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"In a sense, all of us who work with children are nectar merchants offering our individual wares" - Mary A. Rhomberg

Green is for Growing: The Girl Scout Experience With Environmental Programs

by MARY A. RHOMBERG, *Volunteer Trainer, Girl Scout Council of the Nation's Capital.*

ABSTRACT. With neighborhood organization, program flexibility, and child participation in the planning and implementation of activities, the Girl Scout program is designed to be highly responsive to the varying needs of individual groups of girls. There is no fixed agenda or focus on a single aspect of environmental education. Instead, the Girl Scout concept of total environment encourages activities that place equal emphasis on projects fostering development of self, community involvement, and a variety of outdoor experiences. The Girl Scout movement has both strengths and weaknesses as a vehicle for environmental education.

A FORMER PRESIDENT of Girl Scouts U.S.A. said, "Words will be understood only when interpreted by experience and, if experience is wanting, then it must be supplied" (*Arnold 1934*). The purpose of the Girl Scout program is to do what it can to supply experience in ways that are appropriate and acceptable to children. It tries to round out a child's definition of herself and her total environment.

Over a period of 60 years the Girl Scouts have developed a number of techniques or approaches that lead to a program of creative recreation that children enjoy and that has the capacity to grow as the child grows. The intent is not to fit the child to the program, but to fit the program to the child. Thus scouting offers an ongoing program designed so each small group can build a program suited to its individual needs.

The purpose of this paper is to share some aspects of the Girl Scout experience in providing environmental programs for children. A general discussion of what the Scout movement does in fact do will include adult-child partnership in developing troop programs, community contact as an integral part of environmental programs and some observations on our long and

successful experience with outdoor programs. This will be followed by an appraisal of the role scouting plays (or can play) vis-a-vis an overall community effort to enrich the environmental knowledge of urban children.

To put these remarks into perspective, it is first necessary to define the Scout concept of environmental program and to outline the framework within which the movement operates, for these matters largely determine the types of programs we can realistically undertake.

The Girl Scouts prefer the approach that "environment is everything". In this view, individual growth, community affairs, obligations of citizenship, and outdoor activities are equally important elements of an environmental program and are equally deserving of attention in troop planning.

How this view is translated into program can most easily be shown by listing the activities of a single troop. During a school year, a busy group of teenagers did the following things: visited the state legislature and the U.S. Senate, talked with their state senator about gun control, did volunteer work at an animal shelter, and taught camping skills to younger scouts.

Being strongly oriented toward the outdoors, they also went camping and backpacking, took a canoe course, and built a new trail at a Scout camp. As a service project, some girls assisted in a program for underprivileged children and others were responsible for child care during periodic visits of the bloodmobile.

A troop with different interests, or at another age level, would have a different program, but the same elements of service, community involvement, and the out-of-doors would be included.

To the Girl Scout organization, the particular directions that troop activities take are not important, for scouting has no fixed agenda. What is important is that the chosen activities help a child to grow as an individual by giving her varied experience and a chance to make decisions and to assume responsibility. We believe that, over the scouting years, the many bits and pieces of experience will eventually fall into place to help build positive attitudes about oneself and one's environment.

Since scouting is based on voluntary participation, activities must also be designed so the girls have a good time and feel satisfied that their interests and needs are met. Both sets of goals are served by a child-adult partnership. Each troop (approximately 20 girls with two adult leaders) is completely free to plan its own activities, and the girls are encouraged to participate in the planning process to the fullest extent that their ages and capabilities allow.

This means that the first element of the Scout environmental program, individual growth, is a built-in feature of scouting. The operational structure is designed to give a child chances to feel good about herself. She is encouraged to think independently and to take responsibility in troop affairs and, within the sheltered troop situation, she can afford to try, because not so much is riding on the outcome as in school or even in the family. The inevitable failures are as conducive to growth as the successes. We can say that we want children to become independent, but we don't really mean it unless we let them try. A poet put it this way:

Youth, you should heed the older witted
When they say don't go too far;
Now their sins are all committed,
Lord, how virtuous they are!¹

¹ Wilhelm Busch in "Die Fromme Helene" ("Pious Helen")

Community contact, the second parameter of environmental program, is traditionally developed through giving service or excursions within the city. With younger children the results are mixed, for it is not easy to devise events that are meaningful and still appropriate in terms of age and experience. Nevertheless these projects are encouraged, for they expose children to the many strands that are woven into the fabric of a community. Hopefully, these small experiences in citizenship are the first steps toward full community participation in later years.

When girls reach their teens, service becomes an important part of the troop program. In general, teenage Scouts want to become involved in helping others, for they regard service as a mark of maturity. But they resent anything that smacks of exploitation; they want to be appreciated as individuals and expect their newfound maturity to be taken seriously. If their conditions are met, they can do a great deal.

We have some notable success stories, where enthusiasm and energy have sparked a whole community.² For example, some Scouts in Virginia established a library in Appalachia, and a Connecticut troop talked their community into saving a bog and helping them build a bog walk for community use. Although most projects are far more modest in scope, the motivational basis is the same, i.e., change is brought about by people who care and are willing to try.

The outdoor program is the facet of environmental education most commonly associated with scouting—everyone knows the Girl Scouts sell cookies and go camping. (In point of fact, the two are more closely related than some might think, for without cookie sales, outdoor programs would be severely limited.) The outdoor program is indeed very popular and, for some, provides the impetus for joining Scouts in the first place. It seems to be the one thing that, for many girls, scouting can provide more satisfactorily than most organizations.

Nature study per se is not emphasized, except in summer programs where the pace is more leisurely and special consultants are available. To help leaders who are interested, Scout

² A compendium of successful and imaginative project ideas developed by Scouts can be found in *Service Is a Way of Thinking*, Girl Scouts USA (New York 1967) Catalog no. 19-140.

resources include many suggestions for nature-oriented games, crafts, and other activities.³ In Scout camps, nature trails are laid out over and over again as different groups with new ideas come along, and heavy stress is put on good conservation practices—the outdoor good turn is as old as scouting. Nevertheless, the main thrust is to help children enjoy and feel more comfortable in the out-of-doors. Outings are relatively unstructured so that, within reason, each girl has a chance to enjoy the natural environment in her own way.

At first, outdoor activities tend to center around camp skills, i.e., outdoor housekeeping. Younger girls are eager to learn these skills which are, after all, an exciting new way to play house. We have learned that this is also a necessary step in their outdoor education, because they are not very receptive to other things until they feel confident that they can cope with their surroundings and the mechanics of outdoor living.

With their basic skills well in hand, teenagers use outdoor experiences to learn more about themselves, and learning about the natural environment is secondary. Some outings come close to being retreats. Togetherness is very big and there is endless talk as the girls try out new ideas and express feelings. Though they actually do very little, the girls nevertheless place great value on the isolation and tranquility of the camp situation.

On the other hand, adventurous activities like backpacking, canoeing, and wilderness and winter camping are also popular. These activities have always been a part of scouting, but more and more girls are asking for them every year. Here the girls want to learn about themselves in another way: by accepting physical challenges to prove that they can "hack it". Some people attribute this heightened interest to the advent of women's lib and, in one way, they are right. Adventure has always been important to girls, but now the climate of opinion has given them the courage to demand it.

For any youth-serving organization, the cost of outdoor programs is a problem. In scouting every effort is made to keep camping within the financial reach of all troops, and for the most part we do well. The problem is approached in

two ways. First, the organization assumes the responsibility of providing camp areas and some equipment at minimal cost to troops. Second, strong traditions of thrift and adaptability are fostered in the troops.

Many Scout councils maintain depots where equipment is available for a small handling fee. When this equipment is all spoken for, troops borrow and improvise. The need for thrift has resulted in the well-known Scout penchant for making camp equipment from discards, often called creative junkery. For example, a cardboard box lined with foil becomes an excellent charcoal oven; three plastic garden bags can make a serviceable rain suit. The main value of such items is not their very low cost, but the fact that they serve as constant reminders that the least expensive way must continually be sought for everything we do.

Both in adult training and in planning with girls, an unceasing emphasis on basics and inexpensive alternatives runs through all discussions of food, clothing and equipment. Doing-it-yourself and saving odds and ends become a way of life. And it works: we may not look very elegant, but we do get the girls outdoors in huge numbers.

In the Council of the Nation's Capital, we are particularly fortunate in that we can offer many outdoor opportunities at low cost. Besides having access to many parks, the Girl Scouts own a number of excellent camp properties that are used to capacity. During the school year the camps are used for day outings and weekend camping; in the summer they are day and resident camps. Additional day camps are established on non-Scout properties more accessible to the children in some areas. The result is that a larger percentage of girls are getting outdoor experience than in almost any other Scout council in the country.

Yet there are troops that do not take advantage of these opportunities. While finances do enter the picture, adult attitudes seem to be more responsible. When they take over leadership of a troop, not many adults have enough experience to feel comfortable in assuming the considerable responsibilities that go with outdoor program. They have to be trained. Where leader turnover is high, or where an outdoor tradition is lacking, the necessary training never takes place.

There are other obstacles. For safety, the Girl

³ Two such publications published by Girl Scouts USA are *Let's Try It*, catalog no. 19-197, and *Leader's Nature Guide*, catalog no. 19-9833.

Scouts require that a number of adults accompany the girls, and these adults are sometimes hard to come by, either because they have no time or because they feel they would be of little use. Also, parents with no outdoor experience themselves worry about the well-being of their children out in the woods. (In general, parents are far more protective of their daughters than of their sons.) All of these problems are more acute in highly urbanized areas, but by no means confined to them. When parents are given a full explanation of what a troop plans to do, they are usually much more receptive and supportive.

For the children in such troops, summer day camps are particularly important. There they can gain experience under the tutelage of specialists. Therefore an effort is made to establish day camps that are easily accessible. In Washington, D.C., a successful day camp has been established on a wooded college property in the heart of the city. Guided by an imaginative director, the camp offers a full range of camp activities suited to the children's needs—they even get overnight tenting experience. The location reduces transportation costs and allays parental apprehension. The next step, going out to the Scout camps, is taken more easily after the day camp experience.

Looking at the total program, scouting clearly does make a difference to the girls involved, in terms of both personal growth and broadened experience. The next step is to evaluate Scout program as a vehicle for environmental education in relation to other youth programs in the community. There are several points of strength and weakness to be noted.

The two greatest strengths of scouting go together: it is essentially a neighborhood affair and it has a high degree of flexibility. Each troop is formed within a single neighborhood, with volunteer leaders recruited from the same area. Thus there is a strong element of identification and the leaders are able to assess more accurately the needs and interests that must be met. Because each troop plans its own activities, the leaders are free to use the resources of the Girl Scouts and the community in ways that are most suitable for their own group of girls. As the group's program develops, the girls will reach out from their own neighborhood to broaden their experience and understanding,

but relationships and relevance to self and home remain clear.

Another strength of scouting is its ability to help very large numbers of children. Other programs may have a sharper focus and are able to handle specific phases of environmental learning more thoroughly and efficiently. However this sharp focus usually also limits time and numbers. In scouting, on the other hand, there is an established structure for building broad ongoing programs for very many children—programs well suited to the introduction of new views and new viewpoints.

The long experience of the Girl Scouts has shown that the single most important ingredient of good program is leadership. This ingredient is both a strength and a weakness of the Scout movement. As already noted, it is a strength because of the close identification possible between child and adult. It can also be a weakness because volunteer leaders come to their jobs with widely different capabilities and background experience.

The Girl Scouts maintain a strong adult training program, but only so much training can be required of volunteers. Most of our volunteers are genuinely interested in learning how to do a better job. In fact, the major unsung success of scouting is the amount of adult education that takes place in the name of serving youth. But where leadership is inadequate, the program suffers in scope or substance.

The other weakness is scouting's dependence on community support. Moral support is there—scouting ranks right along with motherhood and the flag. But the more tangible evidences of support are not so readily offered. Because the basic operating unit is the individual troop, and because the principal emphasis is on individual growth rather than the more visible forms of achievement, Girl Scouts have a low profile despite their large numbers.

On balance, scouting clearly has much to offer as a means of bringing environmental learning to children. Within the Girl Scout community, we believe we can increase our impact on the lives of children, first, by looking at our own operation to find how we can reach more of the girls who could most benefit from our style of program and, second, by working with other agencies where we can make a positive contribution. In the long run, the quality of experience is

more important than its substance; we expect that the quality can be improved by sharing resources and capabilities.

We believe cooperation works best on the local level and when it is aimed at reaching common, specific goals. For example, in one county we provide summer day camp for many children, but there are many others we cannot serve. Therefore we are sharing materials and program descriptions with the Department of Recreation, which organizes summer programs at neighborhood schools. In another county, the Girl Scouts have started working closely with the Youth in Crisis program, while in a third they are cooperating with the parks to set up a ranger aide program to expand the interpretive program for young children.

Sharing in one form or another makes sense. John Burroughs (1913) said, "I go to books and to nature as a bee goes to the flower, for a nectar that I can make into my own honey." In a sense, all of us who work with children are nectar merchants offering our individual wares. We can't say for sure how things will turn out, but we can provide the best possible selection of experiences and attitudes from which intelligent choices can be made.

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