

Spiritual Outcomes of Park Experience: A Synthesis of Recent Social Science Research

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Introduction

IN RECENT YEARS THERE HAS BEEN INCREASING EMPIRICAL RESEARCH on park experience and spirituality. In the vast majority of these studies, participants self-define spirituality. This paper summarizes and synthesizes this recent empirical research using the behavioral model of outdoor recreation as a framework (See Figure 1) that allows for the inclusion of many factors involved in the relationship between park experience and spirituality. Due to space restrictions only 16 of these studies are reviewed and synthesized in this paper. Antecedent conditions include personal history and current circumstances, attitude and motivation, sociodemographic characteristics, and spiritual tradition. Setting components include being in nature, being away to a different environment, and place processes such as place attachment and place meanings. Recreation components include activity, free time, solitude, and group experiences. The paper further explains how these conditions and components may lead to outcomes of spiritual experiences, spiritual well-being, and leisure-spiritual coping. The model presented takes into account the complexity of the park experience and spirituality relationship. This research synthesis is important as it may help park managers to better understand the processes that link park experience with spiritual outcomes and to educate park visitors about these processes.

Antecedent conditions

Antecedent conditions refer to people's characteristics prior to their park experience. Personal history and current circumstances may influence the park experience. Examples of personal history include "baggage," such as fear that one brings to the park experience and which prevents one from being sufficiently relaxed and receptive to be open to spiritual experiences in a wilderness park setting, as noted by Fox (1997) in her study at Australia's Croajingolong National Park. Another example of personal history, identified by Foster (2012) in his study of Boundary Waters canoeists, is spiritual mentorship, which refers to how parents, relatives, friends, guides, visual media, fiction, and non-fiction may influence a person's spiritual experience in nature. A third example of personal history is Stringer and McAvoy's (1992)

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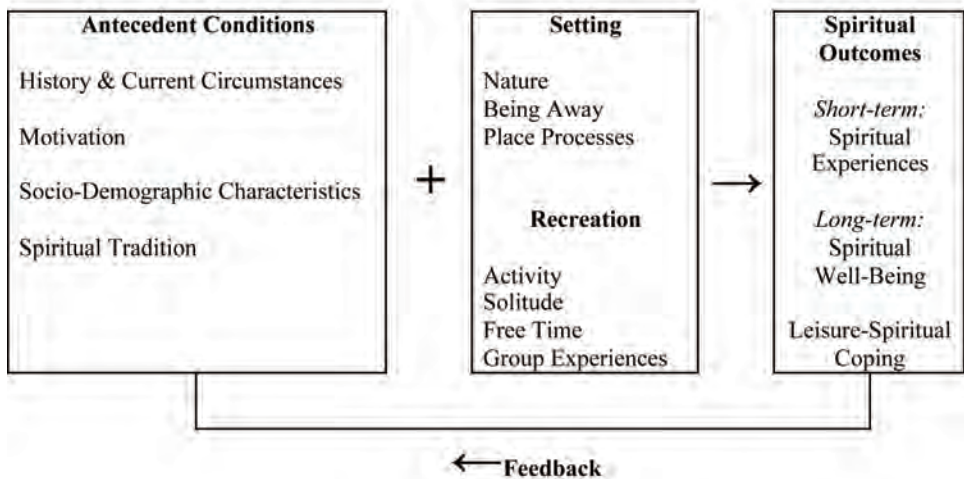


Figure 1. Park experience and spirituality outcomes.

finding that “prior awareness of one’s own spirituality,” as well as previous spiritual experiences, contributed to spiritual experiences during canoe and hiking trips in wilderness areas. In addition they found that in terms of current circumstances, “needing to confront and deal with personal questions” (p. 18) contributed to spiritual experiences during a trip.

People’s motivations and attitudes in regard to visiting parks can be considered antecedents. While some park visitors may not be seeking spiritual outcomes (Stringer and McAvoy 1992; Heintzman 2007), quantitative studies suggest that 46% to 82% of park visitors seek or experience spiritual outcomes (Brayley and Fox 1998; Heintzman 2002, 2012; Lemieux et al. 2012), although these outcomes may not be the most valued (Behan et al. 2001). In a qualitative study, Stringer and McAvoy (1992) found that “predisposition toward spiritual reflection and/or experience” (p. 18) contributed to spiritual experience.

Sociodemographic characteristics are also considered antecedent conditions. For overnight campers at Ontario Parks in Canada, the degree to which introspection/spirituality added to satisfaction with the park experience was greater for males than for females, increased with age and education level, and decreased in households with higher incomes (Heintzman 2012). This gender difference was also true for day visitors to Ontario Parks (Heintzman 2002). Similarly, in a study of visitors to two Canadian parks, Lemieux et al. (2012) found that females rated both spiritual well-being motivations for visiting a park and the spiritual well-being benefits received from visiting a park higher than that of males, while those in the lowest- and middle-income groups tended to rate spiritual benefits higher than those in higher-income groups.

Finally, spiritual tradition should be considered. For example, for park visitors with Christian understandings of spirituality, nature is viewed as God’s creation, which is entwined with their spirituality (Heintzman 2008; Foster 2012). Similarly, in a study of US national park visitor experiences, while the researcher attempted to remain open to the many deities that might be mentioned by park users, the spiritual themes were dominated by ref-

ferences to God and visitors related to the national park lands as a creation of God (Hoover 2012).

Setting

Park settings produce opportunities for spiritual outcomes for two main reasons. First, the natural setting of parks elicits a variety of outcomes, including a sense of wonder and awe (Fox 1997); connection with God or a higher power (Heintzman 2007, 2008); a sense of peacefulness, calm, stillness, and tranquility (Fox 1997; Heintzman 2007); therapeutic benefits (Fox 1997); and peak experiences that facilitate spiritual expression (McDonald et al. 2009). The biophysical characteristics of *bona fide* park wilderness and direct contact with nature (Fredrickson and Anderson 1999), as well as the natural backcountry setting (Marsh 2008), have been associated with spirituality. Ontario Parks camper and day visitor studies (Heintzman 2002, 2012) included statistically significant relationships between the type of park visited and the degree to which introspection/spirituality added to visitor satisfaction. Visitors at wilderness parks rated introspection/spirituality the highest, those visiting natural environments were next, while visitors at recreation parks rated it the lowest.

Second, being away appears to be as important as the natural setting for park visitors. Stringer and McAvoy (1992) observed that greater opportunities for, and enhancement of, spiritual experiences were usually ascribed to lack of constraints and responsibilities during a wilderness area visit compared with participants' everyday lives. Being away at a park has been associated with the opportunity to get away from the everyday routine to focus on spirituality (Heintzman 2007, 2008), sacredness of life (McDonald et al. 2009), and escape from information technology (Foster 2012), all of which have been associated with spirituality. Being in nature may be important for some park visitors and being away may be significant for others, but often the combination of these two factors is conducive to spirituality (Foster 2012).

Place processes may be a third reason why park settings produce opportunities for spiritual outcomes. The spiritually inspirational characteristics of parks have been linked to the phenomena of "place attachment" and "sacred space" as visitors have developed a sense of "at-homeness" and identification with the wilderness areas they visited (Fredrickson and Anderson 1999). Also, spiritual place meanings have been associated with sacred sites by visitors at the Apostle Islands (Salk et al. 2010).

Recreation

In a study of US national park visitor experiences, spiritual themes such as spiritual affirmation, spiritual connections including deeper connections with God, and deities as creators and protectors were closely associated with recreational experiences in these parks (Hoover 2012). These spiritual themes were the second-most prevalent themes after social themes.

The type of recreation activity engaged in at a park influences spirituality. While diverse park activities have been associated with spirituality (Stringer and McAvoy 1992), Ontario Parks' campers who spent most of their time at a park in more nature-oriented activities (e.g., viewing/photographing nature, guided hikes/walks) rated higher on the degree to which introspection/spirituality added to their satisfaction than did participants who spent most of their time in activities such as biking and motor-boating (Heintzman 2002, 2012). Similarly,

Behan et al. (2001) found that spiritual benefits were valued more by foot travelers than by mountain bikers, as it was easier for non-mechanized travelers to focus on nature.

The intensity of a recreation activity during a park visit may also influence spirituality. The physical challenge of canoeing in the Boundary Waters and hiking in the Grand Canyon (Fredrickson and Anderson 1999), adventure, and mental and physical exercise (Marsh 2008) have all been associated with spirituality.

The type of spiritual outcome may also be influenced by the type of park activity engaged in. Canoeists have been found to have had spiritual experiences focused on interconnections with people while mountain hikers described spiritual experiences involving appreciation of wilderness beauty (Stringer and McAvoy 1992). Canoe paddling has also been found to offer an opportunity for spiritual reflection as it provides time to consider the difference between park conditions and everyday life (Foster 2012). Solitude has led to peace, tranquility, a chance for an inner journey, time for self-reflection (Fox 1997), and renewal resulting from contemplation of life's deepest questions, which can be difficult or impossible during everyday life (Fredrickson and Anderson 1999). The importance of solitude for spirituality has also been reported by canoeists in a provincial wilderness area who participated in a solo experience (Heintzman 2007), and by backcountry adventurers (Marsh 2008). Ontario Parks campers who visited a park alone rated introspection/spirituality higher than those who visited a park with others (Heintzman 2012). In the case of group experiences in wilderness, unscheduled time in nature when one is free to do as one chooses, has been viewed as a critical component in spiritual experiences (Stringer and McAvoy 1992).

Group experiences in wilderness areas, including the sharing of experiences, opinions, and ideas (Stringer and McAvoy 1992); working as a team (Fox 1997); "group trust and emotional support," "sharing common life changes," and a "non-competitive atmosphere" (Fredrickson and Anderson 1999); and the opportunity to discuss with others, to share stories and personal life experiences, and to have friendships and camaraderie (Heintzman 2007) have all been associated with spirituality. Conversations and discussions on one canoe trip facilitated ongoing spiritual friendships (Heintzman 2008). Being part of a male-only or female-only group has also played an important role in spiritual outcomes (Fox 1997; Fredrickson and Anderson 1999; Heintzman 2008). In some cases a balance of solitude and group experiences is helpful to spirituality (Heintzman 2007): "There is a dynamic of tension between interaction and solitude: Both enable a spiritual meaning" (Marsh 2008: 292).

Spiritual outcomes

The combination of antecedent conditions, setting, and recreation components may lead to spiritual outcomes. Spiritual experience in nature has been characterized by emotions of awe and wonderment at nature; feelings of connectedness, heightened senses, inner calm, joy, inner peace, inner happiness, and elatedness (Fox 1997); intense and often positive emotions (Stringer and McAvoy 1992); peacefulness, including peace with oneself and the world (Heintzman 2007); and religious-like or self-transcending feelings of peace and humility (Fredrickson and Anderson 1999). McDonald et al. (2009) discovered that participants' peak experiences in wilderness areas within Australian National Parks facilitated the sacredness of life, meaning and purpose, and transcendent "unseen" dimensions of spiritu-

ality. Within an urban park setting, Chiesura (2003) found that the emotional dimension of park experience included feelings related to unity with oneself and unity with nature, which they described as a spiritual component of the park experience. Chiesura explained that this component reflects a need to elevate the mind and soul beyond daily thinking as well as to feel part of, and in harmony with, a larger whole. She concluded that “the tranquil atmosphere of the park inspires reflection, meditation and a general feeling of harmony between oneself and the surroundings” (p. 135).

Some studies suggest spiritual experiences in parks influence daily life. Fox (1997) claimed that feelings of empowerment, clarity, and inner peace led to inner strength and self-control, which affected both work life and family life by making participants feel more in control and stronger regarding relationships, roles, and personal goals. Stringer and McAvoy (1992) used post-trip interviews (i.e., 3–45 days after the trip) to conclude that wilderness experiences appeared to have some impact on participants’ lives one month later. Just over half of the participants in McDonald et al.’s (2009) study observed that their wilderness peak experiences were significant in their life because the restorative elements of wilderness, such as the absence of distractions, human-made intrusions, and time constraints, along with solitude, provided time and space to think about meaning and purpose in relation to suffering, the limits of human life, and nonmaterial pleasures.

Another outcome is spiritual well-being. Lemieux et al. (2012) found that 73.4% of park visitors perceived spiritual well-being benefits or outcomes from connecting with nature, being inspired by nature, and seeking the meaning/purpose of life while visiting parks. The impact on spiritual well-being for men on a canoe retreat in a provincial wilderness area 5–7 months later was associated primarily with the memory and recollection of the experience and less with specific behavioral change. Development and enhancement of spiritual friendships was the main impact on spiritual well-being 8–10 months after a different men’s canoe trip along a provincial waterway park (Heintzman 2008). Chiesura (2003) examined whether an urban park experience was perceived as important for the participants’ general well-being. She discovered a spiritual component related to the stimulation of a spiritual connection to nature that was seen as a source of energy that enriches life.

“Leisure-spiritual coping” refers to the ways that people receive help, in the context of their leisure, from spiritual resources (e.g., higher power, spiritual practices, faith community) during periods of life stress. Women who had experienced a major life change (e.g., deterioration of personal health, major career change, death of a loved one) found a canoe or hiking trip in wilderness areas provided the opportunity to leave everyday life stresses and experience spiritual rejuvenation (Fredrickson and Anderson 1999).

Conclusions

These research findings may be most beneficial to park managers in terms of their understanding of the park and spirituality relationship rather than their ability to provide specific guidance to bring about spiritual outcomes. Research indicates that the park experience and spirituality relationship is multifaceted and complex. Thus, park managers need to keep in mind this complexity and the components of the framework presented in this article. Managers should be aware of the important role that antecedent conditions play in park spiritual

outcomes, and that spiritual outcomes are associated with a wide range of park recreation activities (e.g., Stringer and McAvoy 1992), but that certain activities (e.g., more nature-oriented activities) tend to be more associated with spirituality than are others (e.g., Heintzman 2002, 2012).

To some extent research suggests that promoting spiritual outcomes amongst park visitors may be related more to choices that visitors make than to management actions. However, park managers, through educational programs and materials, can empower visitors who seek spiritual outcomes to make choices that will result in these types of outcomes.

In regard to setting characteristics, the following implications are particularly relevant. First, given that nature and naturalness, as opposed to developed recreation areas, have been found to be associated with spiritual outcomes, the naturalness of a park needs to be upheld. Second, because being away in a different environment is important for spirituality, distractions and developments associated with civilization should be minimized. Third, given that spirituality tends to be associated more with nature-oriented activities (e.g., viewing/photographing nature) than with activities that are less focused on nature, providing opportunities for nature-based recreation is relevant. Fourth, since solitude in nature settings is important for spirituality (e.g., Heintzman 2012), actions to maximize solitude are encouraged. Given these implications, park management focused on maintaining solitude and naturalness, along with inclusion of spiritual outcomes in classifications of park benefits and in the use of limits of acceptable change (LAC) and similar planning frameworks, is recommended.

Some research suggests that a focus on an overall high quality of park service rather than on specific management actions may be the best strategy to enhance spiritual outcomes in park settings (Heintzman 2002, 2012). Nevertheless, as a significant positive relationship has been found between spirituality and participation in activities such as guided hikes, visiting historical/nature displays, visiting viewpoints and lookouts, and viewing or photographing nature (Heintzman 2002, 2012), provision of nature interpretation and educational opportunities by park managers may enhance spiritual outcomes. These interpretation and educational activities could also include facilitation of introspection for park users (Brayley and Fox 1998).

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