

# Raising Environmental Awareness Through College Outdoor Programming

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**Abstract:**

I have always attributed my awareness of and interest in the environment to my immediate exposure to nature through outdoor activities. This awareness is essential to the future of humanity and we must be consciously working to live more lightly on our planet. So how can an awareness of the environment be cultivated, especially right here on Smith College Campus? To answer this question I turned back to my own experience and hypothesized that a quality outing program would provide an excellent source of environmental awareness through exposure to the local outdoors. To test my idea I looked in the archives to find out what programs Smith has offered in the past. I looked to current thought and study to find out how people are thinking about the environment in modern America. I did a poll of my peers to find out what they think about the environment and outdoor programming. And I considered the studies of other scholars who have contemplated similar issues. All of this research culminated in a clear need for student-led outdoor programs at Smith, so I concluded my report by beginning to develop the program I think Smith College needs to raise student awareness of and interest in the environment.

**Introduction:**

I clearly remember throwing a temper-tantrum in Dinosaur National Park when my Father told me I couldn't take home a smooth red stone I had found. I was six years old, and I was learning leave no trace ethics. I doubt any college age student would throw a tantrum over a rock, but I'm sure there are plenty who wouldn't think twice about removing a souvenir, or worse, who have never even faced the choice. The fact is, humans

can't continue to live on this planet without considering our actions. Taking a rock from a National Park is an easy example, but the concept spreads so much further. We have to start considering the amount of water we use, the way we travel or generate energy, the way products we use are created and eventually disposed of. As David Orr said:

Those now being educated will have to do what we, the present generation, have been unable or unwilling to do: stabilize world population; stabilize and then reduce the emission of greenhouse gases, which threaten to change the climate, perhaps disastrously; protect biological diversity; reverse the destruction of forests everywhere; and conserve soils. They must learn how to use energy and materials with great efficiency. They must learn how to utilize solar energy in all of its forms. They must rebuild the economy in order to eliminate waste and pollution. They must learn how to manage renewable resources for the long run. They must begin the great work of repairing, as much as possible, the damage done to the earth in the past 200 years of industrialization. And they must do all of this while they reduce worsening social and racial inequities. No generation has ever faced a more daunting agenda.

-Orr, 1994

I realize the truth in what Orr is saying, and I know that the generation he places this weight on is my own. I am one of "those now being educated," and my education at Smith College should be giving me the tools to do this work.

Unfortunately, very little in most of my classes has prompted me to factor the environment into my studies. Each department divides itself to some degree against the

others and teaches without interdisciplinary considerations, even though, as Orr also points out, “all education is environmental education. By what is included or excluded, students are taught that they are a part of or apart from the natural world.”(Orr, 1994) If individual departments are failing to teach students that they are a part of the natural world, what else exists in the undergraduate experience that can instill the values necessary to fulfill the tasks my generation has before us? I return now to the smooth red stone that I so desired for my own, but learned not to take thoughtlessly. This lesson was not learned in a classroom, but as part of my wilderness experiences, a vast body of knowledge that has educated me in numerous ways. Through experiencing the wild I have learned of nature’s fragility and also nature’s power. I have learned how significant my small impact can be. I have maintained the sense of wonder, which Rachel Carson found so greatly lacking in our modern culture. I have come to love the planet in a way that forces me to see it as more than mere resources, which, while not equivalent to considering environment as a part of all classroom learning, does bring the matter closer to the mind of the student, and does instill the values which are so grossly needed. It is for these reasons that I studied the outdoor programs offered at Smith College. What I found was a mixed bag of missed opportunities and unwritten futures.

### **The History:**

To uncover the history of the Smith Outing Club, I carefully examined the documents held in the College Archives for the Outing Club. All of the historical material I used on the college’s outdoor programming comes from this location, although much of

it cannot be referenced any more explicitly than that due to the nature of the documents, most of which have no author or date, and many of which make only vague references to the information and chronology constructed here. I would like to note that constructing a history from primary sources is unstable work, which, like other forms of research, can be proven incorrect by future discoveries, but must be interpreted as clearly as possible with the information available.

It should come as no surprise, considering Smith College's location, affiliations, and age that when the wilderness idea swept the nation in the early part of the twentieth century, the college responded by creating an Outing Club. The club was somewhat radical in being the first of its kind, a student organized club at a women's college. Talk of the club began in 1920, and in 1922 the college recognized the club officially with the construction of a cabin for the college's use on a section of private forest near the college. Women who made trips to the cabin traveled there by horse cart and spent their days and nights in the company of a chaperone. Ever on the cutting edge, the Smithies on the early trips did so to the surprise and sometimes disgust of their parents. One letter from the mother of a Vassar student in the 1930s responds to the daughter's tale of an Outing Club adventure (at Vassar, of course) by sending extra blankets and hoping the daughter doesn't have to use Bon Ami for her bath in order to get clean after her outing trip. I imagine this response of worry, though amusing now, would not have been unlike the concerns of a Smith parent in the same era. Even as improper as it was, Smithies went outdoors anyway.

The outing club grew tremendously and was the largest club on campus from the early 1930's through the 1950s. A total of three cabins were built on what I gather to be three separate pieces of land, but two were sold, and the third cabin burned down. The college, witnessing a decline in participation, never replaced the cabins, or the wild land they had been on. At the height of the program Smith was an active member of the Intercollegiate Outing Club, and the program was not only a means to get outside, but also a way to meet other undergraduates, particularly those at Dartmouth and Yale, still men's colleges at the time. Intercollegiate events between the two men's schools and the two women's schools, Smith and Vassar, were popular. I suspect that a decline in club activity coincided with Dartmouth and Yale's decisions to become co-educational institutions, although archival material suggests this. Around the same time, the youth culture of activism and protest of the 1960s began to grow, and the college turned their efforts towards the growing social action groups on campus, letting the Outing Club and its untold benefits fall to the background, where it has remained, without reconsideration since the late 1970s.

### **The Present (and an original survey):**

Reconsidering the need for an Outing Club is more important now than ever. With the speed of modern life and the fragmentation and isolation of departments from their environmental components, how can the college possibly cultivate the sense of wonder Carson finds so necessary, much less the deep values Orr calls on for the execution of my generation's daunting agenda? I would argue that people only protect what they love, and

when nature is something “out there,” seen only in SUV ads or the nature channel, it is rarely connected directly or intelligently to our actions. Getting “out there” and having first hand experience is, in my mind, the best way to shift the environment from something abstract to something personally meaningful. It’s an easy argument to make, and one couched in years of American conception of wilderness as healing and character building. It’s not hard to find a quote to support this paradigm. John Muir is attributed with saying, “Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves." It is clear that Americans view nature as a place of beauty and healing and, as Carson suggests, wonder.

It is all well and good for philosophers and writers to suggest these things, but I began to wonder what Smithies think today on our campus. So I asked. I compiled a survey with several questions. When I asked students how spending time outside affects their health or wellbeing they said, almost unanimously, that time outside had “definite positive effects.” I was not surprised by this response since it is the dominant ideology of our culture, what surprised me were the other results.

Most Smithies spent more time outside in high school than they do in college. A staggering 90% of Smithies would like to spend more time outside, and the other 10% were happy with the time they spend outside. No one in 102 students polled wanted to spend less time outside. So why has time outside dropped since high school? Why don’t Smithies spend more time outside, especially since they say they want to? Most cited too much schoolwork; others lacked information, equipment, or transport. A few

complained of the chilly New England winters. And so, the campus remains locked in an academic ideology where learning happens only within the walls of the institution.

“Must we always teach our children with books?” David Polis asked. “Let them look at the mountains and the stars up above. Let them look at the beauty of the waters and the trees and flowers on earth. They will then begin to think, and to think is the beginning of a real education.”(Rosen,385) Books are excellent sources of information, but learning to read the environment as a text is not something taught at Smith College. I have learned in various classes to consider other less conventional texts, such as the supermarket (in the work of Susan Willis), or advertising (in the work of Robin Andersen,) but I have never been asked to look outdoors and study it, experience it as a valid and valuable source of knowledge. Emerson noted the same problem years ago. “We are shut up in schools and college recitation rooms for ten to fifteen years, and come out at least with a bellyful of words and do not know a thing. We cannot use our hands, or our legs, or our eyes, or our arms. We do not know an edible root in the woods. We cannot tell our course by the stars, nor the hour of the day by the sun.” (Orr, 2002) My own education in the natural world has come from experience outdoors, not from theory in the classroom.

It would be easy to disregard my single personal experience without substantial supporting evidence, but I stumbled on supporting evidence when I asked Smith students to identify local outdoor areas. I asked them to check places they had heard of and to circle places they had been out of a long list of local natural areas. I included in the list: Norwottuck Rail Trail, Look Memorial Park, Elwell Recreation Area, Northampton

Bikeway, Childs Park, Skinner Park, Mt. Holyoke Range, Mt. Tom, Fitzgerald Lake, Dinosaur Footprints, Metacomet-Monadnock Trail, Chicopee State Park, Connecticut River Greenway, Mt. Sugarloaf, Mt. Toby, D.A.R. State Forest, and a blank space to include others. Of this long list of popular area in Western Massachusetts, two thirds of students who took the survey had heard of one or more of these locations. Only half had ever been to one of these places. I could not imagine living in Northampton and never even hearing of Mt. Tom, the place where Smithies historically headed for Mountain Day. I was even sadder to imagine half of a highly educated class graduating without ever seeing any of the spectacular local areas I listed. It was no surprise then to find that only 1% of the students polled said they were very aware of areas near campus where they can recreate outdoors. Similarly, 65% of the students polled think Smith does a marginal or poor job of fostering environmental awareness. I began to wonder if Smith annually graduates students who have never directly experienced the natural world, or who have never related an outdoor experience to their education. If this is the case, even for a small number, the college is failing to educate students on the most universal and important of subject of our time, our environment.

### **The Future:**

“Adventure education is a recent phenomenon in the widespread business of teaching and learning. Its emergence has, ironically, coincided with the decline of the wilderness resource upon which it depends. This is not surprising since the reason people now program “adventure” is because it is no longer a normal part of life.” (Miles, 1990)

The reality that wilderness is no longer a normal part of life is a direct factor in our modern ability to think of nature as other. Without ever seeing the face of the environment, the origin or destination of products we consume is without perspective. Outdoor programming, sometimes called adventure education, is a way to learn this perspective. Thus, after exploring the cultural and Smith specific problems of environment in higher education, I have returned to the need for direct experience with the environment.

Luckily, the Outing Club, which was once so popular, has not completely faded from Smith's campus. Miraculously, the club has survived uninterrupted since 1922. At times, a motivated president would orchestrate trips, other years the club succeeded in little more than electing new club leaders for the next year. Because the need for the club is so clear, especially if Smith is not making students aware of their environment through academics, I called together a committee. The committee, which we called the SOC future planning group, held three lunch meetings, which were well advertised around campus. Nine students helped to create a future plan. As a group we identified the following problems: lack of organization, lack of resources, lack of experience, and lack of publicity. We also identified the following goals: re-write the club constitution and by-laws to provide a better organizational and leadership flow, develop an outdoor resource center to provide better information in collaboration with other campus and local organizations, develop an outdoor leadership training program to prepare students to lead wilderness trips, and finally to use a consistent visual image to promote and publicize the program. We additionally wanted to re-instate some old traditions and develop new annual events

to help increase participation in the club. All of this meant we had our work cut out for us, but with a good plan, the club has forged ahead.

From what began as a sustainability project, a renewed club has emerged. With the help of Smith Outdoors Director, Scott Johnson, the Outing Club student leadership program will begin next fall with a semester-long program designed to give students wilderness skills, first aid skills, leadership skills, and perhaps most important, the environmental ethics that are otherwise lacking in a Smith education. An ambitious calendar of day trips and overnight trips responds to comments received on the survey asking for more trips. A fall event, designed to increase club participation will kick off the year, hopefully exposing first year students to the new face of outdoor programming at Smith College and placing outdoor awareness firmly in their minds as a meaningful part of higher education. One trip in particular, a day trip to do trail work for the Berkshire chapter of the AMC, will set a precedent for environmentally aware student led outdoor programming at Smith College.

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**Additional Materials Studied:**

- Outing Club materials (two boxes) available in the Smith College Archives.
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**Background reading for this project included:**

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