

Strand: Conservation and Community Education

The Giving Camp: A Model For Developing Year-Round Programming Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Organized camp programs provide youth with an array of experiences in a setting that fosters personal and social development. A great potential exists for these valuable experiences to be incorporated into complement formal education programs and community-based environmental initiatives. Expanding the organizational capacity of traditional summer camps to provide year-round programming opportunities can provide numerous community benefits, particularly for nearby urban communities. These benefits include opportunities to experience nature, family bonding, and physical skill development. Year-round programming opportunities can also play an important role in promoting sustainability education at the community level. Directors at Camp Beech Cliff, a nonprofit outdoor education center located on Mount Desert Island, Maine, are actively working to expand their organizational capacity to offer a variety of year-round programming opportunities including after-school activities, wilderness adventure trips, outdoor classroom opportunities, and professional retreats. The benefits and challenges

associated with providing year-round programming opportunities, a conceptual model for building the organizational capacity of camping organizations, and a first-hand account of one camp's transition to a year round education facility can help others follow Camp Beech Cliff's lead.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this presentation are to 1) offer a first-hand account of one camp's transition to a year-round outdoor education center, 2) present a conceptual model for camp development, and 3) provide creative solutions for increasing the organizational capacity of camp organizations.

BACKGROUND

As our population becomes increasingly urbanized, our youth become less connected to the natural environment (Louv 2005). Environmental and sustainability education programs that utilize outreach techniques and environmental interpretation can help restore connections between youth and the natural world. Camps are able to satisfy many of the key components of successful youth outreach programs by demonstrating the importance of relationships and human resources through the types of programs they offer (Bocarro 2002). Camp experiences can provide youth with physical and developmental skills that are increasingly less available through formal education institutions, and thus contribute to the education of the whole child. As stated by the American Camp Association (ACA), "they (camps) are assuming a greater role in year-round education and youth development, recognizing that the same 'fun' activities and programs they have traditionally offered, are in reality highly effective alternative learning models" (ACA 2002).

The very structure of camps often times establishes various levels of peer groups i.e. program directors, counselors, counselors-in-training (CIT), etc. These peer groups can reinforce social norms that promote participation in proenvironmental behaviors. The Schwartz norm activation model proposes that people are motivated to engage in proenvironmental behaviors when they hold personal norms that favor those behaviors (Vining and Ebreo 2002). Camp organizations that provide youth with opportunities to experience nature through outdoor education programs are thus becoming increasingly valuable.

CASE STUDY

Information for this presentation was gathered in part through personal experience working as the Program Director for Camp Beech Cliff during the summer of 2006 and as a counselor from 2004 to 2005. Located in Mount Desert, Maine the nonprofit camp provides year-round outdoor education programs for a small island community. The programs they offer are the result of years of planning and development. Camp Beech Cliff began operation in the 1950's as a private summer camp for boys. Following a brief closure in 1978, the camp was reopened in 1991 as a day camp for boys and girls. The camp's transition to a year-round outdoor education center began with the incorporation of the camp as a nonprofit organization in 1999. The programs they now offer include:

- Archery – Lessons and National Archery Association Level I Instructor Certification
- Adventure Trips – Maine based adventure trips that incorporate outdoor skills and leadership development on extended backpacking and canoe trips
- Acadia Leadership Experience – Locally based programs that combine leadership development with community service and adventure programming

- Summer Camp – A traditional summer day camp experience offered over eight week-long sessions with program areas that include boating, arts & crafts, outdoor skills, and challenge course
- Wall Nuts Climbing Program – An indoor rock climbing program that is open to community members of all ages
- The Aspire Program – A program developed with the local high-school that provides at risk youth with an alternative educational experience

Camp Beech Cliff's staff consists of a full-time Executive Director, Camp Director, Adventure Education Director and office manager. Approximately 50 seasonal staff lead the camp's various programs. Directors at Camp Beech Cliff have made a recent pledge to the Mount Desert Island community to promote "No Child Left Inside", a targeted effort to help families realize the multitude of benefits that outdoor experiential education can provide. Campers, fellow staff, management, and the camp's Board of Directors have all played a valuable role in making Camp Beech Cliff's transition to year-round educational programming a success.

METHODS

Information for this project was acquired through various qualitative techniques. Interviews were conducted with both the Executive Director and Camp Director for Camp Beech Cliff, the parents of campers, campers, and camp staff. These interviews provided valuable insights into the benefits associated with camp experiences and the challenges that must be overcome to provide organized camp programs on a year-round basis. Various program materials were also evaluated for content and impact.

DISCUSSION

The development of any new EE program begins with the planning process. An important component of this phase is a review of the organization's mission and educational goals (Jacobson, McDuff and Monroe 2006). Camp Beech Cliff's mission is to provide children and adults with outdoor educational experiences that foster fun, teamwork, self-esteem, positive decision making, and relationship development through physical and social growth. Directors connect this mission to the Mount Desert Island community by developing programs that meet the needs of the local school system and complement educational programs offered by nearby camps. Counselors and program leaders are trained to positively influence campers and program participants to engage in proenvironmental behaviors that can ultimately benefit both the community and the environment.

It is in the best interest of camps to align their goals with the sustainability objectives of their community. Many of the steps that are a necessary component of program development are synonymous with the steps that will need to be taken to increase organizational capacity. Organized camp experiences can be extended through the following types of youth programs:

- Specialty camps
- Custom programs for schools
- Field based instruction
- Outdoor classrooms
- Alternative school programs for at risk youth
- After school activities
- Adventure trips

- Service learning projects and community service opportunities

Offering adult programs allows camps to provide educational services that benefit the entire community. Camp Beech Cliff offers leadership development and training, skill instruction i.e. sailing and painting, professional retreats, and collaborative education programs with state and federal agencies and community organizations in addition to its numerous youth programs.

The benefits of providing organized camp experiences through the types of programs listed above are numerous, and extend across multiple levels of community sustainability education needs. The following benefits were identified by organizers and participants of programs offered by Camp Beech Cliff.

Personal benefits

- Strengthen relationship with nature
- Communication and physical skill development
- Enhanced sense of personal responsibility and self-efficacy
- Increased knowledge and awareness

Community benefits

- Contributes to participants' sense of place and community attachment
- Promotes environmental literacy
- Provides opportunities for family bonding and social interaction
- Increases opportunities for developing partnerships and environmental based community initiatives
- Fosters a sense of caring for others

Environmental benefits

- Promotes the practice of environmentally responsible behaviors
- Promotes sustainable resource use
- Increases value of resources

The benefits are grouped into the categories: personal, community, and environmental benefits, to reflect the idea that sustainability affects communities on multiple levels as derived from the benefits-based management (BBM) approach to recreation opportunity management. “BBM provides a rich framework for providing the types of recreation opportunities that will satisfy visitor and community needs, protect the critical resources found within wildland recreation areas and ensure that quality experiences and benefits are attained” (Anderson, Nickerson, Stein and Lee 2000). Using benefits to assess the value of organized camp experiences thus provides a meaningful framework for promoting the development of new sustainability education programs.

Numerous challenges must be overcome by camp organizations as they increase the scope and number of programs that they offer. Camp Beech Cliff has experienced the following challenges in developing year-round programming opportunities:

- Lack of support from the community in terms of participation and/or funding
- Developing effective strategies for building organizational capacity
- Lack of financial resources
- Time, material and other resource related constraints
- Organizational inflexibility and/or instability
- Hiring quality employees to meet staffing needs
- Lack of interest and/or commitment to sustain long-term partnerships

Effective PR is in many cases necessary to overcome many of these challenges. One proposed avenue for promoting year-round programs is by combining PR efforts with social marketing campaigns that focus on improving the health of the environment and/or social welfare. “Unlike many information-intensive campaigns, community-based social marketing has been shown to have a much greater probability of promoting sustainable behavior” (McKenzie-Mohr 2000). Camps should look to partner with local agencies, environmental groups, and schools to develop such campaigns.

It is important for camp directors to draw upon all available resources when transitioning to year-round programming. There are many facets of building organizational capacity. Some important points of consideration are improving operational effectiveness, maximizing utility of existing resources, having a clear strategic plan, and understanding the camp’s mission (Astle 2001). Creative solutions for increasing organizational capacity employed by Camp Beech Cliff include increasing grant flexibility by forming partnerships, pooling resources with other camps and educational organizations to supplement needs for staff and/or supplies, utilizing strategic planning to develop an educational “niche” based on the needs of the community and regional attributes, and supplementing costs through the planning and development of a collaborative fundraising campaign.

CONCLUSIONS

Extending organized camp programs to offer year-round community programming opportunities provides numerous benefits for both community members and the environment. Many communities, particularly urban communities, currently lack the programming opportunities necessary to foster participation in EE and sustainability education programs. Effective solutions need to be developed to help camp organizations

build their organizational capacity and overcome challenges associated with providing increased programming opportunities. Camps represent a valuable avenue through which the important messages of sustainability and EE programs can reach potentially large audiences of both children and adults. The connections they can help communities forge with the natural environment remain a widely untapped resource in many parts of the country. Extending organized camp experiences can help communities reconnect with a sense of childhood wonder towards nature and obtain their goals of sustainability.

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