

Landfullness in Adventure-Based Programming: Promoting Reconnection to the Land

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Nearly a half-century ago, Aldo Leopold acknowledged the threat of “landlessness” in our society as measured by the loss of our collective awareness of, and admiration for, the land (Leopold, 1966). At present, this disconnect has evolved to the point where participants in adventure-based programs may find themselves traveling through “Any Woods, USA,” perceiving the landscape as an interchangeable backdrop rather than developing a personal connection to it. Experiential educators can take a tangible step toward solving this dilemma by promoting “landfull” experiences that actively engage students with place. The Landfull Framework consists of four areas of “landfullness:” (a) Being Deeply Aware, (b) Interpreting Land History, (c) Sensing Place in the Present, and (d) Connecting to Home. The essence of landfullness is for participants to discover a personal approach of relating to the land that is integral to everyday life.

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Let us venture back to the early 20th century, to the glory days of nature study when naturalists, such as Anna Botsford Comstock and Enos Mills, were promoting an “essential nature literacy” that necessitated direct contact with plants and animals in their natural surroundings (Pyle, 2001, p. 19). It was a time when botany walks were common and “a lively, experimental curiosity in plants and animals was nothing unusual; it was simply one component of the engaged citizen’s life” (Pyle, 2001, p. 19). Move forward to the mid-1900s, however, and we find Leopold lamenting the fact that field studies had been succeeded by laboratory biology as the pure form of science, and that memorizing the names of the bumps on the bones of a cat had come to take precedence over gaining an understanding of the native countryside (Leopold, 1953). Leopold observed that our collective relationship to the land had been compromised to the point where we were fast approaching a state of “landlessness.” He noted in his *Round River* essays:

The problem, then, is how to bring about a striving for harmony with land among a people many of whom have forgotten there is any such thing as land, among whom education and culture have become almost synonymous with landlessness. (Leopold, 1966, p. 210)

Landlessness, according to Leopold, was manifesting itself in two distinct but related ways: the literal loss of places wild and free; and the figurative loss of our collective awareness of, and admiration for, the land.

Before the turn of the 21st century, Lopez spoke to this concept of landlessness, noting that almost four decades later it had reached an unprecedented level. In his book *Rediscovery of North America*, Lopez stated: “We have a way of life that ostracizes the land” (Lopez, 1990, p. 31). As the suburbanization of America evolves at an ever-increasing rate, landscapes are becoming more homogenized and we often find ourselves in “Anywhere, USA” (Hiltner & Hiltner, 1996). During the past century, our collective environmental literacy has declined dramatically. As noted by Hawken, “That an average adult can recognize one thousand brand names and logos but fewer than ten local plants is not a good sign” (Hawken, 1993, p. 59).

These combined realities—irreversible loss of undeveloped land, plus changes in our national relationship to land—have created the need for reconnection, both on a personal level and national scale. The day has passed when participants can leave adventure-based programs with a sense of accomplishment, but without a sense of their relationship

to the land. It seems, then, that as experiential educators it is incumbent upon us to assess whether our students are becoming actively engaged in the landscape or merely passing through it. Simply put, are we promoting *landless* or *landfull* experiences?

Landlessness in Adventure Education

It may be assumed that the environment plays an integral role in adventure-based programming simply because it is there. Oftentimes, however, the land becomes a backdrop surrounding the adventure experience (Baker, 1999; Haluza-Delay, 1999; Miner, 2003). The myriad of modern-day forces distracting our awareness from the land can be both overwhelming and insidious; it is all too easy to divert our attention toward the activity, the group, the gear, the gadgets—to be pulled away by the map, the altimeter, the GPS, by everything but the very landscape that can inspire our travels. The most notable of the many factors that conspire to create a landless trip are traditional programming objectives centered on inter/intrapersonal skill development, coupled with students' tendencies to focus first and foremost on the technical and social aspects. The likelihood of a landless trip increases when instructors demonstrate a higher baseline competence in *technical* and *people* skills rather than in *land* skills; or when they are teaching in new areas where they have limited knowledge of the landscape. Frequently, the extent to which the land is emphasized is dependent more upon the interests and expertise of the individual staff, rather than the mission statement, training or curriculums of the organization.

Granted, an increasing number of adventure-based programs are placing a higher priority on the inclusion of environmental objectives in their curriculums. However, the implementation frequently centers on Leave No Trace (LNT) philosophy, with a handful of natural history classes added whenever possible. Although commendable as a starting point, this approach tends to frame LNT practices as technical skills with natural history curricula becoming disjointed or lacking in context.

The bottom line is that even on a month-long course in a wilderness setting, students' awareness of the land can be limited to its direct impact on their immediate experience (i.e., the weather, a pretty sunset or a breathtaking view). Likewise, they may relate to the landscape solely in terms of negotiating it, whether through route finding, river crossings or campsite selection. When interactions with the land are viewed in this way, students may not consciously relate with the land, and may, instead, become passersby traveling through "Any Woods, USA." The upshot is that landscapes may become interchangeable and the unique aspects of a particular place, along with any potential connections to it, may be lost.

Promoting “Landfull” Experiences

In face of the realities of landless programming, experiential educators can take a tangible step toward addressing disconnection with the land by promoting “landfull” experiences. If an experience is to be landfull, it necessitates rethinking adventure as we know it today. A landfull adventure is not a journey away, guided by the pull of modern technology and distractions, but rather a journey home, to discover a sense of belonging to the land. As Meyers so aptly describes it in his book, *Lime Creek Odyssey*:

We cannot come to know a place by rushing in and rushing out. I often wonder just what it is that people see in the wilderness when they come for a week or two each year. I imagine their spirits are refreshed and their time here is quite pleasant. I know they learn a great deal. But what do they see? I believe there are some things that can only be seen if you stay awhile. Others become visible only to those who gaze at a landscape and think, *this is my home*. (Meyers, 1989, p. 112)

This notion of discovering home may challenge or even run counter to mission statements and curricula in adventure-based programming. Yet, it is vitally important that we provide students with opportunities to develop “land” skills (in the same way we promote leadership and technical skills), if we are to address the need for an “essential nature literacy.” As in the glory days of nature study in the early 1900s, the key is for students to discover an engagement with the land that extends beyond simply knowing the names of trees, to include a *personal* approach of relating to the land. This discovery is not only a site-specific sense of place, but also an ongoing relationship with land that transcends time and place. The essence of landfullness is when the personal process becomes less intentional and more a part of our identity—in other words, relating to the land is a part of who we are.

The question then becomes how to go about promoting landfull experiences. We must recognize that as a society we are not in the habit of relating to land in a direct and intentional way. Accordingly, landfullness necessitates that we move beyond an inevitable awareness or a convenient consciousness of the land. It requires experiencing the land in its entirety through all of the senses, including the emotional/affective—not only as it is today, but also as it was in the past and will be in the future. Most importantly, it requires an intentional exploration of our own interactions with, and relationship to, the land. This act of striving to be intentional is what enables the land to become more than a scenic backdrop; as we actively engage with the land it becomes more

integral to our experience. It is through purposeful consideration of our relationship to the land that we develop our own ever-evolving personal process of coming to know a place. Rather than traveling *through* the land, we begin to travel *with* and *in* the land.

The Landfull Framework: Levels of Landfullness

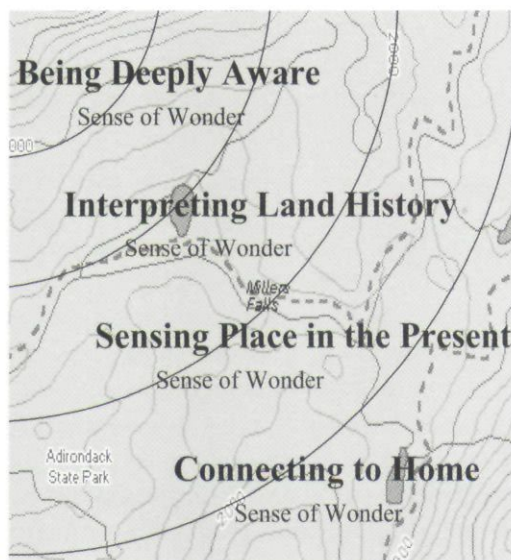
The intent is not to replace traditional goals of personal growth and group development, or to override the curriculum with an environmental agenda, but rather to introduce a landfull approach. The "Landfull Framework" is proposed as a holistic approach to integrating environmental education into adventure-based programming that allows for flexibility based on differences in program type, instructor background and student groups. By using the framework as an ongoing theme, instructors can easily repackage existing environmental studies activities and natural history curricula so that what students may have perceived as isolated classes will be seen as part of a cohesive whole. More specifically, the Landfull Framework:

- Recognizes that people come to know a place in different ways;
- Challenges students to develop an intentional, not merely a convenient, consciousness of the land and to actively consider their relationship to it; and
- Enables students to discover and develop their own definition of landfull that is personally significant, and to become self-directed in moving through the levels of landfullness.

The Landfull Framework consists of four levels: (a) Being Deeply Aware, (b) Interpreting Land History, (c) Sensing Place in the Present, and (d) Connecting to Home (see Figure 1). Although it can be used in a linear progression, it is more effective to mix activities and classes that focus on all four levels consistently throughout the course/trip. When the framework is clearly laid out to students at the outset, they have a shared vocabulary and a mental schematic to support the integration of activities. Moreover, when all levels are integrated, students are able to discover the ways in which they connect to the land sooner. Each level has a specific focus and corresponding questions, as listed below:

Being Deeply Aware

When a group arrives at the trailhead, participants find themselves at a place on the map that may mean nothing to them personally. In this stage, the focus often is simply on the activity and the group. Using a topographic map analogy, a student's thinking is based on a "summit mentality" and

**Being Deeply Aware**

Where am I?
What's around me?
Who is around me?

Interpreting Land History:**Natural & Cultural History**

How has this land changed over time?
What & who have lived here in the past?
How did they relate to the land?

Sensing Place in the Present

How is this place unique?
Who lives/passes through this land
now and what is their relationship
to it?
What does this place mean to me?

Connecting to Home

How can this place link to other land-
scapes & experiences with land?
When does the land become home?
When does home become the land?

Figure 1. The Landfull Framework, used to guide the integration of environmental education in adventure-based programming, consists of four areas of “landfullness.”

the land is seen as a backdrop, or merely a route to the summit, but little more.

- *Focus:* Increase awareness of one's surroundings.
- *Questions:* Where am I? What's around me? Who is around me?
- *Activities:* Students ground themselves by becoming conscious of the lay of the land on both a micro and macro scale through different activities, such as: (a) *Sensory Awareness* games (e.g., “Meet Your Neighbors”—each student goes off to get acquainted with something that interests them, then have a “party” where everybody introduces his/her “new neighbor” and tells its story); (b) *Mapping Initiatives*—students use ropes on the ground to outline where they are including the state, park/forest boundaries, mountain ranges, rivers; (c) *Location Celebrations*—take time out to observe surroundings in an engaging way (e.g., have a birthday party for a tree to celebrate its age, including balloons and singing); and (d) *Art Gallery*—students take turns being the “docent” along the trail by sharing with others the “masterpieces” of artwork they find most intriguing.

Interpreting Land History (Natural and Cultural History)

Reaching this stage, students are somewhat aware of their surroundings, but only through direct observation. At this point, depth can

be added to the students' experiences by increasing their knowledge of the area through both natural and cultural history. Instructors may tend to focus more on natural history than on cultural history, perhaps due to lack of knowledge or concerns about perpetuating stereotypes or historical inaccuracies. However, cultural history often creates a more tangible connection to the land than does natural history in students' minds. By highlighting both the natural and cultural history of a place, the likelihood of making the land come alive may be increased. Rather than relaying historical facts and figures, instructors can reveal the story of land and people over time to spark curiosity using the following examples:

- *Focus*: Increase knowledge of the uniqueness of a particular landscape.
- *Questions*: How has this land changed over time? What and who have lived here in the past? How did they relate to the land?
- *Activities*: (a) *Site Specific Interpretation*—take time to contemplate points of interest, such as cliffs, signs, names on a map, or found objects that may be overlooked as “junk;” (b) *Journaling*—students write their personal land histories (e.g., their story with the land over time); “A Day in the Life Of...” —students write from the perspective of something/somebody that used to live on the land and then guess each others' perspectives; (c) *Role Plays*—identify people/land-use groups from the past and take on roles for a day, for a dinner party, or for a debate at a town meeting; (d) *Skits*—dress up as an historical figure and appear on the trail or in camp with a story to tell (a few leaves and duct tape make a great beard!); (e) *Melodrama*—as a group, act out the story of the land and people over time, and if no information is available have different groups interpret signs in the landscape and act out their version of what could have been the story); and (f) *Time Travel*—connect to people from the past through food, gear, and/or stories (e.g., If we were here 100 years ago, what would we be wearing? Eating? What would the land look like?).

Sensing Place in the Present

If land history is the story of land and people over time, sensing place is feeling a part of the stories (Kriesberg, 1999). Sense of place is a dynamic and personal construct that addresses how we assign value to a place and was first applied to landscapes in 1974 by the geographical philosopher Yi-Fu Tuan (1974). Sensing place is the continuous development of a personal connection to a particular place that

evolves from not only spending time there, but also from learning about its land history. In addition, one understands how the place is unique and is able to articulate one's connection with, relationship to, and feelings about the place. Using a topographic map analogy, students in this stage have gained appreciation of the entire mountain; they are as aware of the marshes at the base as the peak itself. The following illustrates this:

- *Focus*: Facilitate connections to a place that are personalized and ever-evolving.
- *Questions*: How is this place unique? Who lives/passes through this land now and what is their relationship to it? What does this place mean to me?
- *Activities*: (a) *Mapping*—students draw a map of the route and then add overlays to it, including personal highlights, group benchmarks, and sense of place landmarks—aspects of the land that were personally significant; (b) *Topo Naming*—rename terrain features on the map based on your personal experiences and/or impressions of the land; (c) *Solos*—students are given solo time both at the beginning and end of the trip/course to contemplate how their relationship to the land has changed over time; and (d) *Art Gallery*—students are given ample time to find a spot and create a masterpiece that represents their interactions/relationship with the place, and then students explain their creations to the group.

Connecting to Home

The objective of this stage is to enable students to bridge the gap between backcountry and front country. It is this transference of landfullness to everyday life that creates relevance for the land skills developed during the trip/experience. *Connecting to Home* is not a single closure activity to be conducted on the last night in the field, but rather an ongoing effort to develop a conscious awareness of how we relate to the land around us and the role it plays in our everyday lives.

- *Focus*: Promote the linking of landscapes—the transference from the backcountry to the front country (home).
- *Questions*: How can this place link to other landscapes and experiences with the land? When does the land become home? When does home become the land?
- *Activities*: (a) *Water Talk*—discuss the water supply at camp and then have students share where their water comes from at home;

(b) *Daily Walk*—link the skill of being an active navigator in the woods to increasing awareness of one's surroundings at home. Have the students draw or map out the route they take to work/school at home, everyday, including significant landmarks along the way; (c) *Time Warp*—students envision what a particular piece of land looked like 50/100 years ago and then consider what their hometown looked like at the same time; (d) *Constellation Myths*—locate a constellation in the night sky during the trip and then discuss where the constellation would be located at home; then create a myth of how it came to be; and (e) *Back Home Discoveries*—parallels of discoveries made on the trip/course are made to home (e.g., a tree on the trail is linked to a tree in the neighborhood; vista on the trails can spur discussion of what is my "vista" from the home/office).

The Sense of Wonder—actively contemplating the land—serves as a catalyst for moving between the levels of the Landfull Framework. For example, when participants spend time in a place and learn about its land history, their sense of wonder, at some point, will be engaged. By learning more about land history, and further wondering about the place, they will begin to contemplate what the place means to them personally, and thus be propelled into the Sensing Place stage. Sense of Wonder refers to the concept introduced by Rachel Carson (1956) in her book *The Sense of Wonder*. It is a state in which one is actively interacting with another entity, whether it be tangible (e.g., a tree), or intangible (e.g., time); this interaction engages the person mentally through the processes of inquiry (e.g., posing questions as in a state of curiosity), and/or physically through the senses (e.g., seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and/or touching), and/or emotionally through feelings (e.g., affective sentiments of awe, appreciation, etc.). Sense of Wonder represents the reflection/processing step that is integral to the experiential learning process (Kolb, 1984).

The benefits of teaching from a landfull perspective are numerous. At a minimum it adds a new, and often unexpected, dimension to the expedition. Students may gain an increased knowledge of the landscape, develop an appreciation for the uniqueness of a particular place and/or discover a personal connection to the land. Ultimately, students may be able to transcend a site-specific sense of place by developing an ongoing relationship with the land that is integral to their everyday lives. As a reinterpretation of the "essential nature literacy" that Anna Botsford Comstock, Enos Mills and Aldo Leopold all strove for in their time, this "landfull" approach is aligned with experiential philosophy. The pull of modernity has existed for centuries, and will continue to disconnect us

from the land with greater force and diligence in the future. Striving to actively engage students with places is a sure step towards creating a collective connection to landscapes and a more sustainable future.

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