

Through the Eyes of Youth: A Qualitative Evaluation of Outdoor Leadership Programs

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Crissy Field Center (CFC) is a partnership between the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, the National Park Service, and The Presidio Trust. Since 2001, the CFC has engaged urban youth along with mentors and supporters in recreation, education, and environmental leadership programs within the Golden Gate National Parks. Located in San Francisco, they operate a variety of year-round community and educational programs. An evaluation research study was conducted on two key programs: Inspiring Young Emerging Leaders (I-YEL) for high school teens and Urban Trailblazers (UT) for middle school students. The purpose of this study was to understand program impact and evaluate its effectiveness as a model for leadership development among urban youth. This was accomplished by investigating each program's outdoor recreation opportunities, environmental program curriculum, and approach to cultivating leaders. Four focus groups were conducted in 2006 with 43 ethnically diverse participants, including alumni, ranging in age from 11-22 years. Six key themes emerged: motivation to join program, contribution to environment, social awareness and outreach, personal growth and leadership, aided school performance, and healthy lifestyles. Results reveal how the CFC encourages youth to make healthy choices that benefit the environment, enhance personal courage, and engender leadership skills. Findings can be used to assist the Crissy Field Center and similar organizations with enhancing the program structure as well as designing effective leadership curriculum. Finally, implications and recommendations for future research are provided.

KEYWORDS: Urban youth, leadership development, evaluation, national parks, outdoor education

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Millennials (“M-Generation”) are youth who will come of age in the first decade of the century and are heavily influenced by contemporary world advances that shape their long-term personal and professional habits (Millennium Youth Market Assessment, 2002). We (as authors) postulate, from our collective forty years of experience working with urban youth, that in this first decade of the twenty-first century our society witnessed rapidly growing populations of youth who are motivated by hurried consumption (e.g., unhealthy nutritional habits), high-impact, animated video games and television (e.g., sedentary habits), and Internet social media (e.g., peer outreach habits). Such assertions are supported by scholarly work (e.g., Chawla, 2007; Tucker, Irwin, Gilliland, & He, 2008), indicating these commonplace behaviors by today’s youth warrant further research.

These observations are also supported by the work of Louv (2005), a journalist who coined the term “nature deficit disorder,” referring to the current trend where children are spending less time outdoors, and which has resulted in a wide range of behavioral problems (e.g., increased bullying, breakdown of nature appreciation). Furthermore, researchers have been exploring this topic over the last few years, broadly (e.g., Chawla, 2007; Clements, 2004), with a focus on urban youth (Karsten, 2005; Outley & Witt, 2006). As youth today become more technologically adept via social media platforms (e.g., MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter), they also risk becoming ignorant about societal issues such as global warming, childhood obesity, and the devastation of natural resources. This lack of awareness has far-reaching consequences for the health and well-being of young people as well as the sustainability of our communities and society at large.

The gap between a lack of social consciousness by some youth, and enhanced quality of life (from exposure to outdoor environments) should be addressed, at an early age, through experiential learning that applies multiple strategies. Partnerships between parks, community recreation centers, and schools are becoming more proficient at designing innovative programs to address this imbalance. Despite this progress, questions should be raised as programs evaluate both short-term and long-term impact: What are the most effective ways to increase youth awareness (e.g., attitude and behavior changes) about what it takes to create a sustainable and socially just society? What are the specific challenges for connecting urban youth with parks and outdoor recreation? How can young people learn new skills (e.g., knowledge gained), while learning about the environment in a way that incorporates leadership opportunities? How can youth learn to make the best possible choices for themselves, their families, and their communities? What educational experiences and program strategies best serve these purposes and create the most possibilities for positive outcomes?

We report the results from an evaluation study conducted at the Crissy Field Center (CFC) based in San Francisco. While the CFC is nationally recognized within the national park system, the heart of this project focuses on two of their programs for urban youth. Results reveal how the CFC instills a spirit of stewardship, enhances personal courage, and encourages youth to make healthy choices that benefit the environment. The CFC also engenders leadership skills broadly, and generally contributes to what might be considered best practices in youth development. These entail a variety of “active ingredients” including offering activities that promote personal health, social skills, and well-being, empowering

youth to be leaders in the community and building valuable relationships between staff and youth (Eccles & Appleton-Gootman, 2002) where “the presence or absence of caring relationships affects whether an adolescent thrives or has problems” (p. 87); this ethic of care is an essential value of the Crissy Center. Additional best practices, according to Harison (2003), include involving youth in planning as well as hiring independent evaluators who are utilized to evaluate the effectiveness of programs. Both are practiced by the Center.

About the Partnership and Programs

A partnership between the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, the National Park Service, and The Presidio Trust, the CFC has sponsored recreation, education, and environmental leadership programs for urban youth since 2001. The Center serves over 10,000 youth annually, 95% from the city of San Francisco, through thousands of hours of programs that are organized, facilitated and led by youth.

With close proximity to a diverse, urban population, the authors assert the CFC has an aspiration to not only serve the local community, but to make the parks a more meaningful, accessible, and significant part of everyone’s life. The CFC reaches urban children, youth, and families from primarily low-income communities across the Bay Area through collaboration with youth-focused and community-based organizations. Two CFC youth programs, Urban Trailblazers (UTB) and Inspiring Young Emerging Leaders (I-YEL) are the focus of this study.

Youth Programs Selected for Evaluation

Urban Trailblazers is an environmental youth leadership program that offers middle school-aged students a rich combination of experiences including hands-on projects, outdoor investigation, and excursions in the field. Youth learn about the biodiversity of Crissy Field by exploring marsh areas. They also discover the Presidio’s cultural history. A bridge that connects urban youth to their larger environment, UTB also helps young people make connections between important environmental issues and their own lives (Crissy Field Center, n.d.).

The I-YEL program encourages high school students to challenge traditional environmental activism and education. By specifically empowering them to initiate, coordinate, and implement projects and trips, I-YEL supports these students to speak up for a more sustainable and just society. I-YEL participants spend five days and four nights immersed in the ecology of a local national seashore. They learn about the natural environment of the selected area, are educated about resource management, and get hands-on experience working on projects involving science, natural inventories, and population monitoring (Crissy Field Center, n.d.).

Review of Literature

Social, Health, and Behavioral Benefits

Journalist Richard Louv (2005, 2008) maintains that parents in urban, suburban, and rural areas in America say their children are not playing outside much anymore, not even in the backyard or neighborhood park. Based on his investigations, Louv states that kids learn about the Amazon rain forest, but they probably could not tell you about the last time they explored and played outdoors. The benefits of outdoor activity were shown to be significant by researchers at the Human-Environment Research Laboratory at the University of Illinois who studied children as young as five with symptoms of attention-

deficit disorder. Their symptoms were reduced significantly when they engaged with nature (Louv, 2005).

Nature indisputably helps reduce stress and protects the psychological well-being and cognitive functioning of children (Wells, 2000). In general, access to green space has a positive impact on health (de Vries, Verheij, Groenewegen & Spreeuwenberg, 2003). Research shows when programs include experiential learning activities for youth, the negative effects of poor behavior can be reduced (Davies & Schulman, 2007).

One pre-test/post-test study conducted with adolescents, for example, explored the impacts of outdoor adventures on the self-perception of urban youth (Garst, Schneider, & Baker, 2001). Findings show participants' self-perceptions of social acceptance and behavioral conduct improved immediately after the trip, and that some changes in behavioral conduct remained four months later. The study concluded that adverse behavior might be "reduced" in at least one of three ways: (1) Increasing feelings of positive self-perception; (2) Providing ways to gain knowledge, skills, and abilities, and/or (3) Increasing understanding and knowledge of a positive peer culture and participants' ability to develop positive peer relationships and social skills.

Social Responsibility and Leadership

Goodale (1991) suggests that traditional education is limited in its ability to impact youth to become socially responsible. He states "behavioral respectability" is needed in our society to make greater contributions to building community and bringing people together in natural ways. Goodale (1991) asserts that professionals in the field of recreation and parks can instill the craft of leadership, which has lasting effects on students as well as on the local community. As known for nearly two decades, outdoor recreation and environmental programs are multidisciplinary. Minimally, this involves knowledge of both the social and natural sciences. In this sense, "education" goes well beyond the skills needed to succeed academically or earn wages and extends its definition to include having an awareness of ourselves beyond the limits of the classroom. This, too, still holds true today.

According to Smith (2002), connecting learning to outdoor or environment-based education "takes advantage of students' natural interest in the world and their desire to be valued by others" (p. 30). Smith proposes that by focusing on the local environment, environment-based educational programs utilize students' innate curiosity to become competent contributors to their families and the larger community.

According to the article "American Schools in Crisis?" there is continued debate about the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NOW on PBS, 2003). With the passage of this legislation, schools were given new accountability guidelines by the U.S. Department of Education as a way to improve educational achievement; however, years later, scholars indicate that without environmental literacy being an integral part of this, the gains are smaller than before the Act was adopted (Gruenewald & Manteaw, 2007). In reality, what has been produced are numbers (e.g., test scores), but not necessarily well-educated children (Terrell, 2010). Hence, education, in its traditional sense should be respected, yet what young people learn through outdoor and environmental programs in the community augments their skills and aptitude.

This sentiment is further endorsed by the *No Child Left Inside Act of 2009*, where supporters argue there has been little noticeable change over the past several decades in the way youth understand and experience their communities and the natural world. Although outdoor experiential learning models are used both during school and regarding after school programming (i.e., out-of-school time), youth continue to be disconnected from troubling environmental issues. In addition, they have less desire to be agents of change.

As one suburban fifth grader said, “I like to play indoors better ’cause that’s where all the electrical outlets are” (Louv, 2007).

Outdoor Education Program Outcomes and Impacts

The American Institutes for Research (2005) studied the effects of outdoor education programs for children in California. Over 250 middle school students from different geographical locations participated in three outdoor education programs. Students and parents were surveyed to measure changes related to conflict resolution, self-esteem, cooperation, leadership, and relationships with their teachers. The teachers rated students on eight constructs: Self-esteem, cooperation, conflict resolution, leadership, relationships with peers, problem solving, motivation to learn, and behavior in class.

Results showed those who attended outdoor science schools exhibited considerably higher gains in conflict resolution skills. In six to ten weeks, the same children displayed gains in both cooperation and conflict resolution that were significantly higher than the control group. Overall, students participating in the outdoor program received significantly higher ratings from teachers than those who did not participate (American Institutes for Research, 2005).

To elaborate on the need and value of these and other related skills, Henderson, Thurber, Schueler Whitaker, Bialeschki, and Scanlin (2007), proclaim that youth need experiential opportunities to develop social, physical, civic, and emotional competence. Consequently, a growing body of literature supports the claim that well designed and implemented youth-focused programming provides conditions for adolescents to engage in psychosocial growth and can result in positive outcomes for youth (Henderson et al., 2007; Larson, Hansen, & Moneta 2006). For Heath (2001), out-of-school programming constitutes an often undervalued third element of education beyond school and home. Even though this third element rarely gets the attention of educational researchers, there is a common societal assumption that participation in these extras “reflects ways of learning and types of knowledge predictive of patterns of achievement in higher academic vocational and civic life” (Heath, 2001, p.10).

Experiential Learning Outdoors and Urban Youth

In general, youth who spend time playing outside—learning experientially—are more likely to take risks, seek out adventure, develop self-confidence, and respect the value of nature (Roberts & Outley, 2008; White, 2008). The most effective outdoor and experiential programs are those that emphasize active learning, build on student experiences, and facilitate the processing of those experiences to enable a transfer of learning to other areas of life (Priest & Gass, 1997).

According to Outley and Witt (2006), ethnic minority youth may live under more stressful circumstances such as job loss, increasing development coupled with shrinking open space, reduced budgets by recreation and parks departments, and an increasing gap between rich and poor. In urban environments, these challenges are compounded by environmental injustices where their communities are often subjected to policies, which, intentionally or not, put them at a disadvantage (Bullard, 2005 p. 32 as cited in Peloso, 2007, p. 2). Many urban youth live in areas with toxic pollution or other contaminants (resulting in high rates of asthma and lead poisoning) without easy access to healthy and/or organic food (Peloso, 2007, p. 2-3). Additionally, as stated by O’Donoghue and Kirshner, “researchers have found that, for the most part, urban schools present limited opportunities for youth to experience participatory democracy or engage in public change efforts” (2003, p. 3).

Hence, well-planned programs, intentional in design, are essential for assisting urban youth, from ethnically diverse backgrounds, who often deal with more difficult circumstances. There is a great need for programs that help them overcome the barriers of environmental racism and school curricula, which often does not provide the skills needed for active citizenship (Conover & Searing, 2000 as cited in O'Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003, p.3).

As stated by Roberts (2008), there are also numerous sub-cultural as well as self-imposed personal constraints that often limit outdoor recreation experiences for ethnic minorities. Although people of color in the U.S. historically have deep connections with the land, Roberts notes that social trends indicate a tendency for them to disconnect from certain parks and outdoor recreation areas. Explanations and remarks such as "It's a white thing, my people just don't do that" or "I can barely afford to feed my family, so packing for a picnic in the park is not a priority" are testimony to some of the issues and challenges often faced by people of diverse cultural backgrounds (Roberts, 2008, p. 1).

Understanding the constraints and current needs of minority youth from urban areas is often a good first place to begin when it comes to community engagement. The opportunity to be immersed in nature while engaged in programming that encourages self-discovery can lead to holistic outcomes.

Service Learning Among School Groups

Boyd (2001) notes when teens have the opportunity to participate in service learning, they also practice leadership skills and learn self-reflection. Brainstorming, decision making, goal setting, and working with others can be taught and practiced as teenagers learn to plan and carry out service projects. Findings showed that a 12-week program, using an experiential model to teach youth leadership skills in combination with experiential activities and service learning, proved to be successful for teaching leadership skills to students. "Students significantly increased their knowledge of leadership skills in the areas of decision-making, setting goals, working with others, and community service" (Boyd 2001, p. 6).

This study concluded that middle school students within large inner-city schools have fewer opportunities to acquire and enhance leadership skills than their high school counterparts. Likewise, more than a decade has passed since Scheer (1997) suggested this is a problem because possessing leadership skills is essential for most young people to feel satisfied that they have "contributed to society."

Facilitators of Lasting Change

Effective leaders who work with youth should seek to build positive relationships and empower them to become active participants in their own communities (Edginton, Kowalski, & Randall, 2005). Youth participation can be defined in numerous ways (O'Donoghue, Kirshner, & McLaughlin, 2006), but taking this seriously means involving youth as 'research partners' and as players in "grassroots social, environmental, and economic change movements" (p. 3).

O'Donoghue, Kirshner, and McLaughlin (2006) demystify commonly held notions of youth tokenism on school boards, city councils, and boards of directors for nonprofit organizations. They state that authentic participation means building structures and utilizing practices that support and sustain youth from diverse backgrounds. Additionally, youth need to receive training in specific skills (e.g., doing research, making decisions, speaking in public, collaborating) that typically are not part of traditional school curriculum. Providing experiences that broaden their awareness of possibilities and involvement with real-world issues that have public impact are crucial for authentic participation.

In the 21st century, the need for teamwork and collaboration is especially important for community recreation programs that must keep up with the rising demands of society and, at the same time, monitor and improve service delivery. Recruiting and hiring leaders representative of the youth they serve, for example, and who feel an innate sense of social responsibility to collaborate and produce better outcomes is essential. Consequently, more programs have begun to also consider and realize the potential for hiring young people who “come up through the ranks” from participants to leaders.

The influence of outdoor recreation and environmental education programs can become an integral part of the youths’ life, not only affecting their well-being, but stretching beyond imagined boundaries. Related to this is a need to empower urban youth to understand and exercise their rights, and those of their community, regarding concepts of environmental justice. According to Peloso (2007), environmental justice must be incorporated into the lives of youth at varying levels including curriculum design and embedded into program structure when teaching and learning about urban environments specifically. “We ensure a future community rooted in environmental citizenry by empowering our urban youth with the ability to engage in the inquiry of environmental justice” (Peloso, p. 9).

There is a need for experiential education, service learning, and outdoor education to fill in the gaps left by traditional education (as exemplified by the NCLB Act of 2001) and an increase in the use of social and other media by today’s youth—especially urban youth. Such programming can effectively develop “social, physical, civic, and emotional competence” (Henderson, et al. 2007), as well as build leadership and social skills when it engages youth in active, “authentic participation” (O’Donoghue, Kirshner, & McLaughlin, 2006); that is, when programs treat them as ‘research partners’ or stakeholders in environmental justice. The stresses that urban youth face can be mitigated by providing a space that improves their quality of life and the necessary skills and tools that empower them to reach out to their communities, both present day and in the future. Since 2001, the CFC has attempted to provide such a space for urban youth. This study evaluates the CFC’s effectiveness as an experiential learning community with two youth programs (UTB and I-YEL) that improve the lives of its youth and create leaders who are also stewards for the environment.

We, as authors, assert the need for outdoor recreation and environmental education leaders to develop a level of comprehension among urban youth about the long-term benefits derived from engaging in experiential, outdoor-based programs. While there have been great improvements within the past few decades, it is apparent (e.g., by the *No Child Left Behind* and *No Child Left Inside Acts*) that more work needs to be done including development of leader competencies during adolescence. Youth in distressed urban areas face an “institutional discontinuity”—a lack of access to spaces to engage in sustained, active learning opportunities, especially opportunities for democratic participation (McLaughlin, 2000 as cited in O’Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003, p. 2). Providing deliberate outdoor recreation experiences designed to: (1) enhance knowledge and skills beyond the classroom, (2) promote a shift in attitude and behavioral conduct about social justice issues, and (3) cultivate life changing experiences through leadership roles will ultimately have profound impact on youth and, subsequently, the larger community. To that end, the Crissy Field Center curriculum is designed to encourage urban youth to make healthy choices that benefit the environment, enhance personal courage, and engender leadership skills.

Value of Qualitative Research and Evaluation

According to Garst et. al. (2001), it can be counter-productive to rely solely on quantitative methods to identify outcomes as researchers may inadvertently miss the influence of outdoor adventure and environmental-based programs. Furthermore, based

on the nature of typical outdoor programs offered to urban youth, who often represent different social stratifications, it may be problematic to find control groups as required in some types of quantitative studies (Weston & Tinsley, 1999). Consequently, the use of qualitative methods can provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomena in question and greater insight into participant experiences. Examples include personal interviews, participant observation, symbolic interactionism, focus groups, and historical reviews (Creswell, 2003).

Hazelworth and Wilson (1990) suggest that outdoor programs are often a means to reinforce the participant's social and interpersonal skills; each participant, however, may not experience equal changes. Consequently, a major challenge with evaluating outdoor and environmental programs is the difficulty in knowing whether the impact on the youth has lasting effects, if these changes are displayed and sustained at the participant's home on a lasting basis, or if the personal changes stay solely within the program boundaries (Pommier & Witt, 1995).

Finally, a study conducted by Stanford University used interviews to understand the experiences of adolescents participating in the San Francisco Beacon Initiative (McLaughlin, 2003). The willingness and openness of youth participants to talk about their experiences in sincere and instructive ways provided a layer and depth to the results that would not have been possible using standardized quantitative instruments. The effort to communicate the "voices" of young people through interviews served the purpose of understanding the organizational lessons learned as well as identifying and understanding key features of the community centers that were particularly valuable to participants.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to evaluate program impacts on youth participants at the Crissy Field Center (CFC). Specifically, this study of two programs, Urban Trailblazers (UTB) and Inspiring Young Emerging Leaders (I-YEL) explored the following: 1) how youth developed leadership skills, 2) how youth experienced behavioral changes, and 3) how academic and future career choices of the youth were influenced as a result of participation.

Method

A qualitative method was selected as an effective approach for this study. Specifically, focus group interviews were identified as the most appropriate procedure for investigating experiences of urban youth at the CFC. This technique is a good research tool for studying outdoor program impacts in a group context and provides a way to identify depth of meaning (Warner, 1990). Furthermore, as indicated by Creswell (2003), the hallmark of this approach is the explicit use of the group interaction to produce insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group interview procedure.

Study Participants

A purposeful sample of all youth from the 2006 summer season, as well as alumni selected by the staff, participated in the study. Overall, four focus groups totaling 43 participants included one I-YEL group of 13, two UTB programs of 23 total, and seven I-YEL alumni (Table 1 shows basic demographics of participants). Alumni were considered a valuable component of this study as CFC maintains relations with them and many return as program leaders and mentors for the younger participants. Further, interviews were conducted on four separate occasions to keep cohorts together.

Table 1. Participant demographics.

	Urban Trail Blazers ¹ (n=23)		Inspiring Young Emerging Leaders (n=13)		Inspiring Young Emerging Leaders (Alumni) ² (n=7)		TOTAL (n=43)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Gender:								
Male	13	59%	4	18%	5	23%	22	51%
Female	10	48	9	43	2	10	21	49
Age Range	11-14	--	16-18	--	18-22	--	--	--
Race/Ethnicity ³ :								
Asian/Asian mixed	13	30%	6	14%	4		23	53%
African American/mixed	4	9	2	5	9%		6	14
Latino/Hispanic and Latino mixed	5	12	4	9	0	--	9	21
Caucasian/White	0	---	1	2	2	5	2	5
Other/unknown	1	2	0	--	1	2		
Time in Program:								
One year	17	74%	0	--	4	57%	21	49%
Two years	3	13	7	54	2	29	12	28
Three years	2	9	4	31	1	14	7	16
Four years	1	4	2	15	0	--	3	7

¹UTB was divided into two focus groups.

²Some I-YEL Alumni spent a total of three years in the UTB program, this number is not included.

³Mixed-race examples include: Chinese/White; African/American/Filipina

Setting and Procedures

Semi-structured questions were developed as a guide based on the study purpose, and program goals. Sample questions, used in the focus groups, across I-YEL and UTB groups included: Why do you participate in this program? (i.e., motivation); what does this park mean to you? (i.e., sense of place); what are you learning about the environment? (i.e., watersheds); what are you learning about yourself? (i.e., awareness), how does what you learn at the Center or Park relate to your life at home and/or school? (i.e., transference). Moreover, discrete questions were asked of each group based on developmental life stage. For instance, alumni were asked about their experience, how the program affected their current attitudes toward the environment and general life decisions over time, as well as career-related inquiries. Additionally, teens in the I-YEL program and alumni were asked about how their involvement has helped them to become a better “leader” and if their participation contributed to changing behaviors.

Participants were assured confidentiality, informed consent was obtained, and for minors under eighteen assent was also obtained from both the parent and the participant.

Additionally, food was provided, and group interviews lasted approximately 1.5 hours long. All focus groups were audiotaped and transcribed. Additionally, as a back-up measure, handwritten notes were taken by a research assistant during interviews. Prior to each group interview process, all participants completed a demographic data sheet and were given an identifier number; they mentioned this instead of their name before stating their responses to questions. This was essential for analysis and names were not associated with responses.

Data Analysis

A constant-comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to analyze the data to determine emerging themes and patterns as a whole. Cross-cutting sub-themes that were recurrent in the data, as well as relevant and universal to the key domains of the research objectives were developed. The overall meaning of the information was conceptualized, an understanding of the content was organized, and the data was interpreted to provide key inferences. As described by Creswell (2003), after a basic idea of the significance behind the words and depth of information was gained, data reduction occurred and meanings were formed.

Patton (1990) reports that inductive analysis refers to the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis that “emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis” (p. 390). According to Dey (1993, cited in Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000), a natural creation of categories occurs with “the process of finding a focus for the analysis, and reading and annotating the data.” These categories, while related to an appropriate analytic context, must also stem from relevant empirical material. As Patton states, “The analyst moves back and forth between the logical construction and the actual data in a search for meaningful patterns” (p. 411). The present analysis followed this structure.

Results

Results of this study can be used to enhance the structure of the Crissy Center’s UTB and I-YEL programs and their design. More specifically, findings suggest the significance of involving qualified alumni as hired staff. It appears as if these alumni influence high school youth to become future leaders as well; they have an ability to impact the younger participants by helping them build new skills through valuable mentoring.

Six primary themes emerged from the data: 1) Motivation to join program; 2) Contribution to the environment; 3) Social awareness and outreach; 4) Personal growth and leadership; 5) Aided school performance; and 6) Healthy lifestyles (see Table 2).

These themes were analyzed between and within groups, and responses varied based on age and program cohort. There were overlaps in some developmental experiences and processes, which in some cases were gradually incremental. For each focus group interview, sample quotes across cohorts are provided throughout this article as well as represented in Table 3. These quotes represent voices of youth relevant to three emergent domains: knowledge gained, attitudes and behavior, and enhanced experiences.

Theme 1: Motivation to Join the Program

Many of the UTB were introduced to the program by family or teachers with the incentive and underlying motivation of “helping the environment.” In addition, by applying to the program, many learned they would get to participate in activities such as camping and hiking. As stated by one participant: “I joined this program because I wanted to see what this new experience would be like and I wanted to explore new things and also I kind of wanted to put this on my resume.” Participants expressed that they enjoyed learning about the environment beyond the walls of the classroom; they indicated that information

Table 2. Common themes and impacts across all groups and meaning (n=6).

Emergent Themes	Meaning
Motivation to join program	Help the environment • Learned through friends/family/teacher • To have great experiences
Contribution to environment	Spiritual place • Safe place to go • Powerful and unique • Educate and inform others • Live more environmentally conscious • Help to protect natural environment • New attitude towards stewardship
Social awareness and outreach	Learning new skills • Bring back info to community • Feel responsible to educate others • Involve more people from urban communities • Reach non-traditional users • Engage more ethnically diverse youth • More advertisement
Personal growth and leadership	Self-improvement • Program is/was a springboard for youth to believe in self • Became more confident • Influences friends and family • Like helping the environment in program • Will continue to help environment • Increased consciousness
Aided school performance	Program was helpful for environmental and science topics • Knowledge gained to enhance academic work • Improved public speaking in front of peers
Healthy lifestyles	Nutrition– Increased awareness • Consumerism, the environment, and personal health–Developing connections • Physical outdoor recreation trips– Greater understanding of the value to one’s health • Spiritual/emotional connection to natural environment– Outcome of activities

was easily absorbed since the atmosphere at CFC is “more relaxed and more real” than a formal school setting.

Similar to the middle-school youth, some I-YEL participants learned about the program through teachers, family, or friends. Besides the incentive to help the environment, some wanted to get away from peer pressure at school and increase their sense of identity:

At the end of the day in my school I was alone; I had poor grades, the teacher announced about this I-YEL program. I had not been here before and I wanted to have an application; I used to be a follower.

I did not expect to have an interview, the first thing I saw was the vibe; through the interview I learned more and more; I got more and more connected, peer pressure and influence motivated me initially.

Additionally, they wanted to engage in a program for its own sake, and to make new friends outside their regular circle of friends. Receiving monetary rewards through leadership efforts was also a key motivation: “I did not have a motivation, did not know what I was in for; I needed a job, it changed my life . . . if I were not here I would be a different person; my life still would not be the same.”

Theme 2: Contribution to the Environment

For UTB, most of the restoration work comes in active forms such as pulling weeds on trails, and similar activities designed to learn “Leave No Trace.” UTB participants learned about organic food, were encouraged to watch less TV, grasped some of the detrimental effects of non-biodegradable products on the natural environment (e.g., styrofoam, plastics), and acquired more environmental awareness broadly. Overall, findings showed they have learned to save energy by turning off lights after leaving a room or not using excessive amounts of water. Further, as noted by one middle-school student, the knowledge gained contributed to shaping a new belief system as shown by the following statement:

There are some things that are bad in the environment for us, but we destroy some of the environment; we bring non-native plants and exotic plants, and we destroy homes for animals.

For many of the UTB participants, the connection to the program and the park appears to be very personal, perhaps spiritual for some. They perceived their activities (e.g., restoration work, trail maintenance) as having meaning “beyond just helping the environment.” The park, as reported by some, is a place where they can get away from stress and pressures, and to meet and connect with friends who they report are “like family.”

On the other hand, the contributions of I-YEL are reflected in improved social skills that convey a sense of social responsibility towards others. For instance, they foster community involvement by promoting environmentally responsible behavior in their neighborhood (e.g., volunteering at park clean-up events). Through newly acquired leadership and teamwork skills, they help create a level of harmony among their peers, and strive to work as a team towards attaining their own personal goals, including caring about the environment.

Findings suggest that alumni displayed a mature understanding of what it means to be environmentally aware and want to contribute to environmental change in a positive way. Previous participation in I-YEL gave them the passion for the environment, which

led to making decisions about attending college and selecting career choices. Moreover, they use newly acquired knowledge to educate others whom they believe may need greater environmental awareness. The power of the experience is exemplified by the words of this alum:

My biggest contribution is the fact the way our state handles different issues. Like right now I am doing an internship that is definitely non-paid, but I am out there every day trying to convince legislators to adopt laws to help the environment.

Alumni indicated that I-YEL helped them redefine and expand the scope of their definition including “the environment is your social environment, your personal environment, your academic environment; it is approaching as though every single part–component–of life.” The experience gained as part of I-YEL seemed to have deeply affected how they look at the world and relate to nature: They have become environmentally conscious consumers, dedicated birdwatchers, recyclers, and cyclists as well as socially aware citizens who display empathy and compassion towards others as expressed by one youth: “I kind of feel connected because it is like a place where we see birds and animals of San Francisco and I like to protect this. It’s a refuge for exotic birds.”

I-YEL participants discovered a connection to nature at a personal level where the park became a safe place, and where the programs taught them about life and themselves. Students indicated the CFC and the park as being equally a refuge for plants, animals, as well as humans. For the alumni, their reflections of participation revealed strong, ongoing connections: “I don’t just behave differently; I live differently. And more appropriately, I live better than I used to.”

Theme 3: Social Awareness and Outreach

For middle-school students in the program, it was found that social aspects of their involvement come in several forms. First, they learned about both the natural and social environment through interaction with others; for example, they explored environmental issues such as conservation, recycling, consumption and waste: “We go to the plant nursery and clean the pots so they can plant the natives and take out the non-natives.” Also, “We preserve the environment by doing restoration work on trails, like pulling weeds, and sweeping trails.”

They learned about many natural resource-related issues that affect them on a daily basis and conveyed their new awareness and perception about the environment to friends and family:

I tell my friends and family what not to do and why they should not to do it, depending on what they did and stuff. Sometimes I share it with my mom when she asks what I have learned today.

Others find ways to share their knowledge with peers in the program, which leads to new friendships: “I don’t usually tell other people, because it is actually fun when you’re around people you have never met because then you can educate them and make new friends.”

I-YEL participants took what they learned one step further. Many of these teenagers began to examine how they articulate and express themselves in terms of environmental topics; this is one factor that separates them from the UTB. They saw the need to take initiative, volunteer in the community, be a role model, and educate society about preventing further environmental damage as well as how to address environmental justice

issues: “I am a vocal person; sometime it is hard because I cannot keep my mouth shut, I try to teach them because if I throw something away, someone else has to pick it up. Americans are dependent on other people, if we want a better world we need to step up and work on it.”

Evidence shows I-YEL also noticed issues of ethnocentrism, community closeness, and equality as being relevant to their lives by reducing social and environmental injustices. Two examples of this sentiment are expressed by these participants:

Global warming is a pressing issue for America. Everyone is so selfish here—last year I saw it—now global warming is affecting people so they are trying to do something; people would not act if it does not affect anybody, except themselves.

In the long run, it will put out peoples’ opinions, socially and environmentally—95% of all of us will go to college, we are one step ahead of the game. We come out and contribute more to society ‘cause of the learning here.

Similarly, the alumni fully embraced and considered themselves true environmental youth activists, expressing belief in themselves and a sense of importance. They felt a responsibility to educate others about what they know about the environment and saw a much deeper meaning in restoration work (e.g., value of sustainable natural resources).

The evaluation findings reveal a subset to the social awareness theme, that is, outreach interest and desires. As such, the UTB youth feel there cannot be enough youth from different backgrounds in the program. They feel the program should be extended in duration and continue throughout the year (not only in summer). Also, they believe the program should also be opened up for additional participants (e.g., expand) “to experience what we get to do.”

I-YEL students want to bring in more people from other urban communities. They suggest if more youth have access to these resources, the program would continue to grow. They also suggest the program should “go nationwide,” and that staff should be “more aggressive with advertisement.” They also expressed a desire “to show others that there is more than a mall to be happy in.” The alumni suggest using more pictures and a variety of media outlets to advocate for the program and to use CFC resources more for the community as a whole. They felt it important “to reach communities that aren’t traditionally users of the park” and to increase bus service to underserved sections of the city to improve access. It is their perception that low-income children benefit most from the program since it takes them out of their daily routine and teaches them more positive aspects about life.

Theme 4: Personal Growth and Leadership

The connection to CFC gives UTB participants a heightened sense of independence and confidence, as well as a closer connection to their peers in the program by engaging in activities such as camping and hiking and learning about the natural environment for the first time.

The major impact for high school youth in I-YEL was growth of mind and character through personal efforts and enhanced self-expression, self-esteem, and maturity. Findings show that participants desired to improve their self-esteem and were motivated by challenging activities and self-directed tasks. This also helped them learn key leadership skills they could apply to their program experiences and beyond (e.g., school, family, community). I-YEL youth began to understand and embrace the notion of stewardship and wanted to learn how to become better stewards of the environment as well as teachers and leaders.

I learned a lot about young children, I never recycled, mom works really hard, worries about food on the table, when I started working here I heard and I learned. Show me and I learn. Let's get a recycle bin and so forth – now I opened my eyes and I am changing and teaching my mom.

Moreover, the alumni confirmed the program was a catalyst for increased self-esteem. Through their reflections during the interviews, findings indicate they developed a new level of consciousness regarding caring for the land. An improved and deeper relationship with parents and friends was also a common theme for alumni.

Findings indicate alumni challenged other people about their attitude and behavior towards the environment more so after they moved on and they attributed this skill to previous participation in I-YEL. Two differences from younger participants are the following: (1) they gained an increased ability to see the “big picture” of environmental topics; and (2) they acquired the skills to discuss serious social issues with greater ease. Results also showed longer term impact occurred afterwards when they were no longer active participants; CFC staff continued to provide the tools and resources to be leaders, in some capacity, such as in college or with seasonal jobs. Alumni also emphasized that the training they received from I-YEL gave them the confidence to speak to small and large groups as demonstrated by this example:

Each and every individual who passes through I-YEL ends up speaking in front of a crowd of hundreds, or teaches a workshop. You might be rocky at first but you get so much practice in I-YEL that you get really comfortable with it.

As a subset to this theme of personal growth and leadership, students reported making discoveries about themselves and their identity. The middle-school students, for example, acknowledged several aspects about themselves: “We learn how to deal with other people, we talk too much and complain too much.” This process gave them more self-awareness. Additionally, they learned it is possible to make friends within a short period of time.

I-YEL participants realized that “people belong to the environment,” and “change has to be created through responsible behavior.” They learned to advocate on behalf of the environment within their own community or other settings (e.g., school) where they felt their voice was needed. Their personal growth (e.g., enrichment in knowledge and confidence) led to enhanced social growth, such as the embracing of activism, which further reflects a strengthened belief in their potential. Additionally, findings show these skills transferred to public speaking efforts: “I-YEL made it easier to speak in front of an audience and in presentations; I felt alive! [the program] made me a better public speaker.”

The alumni focused more on activism and leadership than on the other two groups. Results show that by receiving the tools they needed to articulate what being an ‘environmentalist’ really means, they challenged themselves and others, going beyond the limits of their comfort zones—“I just became so much quicker on starting an argument with someone”—but they also learned to do so with poise and humor as modeled by their I-YEL facilitators.

Findings also indicate they learned about “identity development”; for instance, they built tighter relationships with their family and peers, and gained a greater understanding of their abilities as well as personal and professional goals. One alumnus stated:

I began to have more confidence in myself and I began to feel happy wherever I went to and I carried that happiness from I-YEL outside, and even my parents began to notice changes in me.

Theme 5: Aided School Performance

While this study did not conduct a pre-post evaluation based on student grades at the beginning and end of the program, responses are based on student perceptions and a sense of their involvement at CFC with their own self-reported performance at school. Hence, either way, no cause and effect is possible as there are often confounding factors.

The middle-school youth expressed how they had more to say and contribute in school and what they learned at the Center helped them with “getting good grades.” Results also show they started to appreciate what they learned from their teachers in new ways.

One of the high school students was asked to help out in class by a teacher because of her knowledge in various environmental science topics learned at the Center. As noted, “My environmental teacher asked me to help out in other classes since my grades are always good in biology and science because I get a lot of new information from what I learn in the I-YEL program.” Because of their core outdoor education experiences, these students found subjects to write about and utilized their new knowledge in their classes. Students mentioned they knew more about certain subjects in their environmental studies class than their fellow classmates and attribute this level of academic development to involvement at the CFC.

Findings demonstrate the experience and personal growth obtained from CFC helped the alumni to be more creative with school projects, both in high school and college. More specifically, some of the help the alumni received was learning through life examples and teachings beyond classroom work; the students said this has “a more lasting effect.” They became more passionate about education and gained a sense of educational ownership and responsibility. Consequently, one student mentioned “grades have no meaning if I do not learn” since education and schooling “is about learning and not just busy work.”

The outcome of their responsibility for doing well academically and their passion for achievement, ostensibly, was honored by teachers and highly recognized by CFC staff. For example, one student said that a teacher used original work from an I-YEL project in teaching another course; while one of the alumni mentioned a newfound ease in approaching professors in college.

Theme 6: Healthy Lifestyles

Activities organized in the park provided middle-school students with physical and emotional gratification and reflected their desire for adventure. Examples frequently noted include backpacking trips, camping, and (for some) restoration work. Nourishment and healthy sustenance is also more meaningful to this group of youth as it affects them directly; both their knowledge and attitudes seemed to shift as expressed by one UTB participant: “I am now more conscious about my nutrition!”

For the teens, as leaders-in-training, physical activity and health consciousness (e.g., eating organically grown food) is derived through purposeful active participation as the direct result of their improved self-esteem and self-awareness. Physical activity and health, overall, is equally noted as being an integral part of life for the alumni. Findings illustrate alumni were proud of their learning experiences from I-YEL.

Results also indicate that involvement in I-YEL encompassed fostering a personal “healthy lifestyle,” promoting “healthy thinking,” and becoming positive role models for their friends and peers as shown in this statement:

Table 3. Sample participant quotes.

Program	Knowledge Gained	Attitude and Behavior	Enhanced Experience
Urban Trail Blazers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I believe that I can use the knowledge to prevent further damage to the environment and even though I might continue with another program, I might continue with volunteer work.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I want to continue to help the environment because I think it is really fun to help it out and I think like we can make the world a better place.” • “Every night I go home, I give my parents a lecture about what I learned.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I really like the program and think other people would appreciate going to the program if they had the chance and that this is a start to inspire other people to be more conservative with the environment and take better care of it.”
Inspiring Young Emerging Leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “95% of us will go to college - we are one step ahead of the game. We came out and contribute more to society, cause of the learning here.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I used to be shy I think I feel more comfortable in summer camp working with kids – I became really comfortable.” • “I always bring in a water bottle to school, there is not recycling in my school, so I created one in my locker.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “People in this program get opportunities other people don’t get otherwise. It is so much fun, from one opportunity to another opportunity to another.”
Inspiring Young Emerging Leaders (Alumni)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I feel like I-YEL made my understanding of what should be socially acceptable, about wanting to contribute in a good way, to the environmental changes that are needed –regardless of what my social acceptability was amongst my peers.” • “I feel like my general level of consciousness about my consumption is very different, so if I buy something with packaging I know that has an effect, whereas before I would have just bought it.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “My biggest contribution is [to address] the fact the way our state handles different issues. Like right now I am doing an internship that is definitely non-paid, but I am out there every day trying to convince legislators to adopt laws to help the environment.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “For me, I-YEL is more than an environmental program, yes we went for snow trips and work in the nursery, but by going on snow trips and to Sequoia National Park we got a much bigger appreciation for the environment, and that has helped me and my family to travel to other National Parks.” • “I don’t just behave differently; I live differently. And more appropriately I live better than I used to.”

Now I go to the mall and I get really anxious and think—oh so much conspicuous consumption, that's so stuck with me. I get in arguments with friends and I feel like I release and part with the people I went to high school with because I feel like that's all they do—they conspicuously consume, but I feel like life is about something bigger than that.

I-YEL participants described how they now contribute to their communities as well as the personal gains they have made through increased physical activity and healthier eating:

I contribute because I plant the food from seed and I harvest from the seeds every single year. I eat from dumpsters; I refuse food that people have thrown away. I walk everywhere which is something amazing, because I busied around my entire life. I never ever buy individually packaged food; I buy in bulk. I make meals for people so we can eat together and no food ever goes to waste.

One I-YEL participant expressed a reduction in spending, and increased physical activity due to high gas prices:

My contribution to helping the environment is by coming back to the Crissy Field Center and by accepting the opportunity they are giving me, such as running the environmental youth program, internship with other park rangers—outreaching to community on how the environment are effecting other people, and also just how I am talking to my friends, cool places of the environment that are around the bay area, that my friends don't know about. I also bike more since gas is expensive, and I get out and see the difference between wants and needs; I shop every half-year.”

Discussion and Implications

The interviews resulted in common themes as well as differences. Similar experiences and impacts revolved around such factors as social and personal growth, contributions to the environment, and an increase in healthy behaviors. While not explicitly measured (e.g., no grades obtained from schools), students also reported the ways they believe the Center helped them with their studies. Leaders should strive to understand how youth experience a transformation between what they gain from programs and how they perceive their performance in school. Their learning in school can be reinforced by activities offered in the out-of-class experience.

A major difference between I-YEL and the UTB is that the middle school youth were introduced to new concepts and the natural environment itself, whereas the I-YEL alumni experimented with their newly learned leadership skills by taking the initiative to learn about environmental and social issues as well as to express their concern to others about needing to take care of natural resources. “It's like a family, every time I come to work here I am happy, I like coming here, coming here makes me want to help others.” Part of this derived from learning how the environment is relevant to their lives.

Outdoor recreation professionals should consider incorporating aspects of the natural environment into the daily lives of urban youth to help cultivate new habits. What mainly distinguishes the I-YEL from the UTB is that the former are more mature and have started to see the bigger picture of both societal and environmental issues and the connections between them. By creating and developing new ideas about the social and political world around them, urban youth begin to see the collective effects of their behavior on the environment and the impact, in turn, on their communities.

Leaders working with urban youth in experiential settings should be aware that students want to also be pushed mentally; this tends to lead to an increase in their personal confidence and motivation to take on challenges beyond their comfort zone. Pertaining to an outdoor setting, this is validated by Wells (2000), who notes nature indisputably helps reduce stress and protects the psychological well-being and cognitive functions of children. Results from this present study also show their satisfaction stems from succeeding in what is typically considered an awkward situation for many teens. For instance, talking in front of an audience, or giving a formal presentation they had to prepare on their own, was extremely meaningful to their development.

Urban youth desire to have the skills needed to take on environmental and social issues. The young people in this study have grown more aware of the importance of conserving resources, and protecting the natural and social environment. They carry the 'name' (of the program) and the 'deeper meaning' of I-YEL into the community by promoting the program and becoming role models in their communities and with family members and with peers at school. The UTB, on the other hand, are similar in every sense with the exception of still needing role models given their developmental life stage. This is partially provided by I-YEL participants who work directly with these younger, more easily influenced middle school students who aspire to be future leaders.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The CFC youth programs (Urban Trailblazers and Inspiring Young Emerging Leaders) effectively increase youth awareness about sustainability and environmental justice while building self-awareness, a sense of identity, and social skills. These programs help urban youth connect with national parks and explore a variety of outdoor recreation activities. They also provide leadership opportunities to the extent that alumni consider themselves 'real' environmental activists and enthusiastically return to work with younger program participants, increasing a sense of buy-in and community connection. Overall, participants stated that being in these programs has helped them make better and healthier choices for themselves, their families, and their communities. More programs, similar to these are needed to help urban youth cope with the challenges posed by economic recession, a widening gap between 'have's and have nots' (Allen, 2007) and a decrease in California state funding for public education. Study participants themselves made recommendations for increased outreach and program duration so larger groups of people could benefit.

How may such programs as these can be replicated on a larger scale or is the small-group number significant to its success? What are specific indicators of community connections and how can the impact on communities be measured? What further effect does the development of youth leadership skills have on outdoor recreation, environmental awareness, and protection of parks and open space? How may program impact on leadership and/or academic skills be evaluated or measured? If such an impact could be shown, how could public education nurture and support such programming? Future research should continue to explore what's in the "black box" to fully understand what generates long-term impact of leadership development among urban youth. In other words, what remains as the unknown? What areas still need exploration? What impacts remain undiscovered and how can we continue improving our programs and developing solid leadership skills to meet the needs of youth today? Additional studies, both quantitative and qualitative, should offer new directions for improving methods, materials and best practices used in youth programs.

As the Crissy Field Center believes in the value of maintaining involvement of alumni (e.g., some return as youth leaders), future research should similarly consist of

a longitudinal approach to more fully comprehend the lasting impacts of the program on the lives of middle and high school students. Additionally, the alumni interviewed in this present study are proud of their connection with the Center and of the status they have gained as a result of their involvement. Findings for this group show a realization of the program impact occurred retrospectively while in the midst of a new place in their life (e.g., college, employment); they are building upon their various experiences in the program both personally and socially. Overall, it appears that outdoor and environmental programs that serve urban youth can benefit when leaders develop and nurture a climate of pride and program identity. The alumni who return as leaders, facilitators, and role models are an essential part of the program's success and sustainability. We suggest this practice could be replicated in similar outdoor education and service learning programs.

Additionally, the social, mental, and emotional development of participants is not possible without the involvement of the Crissy Field Center's exceptional staff. These leaders set the example for youth to be motivated from within. The end result creates intrinsic motivation and lasting change—allowing youth the opportunity to step away from experiences in which the extrinsic rewards are short-lived—and to experience more long-lasting rewards.

Up to the time of this study, I-YEL served 12 students/interns per season. In 2008-09, the program expanded, serving 23 ethnically diverse teenagers with an approximately 50/50 split of females and males. The following school year (2009-10) consisted of 22 youth and a higher number of females (n=13) than males (n=9). Each season, the Crissy Field Center offers unique opportunities to learn something new (e.g., about self, environment, others), provides youth with engaging and deeply meaningful activities, and strives to ensure skills learned are relevant now and in the future. Programs based in urban areas serving youth through outdoor experiences can learn from the model of the Crissy Field Center. The CFC empowers students, cultivates their intrinsic interests, and seeks to maintain a balance between caring leaders as mentors and the power of choice for youth-driven decisions.

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