

# **A review of the social benefits of wild areas for youth at risk, healthcare and conflict resolution**

## **Introduction**

With wild landscapes under increasing threat, there is a growing opportunity to underwrite protection policies by demonstrating the multifunctional use of such areas, including evidence of how wilderness and natural habitats can deliver sound social benefits and aid health and well being.

For many years wilderness experiences have been anecdotally and qualitatively recognised as being beneficial for personal and social skills development. This has led to therapeutic interventions for a variety of client groups which are based on facilitated wilderness experience, including wilderness therapy, outdoor behavioural therapy and adventure therapy.

## **The rationale behind wilderness benefits**

Reasons for positive physical and psychological impacts can be explained in part by the Biophilia Hypothesis of EO Wilson of Harvard University (1), an evolutionary theory that explains humanity having a deep affinity to nature, linked to 99% of our evolutionary traits.

The hypothesis proclaims a human dependence on nature that extends far beyond the simple issues of material and physical sustenance to encompass also the human craving for aesthetic, intellectual, cognitive, and even spiritual meaning and satisfaction.

The Wilderness Foundation UK is an environmental education and conservation charity that has for many years been highlighting the social benefits of wilderness and wild areas to enhance the importance of protecting it.

In conjunction with the Universities of Essex and Ulster, we have been quantifiably monitoring and evaluating factors on psychological health such as mood change, self-esteem, and behavioural change in adolescents and adults, and the impact of wilderness experience on the reconciliation process between former political adversaries in Northern Ireland.

In addition, a key literature review of wilderness therapy in six countries, by the Foundation in association with Essex University, has explored the social and mental health outcomes directly linked to wilderness experience (4). Outcomes for participants resulting from health experiences as reported in the studies reviewed include those relating to: health and a sense of self, behaviour change, connection to nature, family, social, educational, spiritual, cultural and economic aspects (page 18, note 3).

## **Assessing the benefits of wilderness**

Benefits arising fall into three main categories: healthcare, youth at risk and conflict resolution.

### **Healthcare**

Health benefits as a result of contact with wild nature include reduced stress levels, improved mood, enhanced psychological wellbeing and improved attention and concentration (2). Natural places facilitate stress recovery, encourage exercise participation (3), stimulate development in children and provide opportunities for personal growth and a sense of purpose in adults.

Low levels of physical activity are linked to increased urbanisation and this is estimated to cost the British National Health Service about 2-3% of its total budget (Department of Environment 1993). (4)

Studies in Australia argue that by working in wild environments a socio-ecological approach to health can be developed. This approach encompasses all elements within human health (ie biological, mental, social, environmental, spiritual and economic) and takes into account broad ranging health determinants. (5) Perceptions of health have evolved to include a broader range of influencing factors and determinants than the actual health or ill health of the individual. This has been seen as critical in working with young people with substance abuse or behavioural issues.

The growing disconnection of people to wild nature is highlighted in a series of studies and books such as Richard Louv's 'Last Child in the Woods' (5a). This 'nature deficit disorder' is increasing with the growth of urbanisation being experienced across the world. There is the suggestion that this has concurrent links to both psychological and physical disease in human populations, which could have significant impact on the costs of mental health provision.

In the UK, mental ill health affects 1 in 6 of the population, and is strongly associated with life events, lower social class, being socially isolated, long term illnesses and financial and work problems. Anxiety with depression is the most common disorder. There are many symptoms of mental health and stress that are experienced by a large number of people particularly sleep problems (1). Currently the cost of dealing with mental health in England alone is around £77 billion, including National Health Service treatment, and the cost to the economy is approximately £41.8 billion (4).

## **Working with 'Youth at Risk'**

There are approximately 6.7 million young people aged 15-24 in England and a disproportionate number of these live in deprived, urban areas. The prevalence of adolescent problem behaviour has steadily increased with drug, tobacco and alcohol abuse, aggressive and anti-social behaviour, violence, teenage pregnancy and suicide rates becoming growing problems. Adolescents commonly face choices requiring pressurised decisions about gang involvement, violence, alcohol, drugs, sex and pregnancy, that potentially place them 'at risk'. This cohort of 'youth at risk' are also subjected to other interactive environmental stressors, such as domestic violence, parental drug and alcohol abuse, physical and sexual abuse, family stress/poorly parented, divorced/single parent families, neglect or school failure. (4a)

Statistics in the UK (2008) report that youth violence costs the country at least £20 billion per annum, Children in care costs £2 billion. A child with conduct disorder costs the Government £70,000 per annum, and social security benefits (including tax credits) increased by £35.5 billion to £142.7 billion in the 12 years to 2005/06. (6)

Founded by the Wilderness Foundation UK, The TurnAround Project in the UK is a medium-term intensive intervention which aims to address negative behaviour in youth at risk. Over the course of a twelve month period, project beneficiaries engage in wilderness trails, monthly nature-based activity workshops, and regular mentoring sessions with community-based volunteers. Youth aim at a return to education or employment on an ongoing basis.

Youth behaviour at the outset of the pilot programme in 2007 was described as disruptive, challenging, disrespectful, obstructive and undisciplined (4a.) Many were involved in substance abuse. All young people at the start were excluded from school and were unemployed. Most were under supervision of the local probation teams linked to the courts.

Research shows that the TurnAround Project represented a personal growth process and the majority of participants learn how to manage their behaviour and express their emotions (ranging from anger to love and affection) constructively. As the programme progressed the frequency of negative events reduced, criminal activity declined, substance abuse improved and they displayed less anti-social behaviour. Thus, major differences in their behaviour were observed between the beginning and end of the programme. (4a)

The project instigated positive change for all concerned and young people leave the programme with better self-esteem and communication skills, enhanced psychological health and wellbeing, a new set of coping skills, strengthened family relationships, greater awareness of personal behaviour patterns, a renewed interest in school and a set of future goals and challenges to address. (4a)

The project has had a success rate of 80% where success is measured by young people being engaged in full time education or work at the end of the programme. Graduates from the programme have returned as peer mentors and continue their own development through this engagement.

In exploring the link between mental health and wilderness experience, evidence from the wilderness trail elements of the programme show significant and measured shifts in mood and self esteem. This was measured in the adult mentors and youth alike. The youth found the remoteness and challenge of the wilderness experience life-changing and therapeutic support during this experience helped to gain life skills and self awareness that are still being used to moderate behaviour 18 months post programme. (4a)

This intervention creates youth who are self sustaining and not dependent on the state, have civic interest, improved family circumstances and a new interest in the environment.

### **Quantifying the benefits**

The savings to the state are immense, as by providing new opportunities to make positive change local communities benefit from lower crime and reduced anti-social behaviour, while wider society including taxpayers and government benefit from savings on police investigation, court appearances and custodial sentencing. The average cost of detaining a young person for a period of 12 months is approximately £47,000. A one year placement on the TurnAround costs just £7,500 per person.

In South Africa, Usiko, a partner wilderness intervention programme working with young offenders and vulnerable youth in the Western Cape, reports up to 85% non re-offending behaviour and engagement in further education after taking part in their two year intervention programme.

Similarly to TurnAround, Usiko engages volunteer mentors from the local community who also take part in wilderness programmes with the young people involved. The cost to society of violence and crime in South Africa is extremely high and fourteen years after the end of apartheid, the situation has not improved. Data compiled by the National Crime Prevention and Rehabilitation of Offenders shows that in 1999 police arrested 36,700 children (defined as 19 and under) in the Western Cape alone. This points to the extent to which young people are increasingly being swept up in the criminal justice net, at a high cost to the integrity of community and economically to the State. (7)

With growing evidence from the US, Australia, UK, Japan and South Africa, it becomes very clear that wilderness intervention has a positive effect on vulnerable youth behaviour and health, making large savings to the benefit and criminal justice system. As these problems are increasing across the world, there is a measurable need for sustained interventions which alone could justify the protection of wilderness areas to be earmarked for therapeutic intervention, in addition to its other uses such as eco-tourism.

### **Working for Peace and Reconciliation**

The Sustainable Peace Network emerged from the Glenree Survivors and Former Combatants programme, which promoted dialogue and sustainable relationships between victims/survivors, former combatants and wider society in Ireland and Britain from 2002-2008.

The programme hinges on wilderness experience in South Africa and the Scottish Highlands over an 18 month programme.

The overall goal of the programme is to cultivate a growing network of leaders in sustainable peace work, within and between the United Kingdom and Ireland. The specific aims are:

- To provide opportunities for personal growth for 100 potential leaders by 2010
- To promote sustainable relationships between victims/survivors, ex-combatants and members of the broader society on the islands of Ireland and Britain;
- To enhance appreciation for the roles of wilderness or nature-based activities in peace cultivation. (8)

The contribution of wilderness experience is currently being evaluated by the University of Ulster, with the aim to provide quantifiable in addition to qualitative and anecdotal outcomes.

The interim anecdotal measurements state that wilderness experience was key to the following outcomes:

- Less distractions so therefore able to concentrate fully on the programme
- Defusing of tensions by being in wild, open spaces
- Facing fears and having shared vulnerabilities enhanced by being in wild environments out of normal comfort zones
- Chances to connect meaningfully with others
- Chance to connect with self
- Chance to connect with nature and develop a better understanding of sustainability in the environment and socially
- An opportunity to broaden and deepen the understanding of peace/reconciliation by having to live side by side with others in a small group in wild nature. (9)

Participants reflect on having a better understanding of themselves as a result of the programme, having had time to reflect on themselves. A number also felt more spiritually in tune with themselves and achieved some sort of 'inner peace.' Some participants also mentioned being more confident in themselves, and being more comfortable with who they are or where they are in their lives.

The programme aims to have a positive influence on peace-building and encourage participants to engage in peace-building activities. (9)

The programme is now rolling out with a similar format to engage adults who have been through the reconciliation programme to work with young people from their communities, to start new programmes working with vulnerable youth in communities, talks and meetings with schools. Community groups, and public events and the development of a youth leadership project in Derry, Belfast.

## **Wilderness and reconciliation in other areas**

Wilderness interventions for reconciliation has long been used by organisations such as the National Peace Accord Trust in South Africa working with former combatants from the Apartheid struggle. In 1996, NPAT launched the 'Katorus Wilderness Therapy Project', which dealt with the trauma experienced by the youth in areas of intense violence and aimed at reducing their participation in criminal activities.

Between 1996 and 1999 NPAT's trained guides ran eco-therapy wilderness trails in the Drakensberg Wilderness Areas for 125 traumatised youth leaders from East Rand townships. All were unemployed and 84% were engaged in serious criminal activities including murder, rape, armed robbery, bank heists, car hijacking and major drug dealing.

"Eco-therapy trails and the support provided by our psychologists have had a profound impact on nearly all the participants," says the CEO Marilyn Seiler. "At the personal level, most have given up crime and drug abuse, although it is not clear whether their alcohol consumption has stabilised. Many are now involved in community work and some have made personal commitments to family, even taking on young children. She says that while these conclusions

are tentative, she believes serious crime can be markedly reduced through the right interventions at community level. (10)

Research findings share the findings that experience of wild nature in remote areas helps participants to find a shared and common sense of humanity. This is fundamental to the reconciliation process and development of empathy for other people's life experiences and perspectives.

## **Conclusion**

Our experience and research highlights the social and health benefits of wilderness and wildlands, in reuniting communities torn apart by conflict, helping vulnerable young people – for who we all have a responsibility – to change the destructive course of their lives and become valued contributors to society.

Current research provides a strong argument for the urgency in preserving wilderness areas as repositories for healing, and social and personal change.

It is equally evident that the need for meaning, reflection and spirituality continue to be important factors in creating not only a good quality of life but psychological and physical health.

## **Next steps required**

Through our literature search (3) it is obvious that further robust and quantifiable research in these fields is needed. Currently, across the world, most analysis rests on anecdotal or qualitative research with little presence of control groups or comparative analysis. It is therefore essential that further funding be made available to access further quantifiable results regarding the value of wilderness experience in all these areas - before areas are lost to development.

Equally, it will be important to develop more widespread programmes to gain from such experience.

This underlines the need for improved promotion of wilderness benefits to budget holders in the healthcare, youth at risk and reconciliation fields, encouraging support for expansion of current initiatives on the basis of a cost-effective return on investment of taxpayers' money.

The links with lobbying for improved protection must also be established. From a policy making perspective, wilderness areas in Europe deserve the highest level of protection, and the social and health benefits agenda as a key element of the multi-functional use of such areas needs urgent recognition, not least because it applies most clearly to contemporary urban issues and thus has the potential to enter the mainstream political.

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## **References**

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- (10) See [www.peaceaccord.org](http://www.peaceaccord.org)