

Spirituality and the outdoors

Paul Heintzman

UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA

The English word 'spirituality' comes from the Latin *spiritus*, meaning 'breath of life', and can be traced to the Greek word *pneuma* used in the New Testament to describe a person's spirit guided by God's Spirit. Today, spirituality may be defined as 'the feelings, thoughts, experiences, and behaviors that arise from a search for the sacred' (i.e. divine being, Ultimate Reality or Ultimate Truth) (Larson, Swyers & McCullough, 1998, p. 21). Using the behavioural model of outdoor recreation this chapter synthesises empirical findings on outdoor activities and spirituality using a framework (Heintzman, 2010) that includes antecedent conditions, setting and recreation factors, and spiritual outcomes (see Figure 38.1).

This framework identifies factors that influence spiritual outcomes. Not all of the factors may be necessary or sufficient for spiritual outcomes; specific factors and combination of factors may vary.

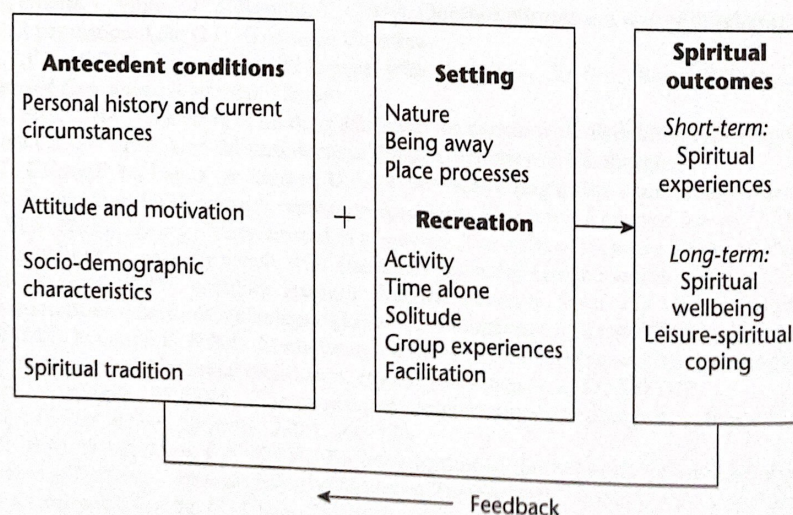


Figure 38.1 Outdoor activities and spirituality

Antecedent conditions

Antecedent conditions refer to people's characteristics prior to outdoor activity participation. Personal history and current circumstances may influence spiritual outcomes (Stringer & McAvoy, 1992; Fox, 1997; Elliot, 2010; Foster, 2012; Pond, 2013). For Elaine, a participant in an environmental education course, the course was a celebration:

[The course] was a very positive experience for me and I think part of that has to do with the frame of mind in which I came . . . it was something I wanted to do to celebrate turning 50 . . . There were no demands upon me by my children, of work. It was a real gift for me to be able to just go off on my own. (Heintzman, 2007b, p. 3)

For a young married couple, the course occurred at a difficult time of relocation and moving from a very remote area to an urban centre. As the wife stated, 'the course was wrapped up in that context . . . we were both just really depressed at the beginning of the course . . . But the course allowed some space for me to figure some of that out' (Heintzman, 2007b, p. 3).

Closely related to personal history and current circumstances is the motivation and attitude that have also been associated with spiritual outcomes (Stringer & McAvoy, 1992; Heintzman, 2007a, 2007b; Moore, 2011). For example, in the quotation above from Elaine, she mentioned that the fact the course was a positive experience had to do with 'the frame of mind' with which she came to the course. She elaborated: 'I was very much in an attitude of having my hands wide open to just receive what came, so each experience was very full in that regard . . .'. Similarly, another participant mentioned the 'making of conscious choices to accept where I am, appreciate where I am'. A third participant also spoke about the attitude of the participant as being important, 'if the student were receptive spiritually, then . . . they can be learning . . . in any sort of situation' (Heintzman, 2007b, p. 4). While qualitative studies suggest some wilderness recreationists didn't experience spiritual outcomes because they didn't seek them (Stringer & McAvoy, 1992; Heintzman, 2007a), quantitative studies suggest many (46% to 82%) but not all wilderness/park visitors are motivated by spiritual outcomes (e.g. Brayley & Fox, 1998, p. 24; Lemieux *et al.*, 2012, p. 77, respectively), although these outcomes may not be the most valued (Behan, Richards & Lee, 2001).

In regards to socio-demographic characteristics, spiritual outcomes have been associated more with women than men (Lusby & Anderson, 2010; Heintzman, 2012; Lemieux *et al.*, 2012), are described more completely by women (Unruh & Hutchinson, 2011), increase with age (Heintzman, 2012), increase with education (Winter, 2007; Moore, 2011; Heintzman, 2012) and decrease with income (Heintzman, 2012; Lemieux *et al.*, 2012).

Spiritual tradition may also influence spiritual outcomes during outdoor activities (Heintzman, 2008b; Cheung, 2011; Moore, 2011; Berkers, 2012; Foster, 2012; Hoover, 2012) as seen in Unruh and Hutchinson's (2011) study of the impact of gardening upon daily life and stressful life experiences. For example, one participant viewed gardening as significant to his spiritual journey, yet did not connect it to religion:

. . . I wouldn't think of myself as a particularly religious person . . . I am perhaps a bit of a spiritual person. I am not quite sure what the spirit is . . . the closest (and I don't know how close that is) to come to grips with this spirituality has been through doing things like gardening . . . I think for me it has to do with nature, the world around us, our environment, how I fit in as a human being in that. (Unruh & Hutchinson, 2011, p. 571)

Gardening complemented or affirmed religious spiritual faith for other participants, as explained by one participant:

I mean, creation just reminds you of God's creation and the wonderful things that he has done. I believe that God is creator . . . And when I look at the intricate designs in a flower or a leaf or the birds and all of these things, how can we not believe that there was a real intelligence behind it? You know, a creator. (Unruh & Hutchinson, p. 572)

Gardeners with religious views viewed their garden 'as an extension of their spirituality and a confirmation of their beliefs', while those with secular views tended to 'embed their spirituality in their relationship with nature as manifested in their garden' (Unruh & Hutchinson, p. 572).

In Snell and Simmond's (2012) study of spiritual experiences in nature, those from a religious spiritual tradition articulated a metaphysical framework in which their spiritual experiences in nature were viewed as purposeful and intelligible while those with non-religious spiritual perspectives struggled to come up with, or resisted interpretations of their spiritual experiences that gave any substantial meaning other than being pleasant or extraordinary psychological states. Snell and Simmonds speculated that 'Perhaps religious beliefs . . . serve to legitimize the subjective experience of the sacred by providing a language and metaphysical framework that make it more meaningful for long-term self-development and psychological well-being' (p. 332).

Setting factors

Factors related to setting, such as being in nature, going away to a different environment and place processes, may influence spiritual outcomes. Research has determined that leisure activities in nature are conducive to spiritual outcomes for a variety of reasons, as summarised by Heintzman (2010): nature elicits a sense of wonder, awe and amazement; helps some people connect with their God or higher power; provides a sense of peacefulness, calm, stillness and tranquillity; creates space to explore spirituality through reflection; and is powerful and therapeutic. For example, Elaine explained:

Having that extended time in nature . . . being in the created world, outdoors. That really provided the setting for meditation, prayer. Just an enjoyment of the grandeur and the majesty of God's presence as I experience Him in nature . . . That my senses are heightened . . . I think in nature when you are confronted with the grandeur of sky, ocean, wind, sun, such variety of texture, smell, height, sound, all of that, is very stimulating for me . . . it is a transcendent experience . . . I'm just aware of God's greatness in the variety of what is seen visually of sights and smells and sounds and to think that God has created all that . . . I am given a larger perspective on existence. (Heintzman, 2007b, p. 7)

Going away to a different environment is conducive to spiritual outcomes (Sweatman & Heintzman, 2004; Heintzman, 2007a, 2007b, 2008b; Ellard, Nickerson & Dvorak, 2009; McDonald, Wearing & Ponting, 2009; Bobilya, Akey & Mitchell, 2011; Foster, 2012). Stringer and McAvoy (1992) observed that greater opportunities and enhancement of spiritual experiences in the wilderness were usually ascribed to the lack of constraints and responsibilities characteristic of everyday life. The following quote illustrates:

[My husband] and I get really connected, our spirits are connected on [canoe] trips . . . leaving everything behind, and getting down to basics and I think that's very meditative too because when we meditate we're just there with God, it's very simple and we don't need anything else really. And so when you go on a canoe trip or a camping trip, you just take a few things. And you . . . don't really need a lot of stuff especially for our spirits, for our spiritual growth or enhancement. (Heintzman, 2000, p. 50)

Various place concepts and processes during outdoor activities have been associated with spirituality: place identity (Anderson & Fulton, 2008); place attachment and sacred space (Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999); sense of place (Heintzman & Mannell, 2003); place meanings (Hutson & Montgomery, 2010; Salk, Schneider & McAvoy, 2010); and special place locations (Brown & Raymond, 2007). This concept is illustrated by the following response to whether any leisure settings were associated with spiritual growth:

Muskoka, it's where I grew up and it's very much a sense of that landscape having formed who I am and also formed my spirituality. It influences the images that I have of God, it influences images of all kinds of things, it is just very much a part of me, so Canadian Shield, water, trees, growing out of rocks along the water edge. I mean that's where I feel most at home. I don't live there anymore. I do have the capacity . . . in different settings of seeing the wonder there, but it comes most easily when I'm home. (Heintzman, 2000, p. 51)

Recreation factors

Participants in qualitative studies have identified numerous and diverse outdoor activities they associate with spiritual outcomes (Stringer & McAvoy, 1992; Heintzman, 2000, 2007b; Schmidt & Little, 2007; Berkers, 2012). Spiritual outcomes have also been documented in studies of climbing (Pond, 2013), dragon boat racing (Unruh & Elvin, 2004; Parry, 2009), gardening (Unruh & Hutchinson, 2011), four-wheel driving in the desert (Narayanan & Macbeth, 2009), snowboarding (Elliot, 2010), windsurfing (Humberstone, 2011), surfing and scuba diving (Moore, 2011), yacht cruising (Lusby & Anderson, 2010) and zoo visiting (Luebke & Matiassek, 2013). While activities that facilitate spirituality vary from person to person, research suggests activities that help people get in touch with themselves, and are compatible with who they are and their personality, are the ones that promote spiritual well-being (Heintzman, 2000).

Ontario Parks' visitors 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 visitors who spent most of their time in activities such as biking and motor boating (Heintzman, 2012; see Table 38.1).

Similarly, Behan *et al.* (2001) found that spiritual benefits were valued more by foot travellers than by mountain bikers as it was easier for non-mechanised travellers to focus on nature. Nevertheless, four-wheel-drive travel in the Australian desert has been found to have a spiritual dimension, possibly due to viewing the journey to the desert as a pilgrimage to sacred space (Narayanan & Macbeth, 2009).

Challenging activities can facilitate spiritual outcomes (Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Marsh, 2008; Sharpley & Jepson, 2011). Schmidt and Little (2007) gave the following example:

Table 38.1 Role of introspection/spirituality in satisfaction with park experience by activity participated for the most time while at the park

Activity	N	Mean	SD
1 Viewing/photographing nature	341	3.37	1.64
2 Guided hikes/walks	82	3.57	1.48
3 Visiting viewpoints/lookouts	83	3.60	1.55
4 Other	746	3.65	1.61
5 Trail hiking (non-guide)	1381	3.67	1.53
6 Canoeing	570	3.72	1.64
7 Swimming/wading	2742	3.89	1.47
8 Fishing	519	3.93	1.68
9 Attending staff presentations	39	3.95	1.43
10 Casual play (i.e. Frisbee)	506	3.96	1.43
11 Picnicking	168	3.96	1.51
12 Visiting historical/nature displays	44	3.98	1.82
13 Biking	478	3.99	1.49
14 Motor boating	153	4.01	1.50
15 Using playground facilities	96	4.10	1.37
Total	7948	3.81	1.54

Note: Mean scores based on scale 1 = Most strongly adds to satisfaction, 9 = Most strongly detracts from satisfaction

Source: Heintzman (2012, p. 301)

It was a very hard walk, steep and what was running through my head was basically a lot of fear and a lot of nervous energy . . . Once we got there it was beautiful and so tranquil and the day was just so perfect and blue and I thought to myself, 'Lord, I'm really glad I'm here and I can see this beauty and vastness of the land.' It made me appreciative and the fear I felt on the way gave an added focus to the appreciation . . . and the connection that was there. (p. 238)

The type of spiritual outcome may also be influenced by the type of activity engaged in. Canoeists have had spiritual experiences focused on interconnections with people, while mountain hikers have described spiritual experiences involving appreciation of wilderness beauty (Stringer & McAvoy, 1992).

In the case of a structured or programmed outdoor activity, opportunity for free time may be a factor (Stringer & McAvoy, 1992; Fox, 1997). One residential youth camper explained how scheduled alone time during a solo was important: 'I think with the solo it was a time when you could really think . . . they kept throwing things at us all month, like stuff to learn and we finally had time to think about it, and catch up with yourself, so I think that helps with my spiritual development' (Sweatman & Heintzman, 2004, p. 27).

The importance for spirituality of solitude in the outdoors has been reported by several studies (Fox, 1997; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Coble, Selin & Erickson, 2003; Sweatman & Heintzman, 2004; Heintzman, 2007a, 2007b, 2012; Marsh, 2008). A wilderness canoeist explained, 'being alone, it gives me that time and the opportunity just to try and work my own way through some of those issues of situations that . . . may be negatively affecting my spiritual well-being' (Heintzman, 2007a, p. 221). In quantitative studies, Ontario Parks' campers who visited a park alone rated introspection/spirituality higher than those who were with others (Heintzman, 2012).

Spirituality is linked to group experiences in the outdoors (Fox, 1997; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Sweatman & Heintzman, 2004; Heintzman, 2007a, 2007b, 2008b; Pond, 2013). As one wilderness adventurer stated: 'just the people . . . trusting other people and loving them, and tolerating their weaknesses . . . That was the spiritual awakening for me, you know, the friendship' (Stringer & McAvoy, 1992, p. 18). Being part of a male-only or female-only group has also played an important role in spiritual outcomes (Fox, 1997; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Heintzman, 2008b).

In some cases a balance of solitude and group experiences is helpful to spirituality (Heintzman, 2007a, 2007b; Sharpley & Jepson, 2011). A wilderness canoeist stated, 'I think I found some spiritual jewels, some spiritual treasures in all the social settings, being alone definitely, being around the fire with the entire group definitely, and just in one-on-one conversations with people' (Heintzman, 2007a, p. 221). 'There is a dynamic of tension between interaction and solitude: Both enable a spiritual meaning' (Marsh, 2008, p. 292).

Facilitation may play an important role in spiritual outcomes for outdoor activities that occur in a group or as a part of a programme. Lasenby's (2003) study of outdoor education participants concluded that, 'facilitation of an outdoor education program is a major factor in both allowing [spiritual] experiences to occur, and in assisting with the "meaning making" process that follows' (p. 4). Environmental education participants noted that what was most important was the way the facilitators put together the overall mix of activities, experiences and elements of the course as the holistic, 24-hour nature of the course led to spiritual impact (Heintzman, 2007b). Thus Deirdre, a course participant, found it difficult to identify specific course activities that enhanced her spiritual wellbeing 'because there were so many different experiences that contributed to the whole'. She described this holistic experience in terms of relationships:

I really lived . . . in terms of the basics, I lived in relationships with people, I lived in relationship with God, I lived in relationship with creation, I lived . . . in a relationship with the world around me. I lived basically. (pp. 4, 5)

Research suggests that outdoor activities can be combined with explicit or overt spiritual activities to facilitate spiritual outcomes (Anderson-Hanley, 1996; LeDuc, 2002; Griffin, 2003; Daniel, 2007; Heintzman, 2007b; Bobilya *et al.*, 2011) although this is not always the case (Heintzman, 2007a), depending on how interested participants are in the spiritual dimension of an activity.

Spiritual outcomes

The most common outcome studied is spiritual experience (Fox, 1997; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Chiesura, 2004; Loeffler, 2004; Sweatman & Heintzman, 2004; Ellard *et al.*, 2009; Humberstone, 2011; Luebke & Matiasek, 2013), which often includes affective dimensions (feelings such as peace, awe, love), cognitive processes (e.g. contemplation), transcendence of one's self and environment, and a high level of emotional intensity (Stringer & McAvoy, 1992). For example, a wilderness canoeist described his spiritual experience as:

the wonderful sense of peace, the wonderful sense of connectedness to my world around me, to myself, . . . not a sense that something was wrong, or I needed to work on something, there was just a peace, there was a tranquility, there was acceptance, there was harmony and I really fondly remember those moments because I felt so good inside . . . (Heintzman, 2007a, p. 218)

Haluza-Delay (2000) criticised studies that focus exclusively on pleasant emotional states, and urged investigation of whether or not the experiences lead to life transformation. Lasenby

(2003) gave the term *hangover* to 'the short-term, immediate effects, which are all highly positive, but [do] not deal with the long-term transformational effects that spiritual experience might have' (p. 62).

An outcome that reflects life transformation is spiritual wellbeing, which Hawks (1994) defined as:

A high level of faith, hope, and commitment in relation to a well-defined worldview or belief system that provides a sense of meaning and purpose to existence in general, and that offers an ethical path to personal fulfilment which includes connectedness with self, others, and a higher power or larger reality. (p. 6)

Using the concept of spiritual wellbeing, the longer-term impact of a wilderness canoe trip has been associated with the memory and recollection of the experience (Heintzman, 2007a), and the enhancement of deep, spiritually oriented friendships (Heintzman, 2008b). In quantitative studies, significant positive relationships have been found between spiritual wellbeing and frequency of outdoor activity participation (Ragheb, 1993; Heintzman & Mannell, 1999), as well as frequency of participation in picnicking, gardening, a day outing to the zoo or park, and plant care; however, there was a negative relationship with adventure trekking (Heintzman & Mannell, 1999). Doi (2004) discovered that the use of leisure-spiritual processes to achieve spiritual wellbeing was significantly higher for college students that preferred outdoor activities compared to students who preferred sports. Lemieux *et al.* (2012) found that 73.4 per cent of park visitors perceived spiritual wellbeing outcomes from connecting with nature, being inspired by nature and seeking the meaning/purpose of life while visiting parks. In a study of urban park experience, the spiritual component of wellbeing was enhanced by the stimulation of a spiritual connection to nature that energised and enriched life (Chiesura, 2003).

Although not explicitly using the spiritual wellbeing concept, studies in outdoor settings have found outcomes similar to dimensions of spiritual wellbeing: greater spiritual connection to nature (Kellert, 1998); enhanced long-term awareness of God, nature and self (Daniel, 2007); significant positive changes in spiritual beliefs (LeDuc, 2002) and spiritual development variables (Cheung, 2011); initial positive change in closeness to God (Henderson, Oakleaf & Bialeschki, 2009); and enhanced sacredness of life, meaning and purpose, and transcendent dimensions of spirituality (McDonald *et al.*, 2009). Spiritual outcomes have also been associated with environmentalism (Moore, 2011) and landscape preservation values (Hutson & Montgomery, 2010).

Another outcome is leisure-spiritual coping, which refers to the ways 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 (Heintzman, 2008a). Leisure-spiritual coping through outdoor activities has been helpful for those experiencing major life change (Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999), cancer (Unruh & Elvin, 2000; Parry, 2009) and other stressful conditions (Schneider & Mannell, 2006; Snell & Simmonds, 2012). For example, Unruh and Hutchinson's (2011) study of gardeners concluded that the spiritual meanings of gardening might have a significant role in the reappraisal of life events as well as in meaning-focused coping with stressful life experiences such as cancer. While for some participants, anxiety and uncertainty associated with life stress or illness sometimes prevented the enjoyment associated with gardening, for others the enjoyment of gardening facilitated hope and planning for the future in spite of uncertainty due to significant life stress. Profound experiences of enjoyment provided the reflective space necessary for spiritual reflection and meaning-focused coping. Participants who experienced chronic health conditions found meaning through regular gardening tasks and occasional special garden projects, such as creating ponds or building trails. Gardening connected the

participants to plants that they nurtured, to people that they shared gardening with, and to an inner sense of being untouched by stress and illness. These participants felt grounded and at peace in the garden. More significantly, gardening provided the opportunity to express hopes and losses in the present and for the future. The garden, as a living system, reflected life tensions. Thus gardening, as an outdoor activity that has diverse spiritual meanings, can be a resource for living with stressful life and health experiences.

Conclusion

The theoretical framework presented in this chapter (see Figure 38.1), based on extant empirical research, can serve as a guide in conducting future research on this topic, just as an earlier version (Heintzman, 2010) was used for research on surfing and scuba-diving (Moore, 2011). The framework provides a way to explore the processes that link outdoor activities with spirituality, and helps explain the complexity of the relationships between these two phenomena. Future research might focus on:

- determining the components of the framework that are most influential and whether there are additional components;
- spiritual behaviours and the long-term consequences rather than just the immediate spiritual feelings of outdoor activities;
- the social and environmental justice dimensions of spirituality in addition to personal spiritual benefits;
- more quantitative research, including the use of spiritual wellbeing and other scales, to determine whether qualitative findings can be generalised to larger populations;
- how outdoor activities repress as well as facilitate spiritual benefits;
- diverse population groups, as the experiences of spirituality are different among these groups.

Finally, the theoretical framework reminds practitioners that the relationship between outdoor activities and spirituality is complex and therefore all the components of the framework, and possibly others not included, need to be considered when implementing outdoor activities or managing outdoor facilities and resources for spiritual outcomes.

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