

# Children's Perceptions and Learning about Wildlands and Conservation Issues<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Nature centers offer children direct experiences through outdoor programming to generate respect for wildlands. This study explores elementary school children's perceptions and learning about conservation issues. The implication of the result for conservation education curricula and practices are discussed.

## Introduction

Important purposes of many nature centres and park systems are to provide opportunities for healthy outdoor recreation, and to serve as informal settings for education. Visitors to such areas have the opportunity to engage in explorations of near pristine ecosystems and natural environments, enjoy wild flowers, birds and butterflies, discover unfamiliar living organisms and habitats, and observe and photograph both common and endangered wildlife. In some areas, parks and nature centres represent some of the few remaining places that enable to people to experience an alternative to degraded environment, and such institutions can provide unique opportunities for environmental learning as locations where people both spend their leisure time and seek out new experiences (Negra & Manning, 1997). Nature centres and wilderness areas can provide a space of quiet and tranquillity, a sanctuary for wildlife, and an informal learning setting offering an opportunity for people to learn about the natural world.

Nature centres and wild areas may present children with opportunities to learn at their own pace from an information-rich environment, and aid in a child's development of a connection with the natural worlds of the parks. According to Kellert (2002) such direct encounters with nature can serve as powerful motivators and stimuli for learning and development. Through engagement in this natural environment, a child's discerning sense of how life relies on a sustainable environment can be cultivated. Hence, nature centres, parks and wilderness or wild areas occupy a unique position because of the great opportunity they offer for children to directly experience more pristine environments. This unique advantage underscores the importance of 'firsthand experience of nature as the surest path to understanding the natural world, the problems and dilemmas of human interactions with it' (Miles, 1991, p. 5).

Within Nigerian communities and traditional folklores, the natural environment is depicted negatively as places where demons, spirits, and dangerous animals reside as well as place where evil occur. The effect of such negative impressions has led to development of different kinds of phobias among the populace particularly the children. As a result of this, it is not uncommon to encounter million of people who have little or no contact with wildland and forests. Unlike in the Western world where the invaluable benefit of outdoor programs is recognized in the educational sector. The value of outdoor programs like fieldtrip to nature reserves and wildlands are yet to be recognized to warrant its inclusion in school curriculum or embraced for educational purposes. It is within this context that this

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<sup>1</sup> Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the North American Association for Environmental Education, Virginia Beach Convention Center in Virginia Beach, Virginia November 14-17, 2007

study investigated the impact of field trip to natural reserve on urban middle-basic level students (primary 4-6). The study is significant to the extent that it is one of the very few studies that have explored the educational potential of fieldtrips activities in the area of conservation in Nigeria.

## **Methodology**

This study was designed to examine the influence of field trips to nature centres and wildlands on primary school students' knowledge and attitude towards conservation issues in Nigeria. The study adopted a qualitative approach in reporting the findings. The first objective was to assess the effects of exposure to the wildlands / nature reserves on children perception. The second objective was to determine whether the impact of experiences in the wildlands / nature reserves subsequently affect their knowledge, attitude and behaviour enough to cause to a change.

## **The Setting**

To obtain the desired results, the students were taken on a one hour field trip to the Nigeria Conservation Foundation Nature Reserve, in Lekki area of Lagos in Nigeria. The Conservation Centre is an oasis of natural resources located on the Lekki peninsula, sandwiched between the Atlantic Ocean and Lagos lagoon. The centre lies within an area once noted for Buffalos. The Peninsula is a mixture of wetland and coastal swamp forest. The former serve home to migrating birds the later serve as refuge for many other species of wildlife, especially those displaced due to encroaching urbanization. The swamp forest consist of trees and plants of great medicinal values, colourful birds, and butterflies and animals such as snakes, Mona monkeys, monitor lizards, crocodiles, squirrels, giant rats, grass cutters and forest duikers. At the reserve the participating students used the illustrative Nature trail to get a full glimpse of the wildlife.

## **Procedure**

A total of 30 (15 boys and 15 girls) children middle-basic level (primary 4-6) drawn from public primary school within Lagos Metropolis were involved in the study. Purposive sampling approach was used to select participants most suitable for the study. The decision to use these samples arose out from the desire to obtain well-matched samples of males and females that have equivalent background. The choice of students in primary 4-6 students is based on the fact that the researchers finds it convenient to work with the school children at these levels of education. Besides it is during this stage that children can cultivate greater affection and curiosity for other creatures and the environment (Shepard, 1996). This stage helps the child develop the capacity for assimilating knowledge and understanding which, in turn, can lead to rapid development of cognitive and problem solving skills achieved through interaction with and coping in natural world (Kellert, 2002).

During the field trip, the researchers and the two research assistants encouraged the students to ask questions and to be free so as to motivate their learning process, while a Park Ranger was on hand to provide answers to question relating to the reserve. The two research assistants were tasked with observing the children and take note of any form of reaction or fears, comments and/or exclamation while in the nature reserve as well as take field notes. At the end of the visitations children were separated into four different groups and were interviewed by the researchers.

## **Results**

To ascertain if learning took place. The students were made to express their opinions about wildlands before the nature-walk. Most of the students (85%) expressed a general apathy towards wildlands. No less than (60%) thought they will ever have any reason to come near wildland how much more experiencing it. About 15% of the students were indifferent about wildlands. Generally the students expressed a high fear level. At the end of the nature-walk research assistants presented the summary of observations based on the three (3) research questions.

#### *Research Question 1*

A change in perception and interest was reported. Additionally a reduced fear level was observed. Furthermore it was observed that some of the sampled students (60%) want a repeat experience. About 20% feel one experience is enough, while 10% would still rather want any such experience. A further probe of the 10% revealed a sense of phobia and dislike for wildlands and wild animals such as snakes, lions and tigers. Furthermore 55% of the sampled students answered in affirmative with respect to overcoming fear, 25% still nurse some fears while 20% were indifferent.

#### *Research Question 2*

A significant change was observed in the students' knowledge, attitude and behaviour, for instance 70% of the sampled students expressed strong interest in learning about the wildland and the animals. Another 65% hold the opinion that nature possesses so much for them to learn from, while 80% believe nature deserve extra care from humans in order to protect its fragility. Of interest was the comment from the sampled students that "*nature studies or conservation education should be made subject in schools to help motivate knowledge*".

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The results of the study indicate that the children did experience some learning during the field trip. It revealed that such field trips help to build a sense of conservation knowledge and competence in the young children. Interview with students indicates that direct experiences in the nature reserve cause them to reconsider many of the beliefs about wildlands. The finding is in agreement with Wendling and Wuench (1985) who find out that all the students reported learning "a lot" after the field trips. In addition, the finding of this research study agrees with Seagart and Hart (1979) who found out firsthand experiences lead to better knowledge of natural environment. The finding on the attitude change on the other hand finds agreement in the Euler (1989) who observed attitude change in urban students after field trips.

Extensive research and conceptual work by Hart (1977, 1983), Moore and Young (1978) and Moore (1980) illustrate the merit of natural areas to the children as an educational and play environments, at least for children with access to them. Repeated positive exposures to wildlands areas through field trips should eventually lower the novelty of wildlands areas and build a sense of environmental competence (Bixler, Carlisle, Hammitt and Floyd 1994). Crompton and Stellar (1981) in their research concluded that length of exposure to natural environment might be the single most important variable in program success. In conclusion, this study has been able to show that fieldtrips to the nature reserves can enhance primary school students' knowledge and encourage positive attitudinal shift in conservation issues.

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