

CAMPING OVERVIEW

The group is getting irritable. It is late in the afternoon and they have carried their packs up and over a good-sized mountain peak. Now they just want to get to their campsite and begin cooking dinner. But they are at a fork in the trail and are unsure of which direction to go. Everyone wants to go the right way, but no one wants to make the decision. Everyone wants to be in camp now, but no one wants to scout out the trail, or look at the map. They all sit and hope that someone else will do it. They are learning about service, and leadership, and responsibility, and consequences.

This scenario and others are common when groups live and travel in a wilderness setting. It is a classroom that has applications throughout many facets of the participant's life. Wilderness camping may be defined arbitrarily as living self-contained, for more than one day, apart from civilization:

1. Living self-contained implies that one has all survival necessities with him or her. Campers are limited by what they can carry with them, and it frees them from everything else. The limits define also the manner in which they live (simply). Living may mean staying in one place, or traveling many miles. It may include purpose and intention, or not.
2. For more than one day distinguishes camping from a day trip. Wilderness camping can be a weekend-or months-long. But if the group does not stay overnight, it is not camping.
3. Apart from civilization defines wilderness. This suggests that the group is away from the road, car, conveniences, and habits of life. The concept is to enter a space that is untamed or unaltered by humankind.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Americans rediscovered the wilderness. Since then, camping has expanded dramatically; some areas even experience overcrowding. People enter the wilderness for adventure, challenge, peace, solitude, camaraderie, sport, and education. To meet the needs of the revitalized interest in camping, an entire industry has emerged to provide equipment and clothing for wilderness use. Additionally, many organizations have evolved to manage and protect wilderness areas.

Several large groups (such as Outward Bound and National Outdoor Leadership School) and hundreds of small organizations take individuals and groups into the wilderness for a variety of purposes. Camping experiences are used for executives, to learn better management skills; for at-risk youth, to gain a sense of competence and an understanding that they can achieve in life; for youth groups, to build a sense of unity and common faith; and for individuals, to learn outdoor skills or to push their personal limits. Many people believe that the dynamics that happen in wilderness settings have real, practical applications in their lives.

Corporations and governments spend significant amounts of money for wilderness camping, because they believe that lessons learned in the wilderness can have a greater impact on the lives of the learners than lessons learned in conventional educational models. The wilderness offers, simply and concretely, basic life experiences such as decision-making, communication, risk-taking, trusting, and leadership. These experiences can be the basis for individual reflection or

group discussion, and become a point of reference for subsequent behavior in the wilderness and in the larger context of life.

For the youth group, a camping experience may provide many powerful and concrete lessons that help young people integrate their spirituality with life issues. In an isolated setting, one discovers his or her responsiveness to fearful or difficult situations, willingness to serve and care for others, and the ability to live with others for a week or longer. In addition, the experience of facing and overcoming challenge together serves to strengthen the bonds between the participants and results in a greater sense of community for the group.

A wilderness program is rarely received with the same enthusiasm as a trip to an amusement park, because it sounds like work. It is work. Therefore, a youth leader should decide if this is what is best for the group, and then set about doing the things necessary to make it a reality.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How might a camping experience enhance existing youth programs?
2. What ways might a wilderness experience challenge a youth leader?
3. An outdoor camping experience may not be fun all the time. Youth workers should consider the challenges and opportunities of planning an event that the youth may not like.

IMPLICATIONS

1. Camping experiences build character. It is important to know how to nurture this in young people today, as many of them are willing to become lethargic and be dictated to by their culture.
2. The wilderness experience can represent periods of our lives. Life and the wilderness experience are not all fun and games. There are tough times and rewarding times. Camping trips provide a safe environment to know how it feels to fail and succeed.
3. Wilderness experiences are instruments of faith. It is a well-known vehicle for groups to learn, understand, and even test their faith in themselves and others. The benefits in growth are more than worth the effort to take a youth group on such a trip.
4. Going into untamed areas is a unique way to see another side of our Creator. He made all of the earth, and youth workers should help young people see it from different perspectives so that they will grow in their understanding of God and His power.
5. Other difficult experiences such as work projects or short-term missions may result in similar growth and learning.

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