

The Role of Camp in Fostering Children's Connections to Nature

Penny A. James and Karla A. Henderson
North Carolina State University

Barry Garst
American Camp Association



Introduction

- For more than 150 years, camps synonymous with nature-based outdoor education opportunities for youth
- Louv suggested increase of specialized camps (e.g. sport camps) reducing nature-based opportunities
 - Purported shift in programming contributes to **nature-deficit disorder**
- **Is nature disappearing from the camp landscape?**
- This study explored camp directors' perceptions:
 - Regarding children's connection to nature today
 - Role of camps in fostering children's nature connections
 - Causes for any *disconnect* between children and natural world

Methods

- May 2007: 144 camp directors completed survey developed by authors in collaboration with members of ACA Children, Nature, and Camp Task Force
- Survey assessed camp director's agreement with claims made by Louv and their perceptions regarding the importance of camp in fostering nature connections
- T tests conducted to determine relationship between camp directors' perceptions and camp demographics

Abstract

Louv suggested camps may contribute to **nature-deficit disorder**. This study explored camp directors' agreement with Louv's claims and their perceptions of the role of camps in fostering nature connections. While most camp directors' agreed that **nature-deficit disorder** exists, they perceived that nature remains important at camps today. This perception is reflected in the operations and programming at their camps. Some concerns were raised that girls and children from lower income families may face additional barriers to developing connections with nature. It appears that nature has not disappeared from the camp landscape, making camps more important in the battle against **nature-deficit disorder**.

Results

- **Descriptive Statistics**
 - 86% indicated primary focus of camp programming was traditional outdoor
 - 88% agreed that children are less connected to nature than children were 20 years ago
 - 80% agreed with all items related to *importance of camp* factor
 - >60% agreed with 10 causes of disconnect
 - 86% agreed fostering connections requires purposeful programming
- **Importance of Camp Factor**
 - Importance of nature opportunities, purposeful programming, increased importance of camp in fostering opportunities, & nature related camp mission & objectives

➤ **Significantly More Agreement: Importance of Camp if...**

- Majority of programming outdoors, campers outdoors more than ½ day, nature important to camp mission, nature related programming goals & nature opportunities believed to influence parental decisions

➤ **No Significant Difference: Importance of Camp**

- Camp affiliation (e.g. agency, gov't., private), day/resident camp, primary programming focus, camp locale, & all camper demographics (i.e. income, gender, age, or abilities)

➤ **Possible Causes of Disconnect Factor**

- External constraints, fear, personal interests & technology

➤ **Significant Differences: Causes of Disconnect**

- Fear: Campers included adults & families
- Personal Interests: Co-ed or girl's camps & Served lower income families

Practical Applications

- Nature experiences at camp are important for combating **nature-deficit disorder**, especially for girls and children from lower income families
- Purposeful programming directed at fostering nature connections must target the affective domain
- Develop specific programming goals for fostering connections with nature

