

Making the Case:

Benefits of Outdoor Experiential Education for the Entire Community

Outdoor exploration and experiential education can have a profound impact on youth, adults, and the communities in which they live. Researchers have been studying the impacts of experiential education and outdoor programs in communities since the 1970s. Their findings have shown that providing access to green spaces and engaging whole communities in hands-on nature investigations can improve mental health, facilitate and promote cross-cultural bonding, and instill a sense of appreciation and stewardship for the natural world.

In order for communities to reap the benefits of outdoor experiential education, they must have access to green spaces, both literally and figuratively. Many low-income and ethnic minority families in the United States have far less access to clean, safe urban green spaces than their middle- and upper-class, primarily white, neighbors (Chawla 2015). Conversely, studies have shown that, even if the green spaces are readily accessible in the physical sense, people from these marginalized groups and cultures often perceive the green spaces to be inaccessible in the metaphorical sense. A 2016 multi-method research project, conducted by North Carolina State University, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Urban Wildlife Conservation Program, found that non-white and low-income participants felt a sense of “otherness” in relation to outdoor activities (Floyd et al). Because of their racial or socioeconomic background, many of the community members from this study noted that they did not feel comfortable or welcome in public outdoor areas. Most green spaces are explored and recreated by white “members of the upper- and middle-classes” who have ample experience in “trail-related activities” (Lindsey et al 2001).

Since the 1970s, outdoor play has drastically decreased, with the constant introduction of new tech toys and the hyper-awareness of potential threats and dangers perpetuated by social media frenzy. Thwarting children’s exposure to outdoor play and exploration can have detrimental impacts on their overall mental and physical health. In a comparative study of Vermont children’s behavior between 1979 and 2004, researchers found that the “loss of creative play culture outdoors coincides with objectively measured increases in psychiatric disorders and declines in creativity in contemporary children” (Chawla 2015).

Outdoor experiential education opens doors for the entire family to appreciate and understand the natural world, while simultaneously learning to appreciate and understand each other. Humans are inherently fearful of things, people, places, etc. that are unfamiliar (Floyd et al 2016). Experiential education in outdoor settings removes barriers, such as a sense of otherness or non-inclusion, that can hinder cross-cultural, community-wide bonding (Walter 2013). Learning and working together in an outdoor setting can be “transformative” for all who take part because “learning is more active, experiential, and physically challenging” (Walter 2013). Community-wide outdoor educational programs provide members with opportunities to “sharpen cognitive faculties” as they participate in activities that directly align with their hobbies and interests, while also building and maintaining relationships with one another (Floyd et al 2016).

References

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Making the Case:

Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont's Work with Community-Based Outdoor Experiential Education

In the last few years, Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont (Tremont Institute) has made remarkable strides toward engaging urban, underserved schools and their surrounding communities in outdoor experiential education programs. Tremont Institute currently has partnerships established with 10 schools in Knox County. These partnerships are designed to connect academic, school-based programming with community-wide environmental action in hopes of increasing each community's capacity to carry forward their access to nature and opportunities to learn with it and engage with it.

Educators from 4 of the Knox County schools are participating in an educator professional development opportunity (Citizen Science 2.0) created by Tremont Institute. Citizen Science 2.0 is designed to get these teachers and their students outside of their classrooms to explore their surrounding natural spaces and investigate problems or needs in their community. Participating teachers will use information they find with their students to design and implement a standards-based unit in their classroom that will identify ways to alleviate a watershed-based issue. Tremont Institute also provides three workshops for teachers that demonstrate best practices in outdoor education and increase educator confidence in leading their own students on outdoor investigations in their local communities. Through this strategic teacher training, coupled with a focus on community-based watershed issues, students will get excited about getting out into green spaces and finding ways to fix issues in their local environments.

In August of 2017, a group of juniors and seniors from Fulton High School came to Tremont Institute for 4 days to learn about the solar eclipse and Great Smoky Mountains National Park. On the day of the solar eclipse, the students acted as docents in Cades Cove, educating thousands of visitors about the eclipse and the park. For many of these students, it was their first time visiting the national park, first time camping, and first time hiking. Even several months after the trip ended, students continue to reflect on the experience and how it positively impacted their everyday lives back home in urban Knoxville. Tremont Institute plans to harness this passion and excitement and send it reverberating out through the communities around Fulton High School through the creation of an Environmental and Community Fellowship. This fellowship will encourage Fulton High student leaders to take action on local environmental issues while working to increase community comfort in and use of local green spaces through programs, such as the Nature Explorers Summer Camp at Lonsdale Elementary School.

Tremont Institute has an AmeriCorps VISTA team dedicated to expanding access to outdoor education among underserved communities in East Tennessee. AmeriCorps VISTA projects are each designed with one common goal at its core: poverty alleviation. This team supports urban teachers in bringing their students outside by developing standards-based lesson plans, activities, and other academic resources in addition to designing community involvement and funding plans. Additionally, in June of 2018, members of the team planned, directed, and facilitated a free, month-long Nature Explorers summer camp at Lonsdale Elementary School. Students from Lonsdale, a profoundly impoverished, urban community in Knoxville, Tennessee, followed their curiosity as they explored the schoolyard and local park while learning about habitats, ecosystems, and all of the nature that exists around them. Tremont Institute believes that the success of the AmeriCorps VISTA project will be achieved when students learn outside during the school day and when the entire community is inspired to value and use their natural spaces for the myriad of benefits that they offer.