

MEN'S WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE AND SPIRITUALITY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract.—Previous research on wilderness experience and spirituality focuses on participants in women-only or mixed male and female groups. This qualitative research study investigated the spiritual impact of participation in a men-only canoe journey into a remote wilderness area. In-depth interviews were conducted with six participants after the trip. Interpretive analysis was used to identify themes in the interview data. The results indicated that the short-term impact of participation in the wilderness trip was a sense of peacefulness while the long-term impact was characterized by recollection. The wilderness setting, along with the diverse social settings during the trip, was viewed as important to spiritual well-being. Most of the participants did not identify the scheduled spiritual activities as having a large impact upon their spiritual well-being. A few, but not all, of the participants viewed participation in a men-only group as important to their spiritual well-being.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In Driver et al.'s book *Nature and the Human Spirit*, (1996) the authors suggested, "A more thorough understanding of the spiritual meanings that nature holds for humans could improve management of public lands" (p. 3). While quantitative studies (e.g., Heintzman 2002, 2003) document that some wilderness users are interested in the spiritual dimension of their wilderness visit, qualitative research studies are helpful in providing in-depth information about the factors that contribute to the spiritual impact of wilderness experiences. Stringer and McAvoy (1992), in a study of male and female participants in wilderness adventure programs, concluded that wilderness experiences were conducive to spiritual development. They identified two influential factors that contributed to the participants' spiritual experiences during the wilderness trips: (1)

having other people on the trip to share experiences, opinions, and ideas with, and (2) being in a wilderness environment which did not have the constraints and responsibilities of the participants' everyday world. Fox (1997) examined six women's perceptions of a solitude wilderness experience in Australia. The women regarded *nature* as being spiritual and that *solitude* was important to their spirituality. Many of the women experienced the emotions of awe and wonderment of nature that contributed to their *spiritual experience*. Fox also discovered that the women experienced a sense of spirituality by being part of a women-only group and that working as a team with other women enhanced their spiritual experience. Fredrickson and Anderson (1999) examined how the qualitative dimensions of the wilderness experience might be a source of spiritual inspiration for women who participated in a wilderness canoeing trip or hiking trip. They found that being in a *bona-fide* wilderness along with aspects related to being part of an all-women's group (i.e., group trust and emotional support, "sharing common life changes, "non-competitive atmosphere") were sources of spiritual inspiration. Fredrickson and Anderson suggested future research with male-only groups.

1.1 Purpose of Study

Since previous research studies focus on the wilderness experience of participants in women-only or mixed male and female groups, this study investigated the influence of wilderness experience upon the spirituality of participants in a men-only group. Is the influence of wilderness experience upon spirituality the same for men as it is for women?

1.2 Research Questions

1. What is the influence of participation in a men's-only wilderness trip upon the spiritual well-being of the participants?
2. How do the various components of the wilderness trip (activities, settings) during the wilderness trip affect the spiritual well-being of the participants?
3. What is the influence of the "wilderness" environment upon the spiritual well-being of the participants?

4. What is the influence of the “men only” dimension of the wilderness experience upon the spiritual well-being of the participants?

2.0 METHODS

This qualitative research study investigated the spiritual impact of participation in a men-only wilderness canoe journey, offered each year by a Canadian education, retreat and conference centre. The program description which was used to publicize this men-only canoe journey read as follows:

A Wilderness Canoe Retreat for Men

Men have gathered around fires in the wilderness for thousands of years. Join this opportunity to travel with men, sharing experiences and stories in the supportive atmosphere of this wilderness journey. Travelling along ancient routes in theWilderness Area, we will paddle and portage deep into remote wilderness. There will be time each day to share experiences unique to our male spiritual journeys, to relax, reflect and swim. An overnight solo is an option for those who choose.

The canoe retreat was five days in length and took place in a designated wilderness area. The group of men on the trip comprised three leaders and 10 participants, one of which was the researcher. The participants ranged in age from early 20s to early 70s with the majority in the 40 to 60 age range. They came from a variety of urban and rural communities. The activities during the trip included canoeing, camping, unstructured time to be alone or with others, discussion times, spiritual activities (e.g., an aboriginal tobacco ceremony, a Sufi dance, a smudge ceremony), and an optional overnight solo.

The participants were informed of the research project at the beginning of the trip and were told that they could volunteer to participate in the study if they were interested. At the end of the trip seven of the 10 participants volunteered to be interviewed. Unfortunately, one participant died in an accident a few weeks before the interviews were conducted. As a result six participants were interviewed.

Haluza-Delay (2000) is critical of previous studies on wilderness experience and spirituality (e.g., Fredrickson & Anderson 1999; Stringer & McAvoy 1992) as they did not incorporate a longitudinal dimension, but rather focused on the immediate experience of the wilderness trip. He suggested that it is important to consider the participant's reflections after the wilderness experience and how the experience transformed the life of the participant. Intense spiritual experiences on a wilderness trip may or may not have an impact on long-term spiritual well-being. A spiritual experience does not necessarily lead to spiritual development as spiritual experiences need to be integrated into life for spiritual development and transformation (Chandler et al. 1992). Therefore to, determine the long-term impact of the wilderness experience on spiritual well-being, the interviews were conducted approximately five months after the completion of the canoe trip rather than immediately after the trip as in previous studies.

The researcher used a qualitative in-depth interview schedule as a guide when conducting the interviews. The questions were designed to explore the relationships between participation in the wilderness trip and spiritual well-being. As the interview progressed, probing with “how” and “why” questions took place to determine how and why the various dimensions of the wilderness trip influenced, if in fact they did, spiritual well-being. In addition, particular attention was given to the impact of being part of a men-only group. These interviews were recorded on audiotapes for later transcription and data analysis.

Interpretive analysis was used to identify themes in the interview data. The transcripts were analyzed inductively to seek patterns and themes based on the data (Patton 1990). The constant comparison technique was used to guide this process of theme development and understanding (Glaser & Strauss 1967). Through this method, the transcripts were carefully read, reread and coded to determine recurring themes and patterns within the data. During this process, patterns were observed that represented commonly shared explanations of the relationships between participation in the wilderness trip and spiritual well-being.

3.0 RESULTS

Six themes were identified in the data analysis: peacefulness, recollection, wilderness setting, variety of social settings, variable impact of spiritual activities, and ambivalence about a men-only group.

3.1 Peacefulness

The theme that encapsulated the immediate impact of participation in the wilderness canoe trip was that of peacefulness. A number of participants actually used the term “peace” or a variant of it to describe the immediate influence of the trip. For example, Bob stated “I think I got a sense of *peace* from it, so that would be a sense of harmonizing and sense of rightening...,” Chris reflected on “a *peacefulness* you had within yourself,” and Ernie claimed, “The whole thing seemed very much of a *peace* to me.” Arthur described the trip as “a break from everyday things, a *peace* with self, a *peace* with the world and I guess a *peace* as a comfort, like obviously not the lack of fighting but the comfort level, whatever but *peace*, that would be the direct part.” He likened the peace he experienced to the type of peace one would have as a child growing up and suggested this peace resulted from being away for four days and not having to worry about everyday responsibilities and concerns. Similarly, for Ernie the wilderness experience had a calming effect: “It was very positive. It was great. It was like a retreat... putting my pre-occupations into perspective...made me feel more opened up, *less as if I needed to hold on to my worries and concerns and anxieties* and all that.” Noting that his sense of peace was “kind of subtle”, Bob associated his sense of peace with “a sense of well-being inside” and attributed this sense of peace both to being in nature and having the opportunity to reflect, contemplate and clarify a number of life issues and questions associated with a major shift in his life. Bob went on to describe this peace in much more detail:

the wonderful sense of peace, the wonderful sense of connectedness to my world around me, to myself, ...there were no sharp things inside me...not a sense that something was wrong, or I needed to work on something, there was just a peace, there was tranquility, there was acceptance, there was harmony and I really

fondly remember those moments because I felt so good inside...

For Chris the peacefulness was characterized by being glad, and although it had an inward or internal dimension like that of Bob, it was heavily influenced by harmonious interaction with others on the trip:

it's more of a peacefulness that you had within yourself, first of all you're glad you'd done it and you're glad you were able to share with a number of other men in the same circumstances more or less and it amazes me...that...people that did not know each other at all could come together and get along so well and share a lot of things they don't share with anyone else in many cases...

In addition to the peacefulness being generated by the harmonious interactions with others on the trip, Chris also spoke of “the peacefulness of the settings that we could go out and enjoy nature...”

While other participants did not necessarily use the term “peace” they described the immediate impact of the trip in ways that reflected a sense of peacefulness in their lives. Like Chris, David found the sharing to be helpful: “I came away from it with...physical fatigue, but quite *refreshed* in spirit and a sense of appreciation of the sharing aspect of it.” Similar to Bob, Fred was dealing with significant issues in his life at the time of the canoe trip and the wilderness experience brought a sense of quieting and perspective into this situation.

...an immediate sense of *quieting of the mind*... prior to going on the canoe trip, I really had experienced a fairly significant confusion and turmoil in my life...it giving me enough time at least to start to work through some of that, put it into perspective.

In summary, although it took different forms and could be attributed to a variety of factors, the immediate impact of the wilderness experience upon the participants was that of a sense of peacefulness. This peacefulness was very much related to the nature of the long-term impact of the wilderness impact which we now turn to.

3.2 Recollection

Recollection, or reflecting back upon the wilderness experience, is the theme descriptive of the long-term impact of wilderness experience upon the spiritual well-being of the participants. This theme of recollection is suggested by a variety of terms and phrases such as “think back,” “recall,” “memory,” and “moments or thoughts.”

“I *think back* on the experience with a lot of satisfaction and pleasure...I *recall* (camping spots).” (David)

“...that peacefulness is still there, it does bring back, you know, you just have to *think back*, it kind of renews I guess your hope that things in the world can be better...” (Chris)

“I *think* about it a fair bit.” (Ernie)

“...ability to be able to *recall*...some of the feelings and emotions of that time...and so I think for me it does allow me to a certain extent to be able to re-experience some of what, you know I would have felt at that time...just feeling a sense of being blessed.” (Fred)

“...there’s a fading of the *memory* of what I experienced...but there is a general enriching of my spiritual vocabulary.” (Bob)

“...it gives me sometimes focus, *restful moments or thoughts* or something like that in what might otherwise be a busy time or schedule.” (Arthur)

The long-term impact of the wilderness canoe trip seemed to be primarily associated with the memory of the experience and less with any specific behavioral change. Fred commented: “I think probably in honesty, at this point in time, it (long-term impact) hasn’t been anything significant.” Other than the “restful moments or thoughts” which tended to help him “stop and smell the roses more often,” Arthur noted that the long-term impact of the wilderness experience was not strong. Bob also noted that the impact of the trip was primarily immediate and not long-term:

I’m a little unsure as to what I carry with me from the trip today...you know spiritual highs if you will, spiritual peak experiences, they do tend, for me at least to fade over time, but

the impact, the really great part of the impact is immediate, during the trip and shortly thereafter...

However, a couple of participants did mention specific behavioral changes as a result of participating in the wilderness canoe trip. For example, David connected his recollection of the trip to his ability to sleep: “In fact I find it difficult to sleep. I have insomnia and regard some of the camping spots there as safe places that I recall and imagine that I am lying down in, and it seems to clear my mind ...” Chris mentioned the influence upon the pace of his life and his relationship with other people:

it’s starting to slow some of the way I’m doing things I guess, how I look at what I’m doing overall I guess and how I get along with my greater family, my in-laws and...how you’d like to relate with them and how you relate to your Church family you still want to be in more of a participative role in that family and also at work...you have a different outlook on how you want to cooperate and work with people in your work environment, it’s all been very positive that way...you know it doesn’t have to be so combative or people competing with each other.

For Ernie, the influence of the trip was subtle but it affected his understanding of his surroundings and of people:

It’s sort of incremental, another part of my cumulative experience...it has made me feel more as if I understand something about this place, which is my home...it’s too subtle to be able to say it’s done this or it’s done that, yeh, it’s definitely effected my outlook on my surroundings and to some extent it has definitely affected something about how I think about people.

In summary, the long-term impact of the wilderness experience seemed to be primarily positive memories and reflections on the experience rather than concrete lifestyle or behavioral changes.

3.3 Wilderness Setting

The nature or wilderness setting of the canoe trip was associated with the men's spiritual well-being. For example, Fred noted that in terms of enhancing his spiritual well-being, "being out in nature...and experiencing that aspect" distinguished the canoe journey from other retreats he had experienced. When the researcher probed to find out what it was about the wilderness setting that was helpful to spiritual well-being, a variety of reasons were identified. One of the most common answers was that the wilderness setting provided an opportunity to get away from the everyday routine and to focus on the spiritual:

"It just helped reinforce the *break with routine*... we are to a large extent back there...away from civilization, cell-phones or whatever you have... getting rid of those distractions maybe allowing one to more go with the setting or with the surrounding to sort of view things or view self as the way we're made or the way we are instead of being adapted or changed by everything around us." (Arthur)

"...*getting away* from the influences of your routine of civilization... it just seems to free you up from the pressures of the day, and the bad news and the stresses that are imposed on you by others...it's good to just get away from those stresses. (Chris)

For Arthur and Chris, the wilderness setting was important for spiritual well-being because it provided the opportunity to be away from their everyday world. For Bob and Ernie, the wilderness was important for spiritual well-being not only because they got away from their everyday world, but also because it involved being in a different type of environment: for Bob, an environment that was more remote and with fewer people while for Ernie an environment that brought about a positive state of mind.

...the idea of being that far away as opposed to a park...it did provide that extra bit of intrigue, that extra bit of mystery, that extra bit of excitement that made me really get the sense that we were in a little bit of a different world. So

just the thought that help for instance isn't just around the corner or if we run out of food, you know we can't just pop across the street and pick up something else...and also the thought that I wasn't going to get disturbed by people which... would have wrecked the experience you know, it would just not have been the same...so from my perspective, I think it really added a lot... (Bob)

...being in the wilderness has a very positive effect on my state of mind ...if spirituality is about discovering the more fundamental and commonly shared aspects of human existence or beliefs or whatever we choose to occupy our lives with, when you leave all you occupy your life with behind, and you go out into the wilderness, which is the same for everybody, it just naturally has that effect. And definitely makes me realize that the stuff that I get caught up in on a day to day basis that makes me forget that human beings are spiritual beings, those things are of no concern to the inhabitants of the wilderness, and so that too, is a refreshing example. (Ernie)

Bob also stressed the importance of the natural characteristics of wilderness such as the breeze, trees, and rocks which were conducive to reflection:

...the fact that I was out in nature...I think the quietness provides me with a chance just to be quiet inside and I think that reflection...I mirror the reflection outside me inside me,...and that provides that settling and the sense of well-being...I mean things as simple as leaves moving in the breeze and the shapes of trees and rocks...I can't describe what it is exactly but I think there is something inside us that recognizes that and that then feels a sense of I'm coming back, I'm remembering who I am. I'm feeling OK inside. So just natural forms I think do that to us, naturally. (Bob)

Bob's mentioning of the breeze, trees, and rocks reflects a second reason why wilderness was important to the spiritual well-being of the participants—it is marvelous and awe-inspiring. "Just the wonder of creation and everything around me...and just the beauty and the

marvel within that creation...the wonder of it all" was important to Fred's spiritual well-being. Chris explained:

...nature is there in every aspect, often is something that, you know is so marvelous, you just want to say, you know, it's so intricate. How can this be? You know and it's so wonderful that fact that you have nature and we can enjoy it and it kind of enlightens the fact that here you are a small picture of it and it's not all about human beings either, we are just part of the big picture.

A final reason that wilderness was seen as important for spiritual well-being was that it produced a sense of being vulnerable:

a sense of vulnerability before and in the face of the forces of nature that we were experiencing...a sense of awe and respect for the surroundings...it made you realize that you were alone and you were self reliant, you were reliant on the resources of the group. It enhanced your sense of vulnerability. (David)

Thus, there were different reasons as to why the wilderness setting was conducive to spiritual well-being: being away from the everyday world; and being in a different environment that generated intrigue, reflection, awe and wonder, and also a sense of vulnerability.

3.4 Variety of Social Settings

The variety of social settings on the trip, such as being alone, being with one other person, and being in a group, was viewed as important to spiritual well-being. Fred highlighted the importance of the social interaction: "the opportunity to interact with other individuals and in particular with the sharing of stories and our own personal life experiences and probably more than any other single factor...that really has a profound effect on me personally..." Chris explained how positive feelings arose from these social interactions: "to come away with a lot of good feelings like you've had things you were thinking about that you could discuss with others in both a group setting and with individuals as you go throughout your day's activities." Several participants commented that the combination of times with the whole group, one on one, and alone was beneficial:

"...the others are open to talk or discussion but...if people want to find their own space, people are free to do that as well...so there's lots of time for self but there's also lots of time to participate...in a group with fellow men if you wish." (Arthur)

I think that I found some spiritual jewels, some spiritual treasures in all the social settings, being alone definitely, being around the fire with the entire group definitely, and just in one-on-one conversations with people... (Bob)

I at least, went back and forth between group and solitude throughout the day, throughout the series of days. It was a nice alteration...To the extent that friendship and camaraderie is an element of spiritual well-being, there was quite a bit of opportunity for that. Sometimes with everybody together and sometimes one on one. Two or three people. (Ernie)

Fred explained how time alone was beneficial to his spiritual well-being:

Well I think being alone, it gives me that time and the opportunity just to try and work my own way through some of those issues of situations that you know may be negatively affecting my spiritual well-being ...and I really firmly believe that more so in one on one situations we tend to be much more open and honest in sharing our experiences.

All three of the participants who participated in the solo found this time alone helpful to their spiritual well-being. Arthur explained that it gave "a feeling of closeness to nature or closeness to the sky." Bob noted: "the solo, that was really good for me...it gave me a really wonderful sense of peace." Ernie explained:

...it's just more formally retreat-like to be by yourself in the woods, just you and the fire and the lake. But I think it sort of comes back to my notion of what spirituality is about, which is that a lot of it has to do with being able to let go of one's pre-occupations and notice what's there underlying it. And so just being out in the woods

by yourself does that, it's only, it gets to be that it takes a considerable amount of effort to drum up something to think about, something to occupy yourself with, so when you give that effort, other stuff comes up that you might not expect.

3.5 Variable Impact of Spiritual Activities

The participants never mentioned any of the organized spiritual activities (e.g., Sufi dance, smudging ceremony) during the interviews, possibly because these activities did not have much of an effect upon their spiritual well-being. Some participants, but not all, mentioned the spiritual discussions, and these discussions were viewed differently by different participants. For example, David appreciated the structured sharing times: "Certainly, the structured sharing around the campfire and times of reflection were important and the tone and the structure of those was very important, they could have been quite negative." When he was asked what it was in particular about the discussions that he found helpful for his spiritual well-being, he responded in terms of the way the discussions were facilitated: "Mostly the open-endedness of the questioning, of the assurance that you could be honest and not, ah, just going along..." Similarly, Chris stated, "I really liked sitting down in the evenings and around the campfire or whenever we sat together and had discussions..." When he was asked how the discussions enhanced his spiritual well-being he referred to a greater being: "...other people had similar thoughts about the way things should go in the world and there's an overall feeling that people want to do the right thing and that...confirmed in my mind I guess that there's a greater being watching over us." For Bob, the discussions were important because they facilitated a sense of community: "...in general you know sitting around the campfire and being with other men and talking about men's issues really...I had a real sense of community, or companionship and there were some good discussions."

While David, Chris, and Bob saw the discussions as helpful, Arthur felt that the discussions would have been more helpful to spiritual well-being if they had have been more intimate:

the first time (a previous trip) let's say the discussions were more intimate or more personal

and maybe people felt more free to voice their problems and inner concerns. Like to me this time maybe people didn't have the same concerns or maybe they didn't feel as (open), ...to me as a group, I think people could have been more intimate, and I use the word intimate like in a mental sense or spiritual sense...

For Ernie, the structured spiritual activities and discussions were more of a hindrance than a help:

For me, the attempt to introduce a spiritual element was the biggest obstacle to having it be an effective spiritual retreat...to my taste, it just wasn't very effective. One aspect to that was that it was kind of a hodge podge: a little Christianity, a little Buddhism, a little Sufism, little Native American, a little Canadian, it just felt like a bag of tricks and quite superficial. Ah, and the real spiritual power of the trip was completely there if no one had opened their mouths. It didn't need that kind of enhancement...what was offered by way of spiritual imitation was just feeble in comparison to the experience itself. And it did come with some expectation, "Now we are going to sit down and have a spiritual experience together." And I just think that that's pretty hard to cook up. Didn't work for me. Now, clearly it did work for some of the other people...

3.6 Ambivalence about Men-only Group

Being part of a men-only group was an important factor in the trip's impact upon their spiritual well-being for some, but not necessarily all, of the participants. Only one participant spontaneously mentioned the importance of being part of an all-men's group during the interviews. For the remainder of the participants, the researcher asked about the impact of being part of the men-only group near the end of the interview. When asked about the effect of being part of a men-only group upon his spiritual well-being Fred responded: "To be quite honest, I don't know that it did...I really don't feel that it had any greater impact than if I were in a mixed group." Arthur stated that "I don't know that it (men-only group) had a strong impact in that regards (spirituality)." Likewise, Ernie observed: "Well, I think in the end it didn't impact

on it much...Part of me thinks that it was probably diminished by the fact that it was just guys, but as I say, maybe the fact that it was just guys meant that I actually did spend more time alone.”

On the other hand, Bob, who was the only participant who spontaneously mentioned the importance of the men-only group to his spiritual well-being explained:

I really enjoyed the camaraderie of the group of men... sitting around the campfire and being with other men and talking about men's issues...maybe brotherhood is too strong a word, but it was just comforting, it was reminding me it was ok to look for companionship with other men and that I'm capable of it and that I was able to be in that company and you know, be myself and have a good time and express what I needed to express and ya that is gave me a boost if you will, it gave me a sense that I can do it, so the companionship was really good.....the fact that it was a men's group allowed me to focus on some of my spiritual issues...just as an example...what is the difference between male spirituality and female spirituality...it was one of the deepest times that I ever thought about that question, you know and that is what I enjoyed...

Two other participants also viewed being part of a men-only group as important as it allowed for the men to share, cooperate, and be vulnerable with each other.

I think it was better as a men's only group... some of the discussions might not have been as open...it was good to see that men...can share and get along and cooperate in that way whereas a lot of our life's experience are not geared to that, it's the other way around, more competitive whether in the sporting world it's all competitive, in the business world, it's sometimes that way, it's not conducive to working together. (Chris)

It made men more vulnerable to one another and open to one another and the realization that other people, other men were willing not to be just (macho)...we've had experiences of quite macho behaviour on the surface at the beginning

and peeling [sic.] that off to discover the real person. (David)

4.0 DISCUSSION

Many of the results from this study are consistent with previous research. The importance of the nature or wilderness setting of the canoe retreat for spiritual well-being is consistent with previous research that suggests nature and wilderness settings provide a helpful setting for spiritual growth and development (Fox 1997; Fredrickson & Anderson 1999; Heintzman, 2000, 2002, 2003; Stringer & McAvoy 1992; Sweatman & Heintzman 2004). The reasons that wilderness was important to spiritual well-being varied, but again reflected previous research. First, for some men the wilderness experience provided the opportunity to get away from the everyday routine. This finding is consistent with Stringer and McAvoy's (p. 17) observation that “the operative factor for some participants was being in a **different** environment, free from normal constraints on time and energy, as opposed to being *necessarily* in a **wilderness** environment.” Second, for other men the awe-inspiring qualities of the wilderness itself facilitated spiritual well-being much like Fox found that awe and wonderment of nature contributed to spiritual experience and Fredrickson and Anderson discovered that direct contact with nature in a bona-fide wilderness was spiritually inspiring. The first reason reflects the “being away” feature of restorative environments theory while the second reason reflects the “extent” feature of the same theory (Kaplan 1995). The finding that a variety of social experiences ranging from group sharing experiences to time alone in nature may play an important role in spiritual well-being is consistent with previous studies which have found that both sharing with others and solitude in nature are important to the participants' spiritual experience (Fox 1997, Fredrickson & Anderson 1999, Stringer & McAvoy 1992, Sweatman & Heintzman 2004).

For the men in this study, the immediate impact of the wilderness experience was a sense of peacefulness. Again this sense of peacefulness has been identified in previous studies. Participants in Stringer and McAvoy's (1992, p. 294) study “commented that the wilderness provides a place to find inner peace and tranquility.” Fox (1997) noted that “spiritual experiences inspired from nature

were often related to ...feelings of inner peace,” while Fredrickson and Anderson (1999) observed that words such as “peaceful” were used by their study participants when journaling about wilderness experience. In comparison to these previous studies, the current study focused on the long-term as well as the immediate impact of the wilderness experience and found that the primary long-term impact was of recollecting or remembering the wilderness experience.

In two previous studies on the wilderness experience of women-only groups it was found that being part of a women-only group was a key factor in the spiritual experience of the women (Fox 1997, Fredrickson & Anderson 1999). In contrast, the current study found that being part of a men-only group was not necessarily an important factor in enhancing spiritual well-being for all men in the group. While half of the men found that a men-only group was important for sharing, co-operating, and being vulnerable, the other half really did not see that being part of a men-only group influenced the spiritual dimension of the trip.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Although the results cannot be generalized and this study cannot be directly compared to previous studies, being part of a men-only group did not seem to be as important for the men in this study as it was for women who were part of women-only groups in previous studies of wilderness experience (Fox 1997, Fredrickson & Anderson 1999). Further research is needed on the impact of wilderness experience upon spiritual well-being for participants in men-only groups.

In terms of practical implications, this study seems to suggest that designing wilderness experiences to include opportunities for contact with nature and a range of social interactions may be more important than including structured spiritual activities and discussions during the wilderness trip. Moreover, the greatest impact of participation in this wilderness canoe retreat seemed to be immediate. Wilderness leaders and programs may want to give more thought to how to facilitate long-term spiritual impacts in addition to short-term or immediate spiritual impacts.

6.0 CITATIONS

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