tension, perhaps tension is the common denominator between people and the rest of life which can help us understand ourselves, and reach equilibrium with the Earth.

The key phrase here is "deal with tension." Because where trees, rocks, and birds seem to effectively deal with tension, people often are unable to release or adapt to stress and therefore unwittingly provoke extreme behavior in themselves. What the rest of life on earth has learned to do, which humanity tries its hardest to evade, is accept the fluctuations of nature as part of survival. Nature throbs, and elephants throb along with it, that's why there are no neurotic elephants (except in zoos and circuses where their ability to fluctuate with nature is diminished).

This process, and our avoidance of it, can be described with some consistency in people. Central air conditioning is a fully accepted aspect of our culture. However, when we spend \$2,000 for central air conditioning instead of learning to cooperate, tolerate, and live with heat (nature's fluctuation) we have 1) bottled up our internal T-R mechanism which thrives on nature's fluctuation: we live at a constant 72° no matter what nature is doing outside; and 2) we have worked to earn \$2000 (8 to 10 weeks of time for most people) at often boring

and uncreative occupations. This creates additional "cultural" tension. So, we've fooled ourselves. Our advanced technology, rather than reducing the effort of survival, actually increases stress.

At the Expedition Institute we have taken this conceptual framework and created a methodology based on person/planet congruency. A pattern which encourages people to choose alternatives which will stimulate their own self-preservation (here "self" is congruent with the earth). Our feelings and emotions are the closest we can arrive at having nature speak directly to us. By learning to experience and express feelings we become close to nature and animate feelings of self-preservation. It is the strong self-preservation feelings which reduce cultural tensions.

Because our curriculum celebrates feelings we have experienced a wholeness and vitality in our classes that was previously missing. Based on their feelings, students' analyses and reorganizations of their relationships encourage survival attitudes and behaviors. Of utmost value is the recognition that one's good feelings toward life emanate from the planet and that they indicate a reduction of tension. Uncomfortable feelings, on the other hand, often originate in cultural dictates that thwart natural self-preservation feelings.

At a class meeting, a student struggled tearfully to express his emotions, as the rest of his classmates listened in sympathetic and supportive silence:

"I have a hard time getting along with my parents," the student said. "My mother was beaten and abandoned at the age

of six, when she found out that her mother was having a sexual relationship with a neighbor. My Mom is an incredibly angry feminist. She's told me that I'm a bastard for being male and oppressing her. I've picked up a lot of nervousness from my relationship with her. At times, it has really depressed me, and led me to withdraw from people by drinking or doing drugs."

The statement, though extreme, is typical of the bizarre childhoods of all too many young Americans. The statement provoked many reactions and reflections from our expedition group:

My Mom is an incredibly angry feminist.

"Our culture may be prejudiced against women because it is prejudiced against nature, and women and the Earth are female."

"Females are associated with nature--Mother Nature--and are threatening because of their supposed fluctuating qualities: temperamentality, unpredictability, instability--you always hear those qualities assigned to women. In our culture those qualities, like nature, tend to be avoided and discarded because they aren't objective and 'rational' or easily controlled by men."

She found out that her own mother was having a sexual relationship with a neighbor.

"In our culture, women are not always experienced as human beings, but rather as sex objects to be used as a form of release for thwarted feelings (nature) of men."

"Women can be raped and discriminated against, just as is nature and the planet."

I'm a bastard for being male and oppressing her.

"Our culture has expectations that men will provide the fortressing and distance from natural fluctuations that we desire."

"Men are expected to authoritarianly maintain the high standard of living that is revered in our civilization."

"Culture's high expectations for males--academic, economic, and physical--overwhelms them. It trains them to subdue nature wherever they find it. They are taught that boys don't cry, boys are breadwinners, boys are strong, boys are superior to women."

"Our culture stresses success in economics and technology rather than in strong human and ecological relationships. People are separated from themselves and from each other, as well as separating the whales from the sea, buffalo from the land, and passenger pigeons from the air."

I have a hard time getting along with my parents.

"Sometimes people subconsciously recognize their subdued nature in another individual. They resent that individual because that person triggers off frustrated feelings within them."

"That also occurs in people's attitudes toward wildlife. The wilderness is exploited because it's freedom from unresolved tension is resented."

Sometimes I withdraw from people.

"Often individuals ignore their frustrated natural relationships with people and life by becoming involved

with other gratifying aspects of culture. Their relationship problems with nature are never emotionally confronted. Culture substitutes for nature--we destroy an ecosystem to build an amusement park."

My relationship has led me to drinking and drugs.

"Drugs and alcohol serve as chemical substitutes for the euphoria that is normally obtained from the release of natural tension that is found in approaching equilibrium with nature."

"Drugs tend to act as social lubricants for relationships blocked by the individual's fear of expression of his/her natural feelings toward another person. Through tranquilization, drugs and alcohol fortress the individual from degrading cultural expectations."

"By providing chemically stimulated tension release and its accompanying euphoria, chemicals reduce an individual's concern about environmental problems that would ordinarily provoke realistic T-R anxiety accompanied by appropriate action. Chemicals reduce angry resistance to acts that subdue nature."

My relationship with her depressed me.

"Depression is almost always in part due to anger about unexpressed feelings that we have been taught to suppress."

"Sometimes depressed feelings are stubbornly maintained, because the expression of them often gains sympathy from others and becomes useful in gaining companionship and euphoria that is otherwise unobtainable away from nature."

These words and reactions in print cannot convey the impact they have as a personal encounter. Each was a sincere statement of the thoughts and perceptions of an expedition member. Continued feedback of this type has shown itself to penetrate through many of the "cultural spinoffs" an individual can carry with them. Every step of the way this process of problem solving connects the individual with their natural whole selves. Resolution of personal conflicts becomes resolution of your relationship with nature.

Does Mom Nature make a good therapist? We have found that she does, and that her recommendations are convincing and beneficial. Evidently, mere exposure to the wilderness reminds individuals of her fluctuations, thereby releasing tension and allowing self-preservation feelings to become more dominant,

Further research and study will be necessary to establish the credibility of this approach throughout specialized groups and traditional settings.

We may yet substantiate that in wildness is the preservation of the world.