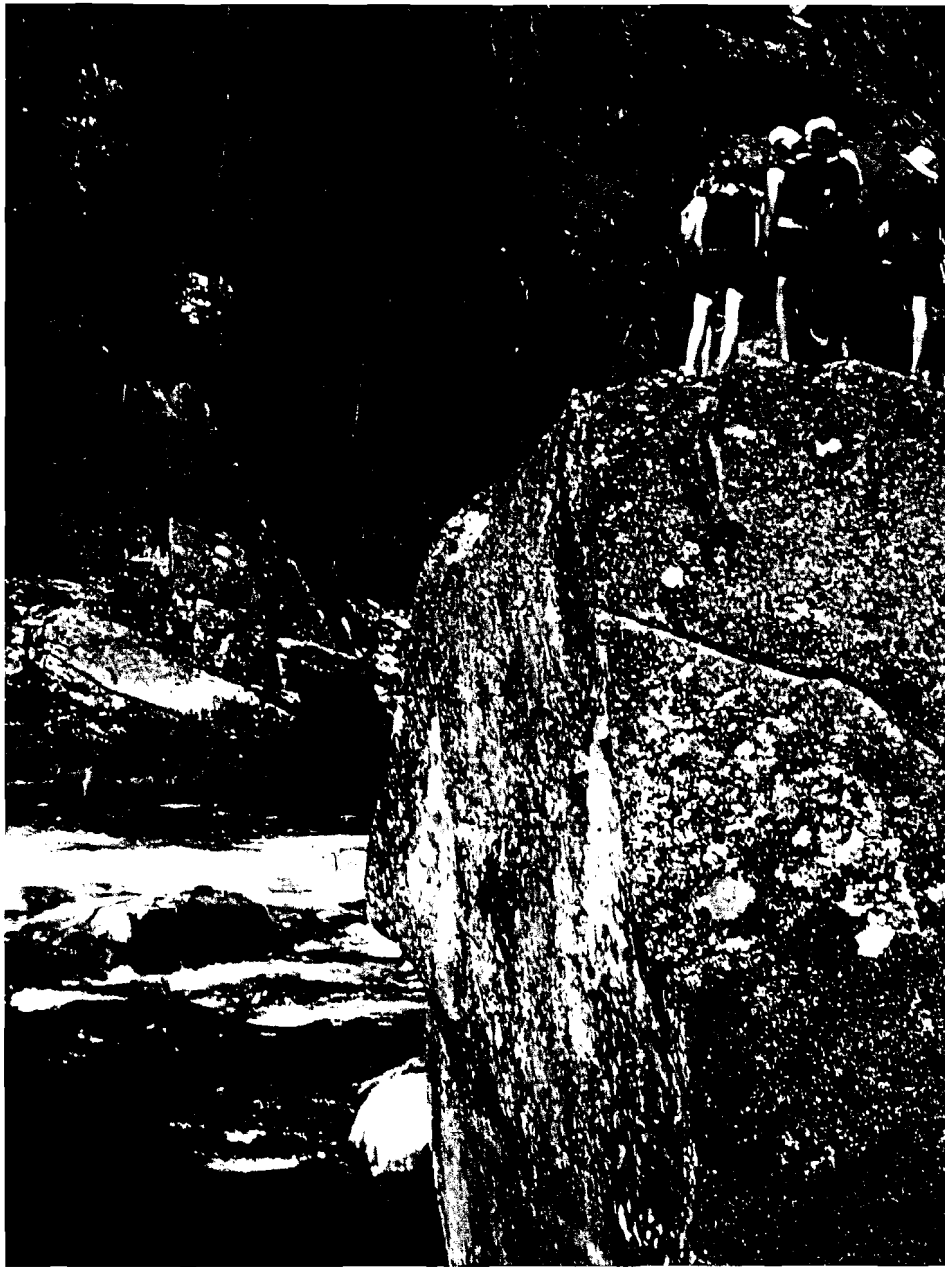


# 2005 Wilderness Risk Management Conference Proceedings



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## *Wake Up! The World Is Not Safe Your Program May Not Be As Safe As You Think It Is*

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In 1998, we began exploring the concepts and linkages relating to the connection between risk management and diversity. Based on this earlier work, an article was submitted to the Wilderness Risk Management Conference proceedings during that year addressing these concepts. We hope that particular paper provided organizations and individuals with pertinent information and tools for practical use (see Roberts & Gray, 1998). Since that time, we have furthered our initial research and inquiry that has led us to present our work each year at various conferences, and continue sharing our resources through publication such as this article.

Cultural considerations in adventure programming may not be in the forefront of individual or organizational thinking. With all the preparation and planning that we do is it really necessary to add yet another element to think about? Our answer is yes, of course. To not do so would be contrary to the complete package of what risk management should ultimately encompass. If an instructor or organization buys into the concept of environmental and human factors as contributing causes to accidents, incidents and near misses, then we cannot dismiss the human dimension factors such as culture, race, abilities, sexual orientation, and other diversity related substance. Since culture is a fundamental premise of this paper, we first offer a definition as used in our work.

### **The construct of culture**

Definitions of culture are numerous and there is no single definition that all social scientists or anthropologists would heartily accept. And, there are several approaches that are relevant to understanding culture (e.g., communication interactions/patterns, problem solving). We have adopted the following definition for its ease of comprehension and utility: "A learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values, and norms which affect the behaviors of a relatively large group of people" (Lustig & Koester, 1999).

A definition that is more lengthy, yet captures the essence of meaning is as follows: "Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas especially attached values" (Banks, 2001).

### **Societal changes and challenges for the field**

Here is a critical glimpse at what has happened in our country on a specific cultural level following the tragic events of "9-11". As Americans, we do not think it would be a bold statement to say people of Middle Eastern decent have experienced numerous risk management issues in their lives. If you take some time to consider innumerable populations who have endured injustice by virtue of their race/culture, sexual orientation, or class, for instance, what do you see, feel, and imagine their own personal and or professional "risk management" concerns might be? In a powerful quote by Audre Lorde she captures, in part, the essence of the message we are trying deliver.

As a black, lesbian, feminist, socialist, poet, mother of two including one boy and a member of an interracial couple, I usually find myself some part of some group in which the majority defines me as deviant, difficult, inferior, or just plain "wrong." From my membership in all of these groups I have learned that oppression and the intolerance of differences comes in all shapes and sizes and colors and sexualities; and that among those of us who share the goals of liberation and workable future for our children, there can be no hierarchies of oppression (Adams, p. 5, 2000).

The point being made in this quote may be clear to some outdoor instructors or directors of adventure-based organizations, but what we put forth vigorously is this: to many it is not clear at all. The number of times we have been asked "what does culture have to do with risk management" is frightening and inauspicious. On a cultural competency scale, of which there are several stages, people who are completely ineffective with intercultural communication skills typically function at a level known as cultural blindness, which is defined as, "denying that any difference exist between one's own culture and the culture of another" (Gray & Roberts, 2001; Lustig & Koester, 1999; Randall, 1989).

Through our workshops and variety of training opportunities, we hope to raise the level of consciousness from "blindness" of some, to a more competent view of many. We seek to illustrate how the assortment of features and characteristics relating to culture, all intersect with managing the emotional and physical risks of the staff, clients and customers we serve. The Humanistic Risk Management Model© at the end of this paper provides a visual overview of these complex concepts. This model is a work in progress.

In our 2001 WRMC workshop in Wisconsin, we presented quite a few figures and statistics on the ever-changing demographics in the United States. This was essential for us to illustrate the point that while we are experiencing an increasingly diverse population, the outdoor profession still reflects the dominant White culture. To further our position, the Census Bureau is projecting that within 30 years European American people will be the minority population in the United States (Census, 2000). A recent article supporting this trend titled "The Future of Experiential Education" by Dr. Dan Garvey was part of his keynote speech at the 2002 AEE Intermountain Regional Conference. He states "if we don't have adequate representation from diverse populations, then how will we possibly survive in the future?" (Garvey, 2002, p.19).

When we attend such conferences such as the AEE or WRMC, representation of diverse cultures is usually rare. Nonetheless, people from various backgrounds do, in fact, participate in our programs. These individuals may be from such ethos as African American/Black, of Middle Eastern descent, Indian, gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender, or "questioning," etc. Statistically, however, these groups are not involved at the same level (e.g., fewer in number) as the dominant culture. "Why is that?" you might have asked yourself? Again, it is our conviction there are safety and access issues, for these and other populations, facing our field that hinders participation both from a staffing and participant perspective. We remain unyielding in our belief and convey this with utmost humility.

According to Ewert (1996), "Although in recent years outdoor education has made progress in meeting the multicultural challenge, few researchers and practitioners have moved beyond a basic recognition of the need to be culturally inclusive. A more profound level of inclusiveness will take place when outdoor educators allow elements of diverse cultures to reshape basic concepts, theories and practice". That is precisely what we, as the authors of this article, are attempting to do. Despite the fact that the known numbers of people of various cultural backgrounds attending outdoor and experiential programs may be smaller on average, they do show up, and there are "differences" to varying degrees, that need to be carefully considered and researched. According Roberts and Rodriguez (1999), for example, based on one's culture there are differences in attitudes towards the outdoors, varying experiences with adventure-based activities, assorted learning styles, and a range of constraints to full enjoyment and skill development.

Dr. Karen Warren, a well known Experiential Education professor (Hampshire College), completed

her doctoral dissertation called "Unpacking the knapsack of outdoor experiential education: Race, Gender and class sensitive outdoor leadership" (see Warren, 1999). In her work she has combined concepts of social justice and leadership theories that reinforce a challenge to this profession to begin exploring these issues as critically as we examine all other aspects of our work (e.g., technical knowledge, knowing the breaking strength of a 11 millimeter rope, knowing the correct first aid protocol for a sprained ankle, knowing how to climb a 5.11+, having and wearing the "best" gear). Warren also prompts this field to scrutinize the AEE accreditation standards, which barely touch the subject of social justice and unquestionably it should. Her ongoing work on "socially just outdoor leadership" is commendable and progressive. She is helping to break new ground and is one of the few scholars in our profession who has, and is, researching this vital subject matter.

### **The Boy Scouts: Case in point**

In order to further communicate the essence of the message in this paper, another example is the Boy Scouts stand on homosexuality. They (gay, bisexual, transgender boys and men) have been given a clear statement supported by the U.S. Supreme Court that homosexuals are not allowed in their club. As authors, we do not feel compelled to enter a debate, *per se*, however we will offer one positive note about the Boy Scouts regarding their intentions and policy. While we do not agree with this policy on homosexual involvement, the Boy Scout council is not pretending to be inclusive and will not consider expanding their risk management worldview to address or understand those significant life issues. That is, there is seemingly no tolerance or appearance that boys or men who identify as gay or bi-sexual are allowed or welcomed by the Boy Scouts.

Our "positive" comment, therefore, is in support of the way the Scouts have been forthright and outspoken about their values. This can be affirming in some ways because there are indisputably programs in existence that profess their "doors are open to all" regardless of their sexuality, ethnicity/culture, religion, etc. yet they have no concept about how to address their staff or program with relevancy or well managed risk. Which scenario is worse, or the lesser of two evils? Both can do tremendous damage in different ways. Organizations that are attempting to integrate a larger humanistic perspective of risk management and culturally appropriate programming seem to be increasing, as stated earlier, and we applaud them for engaging in the quest of greater awareness and pursuing a goal of true inclusion.

### **The Santa Fe Mountain Center: A model program**

The Santa Fe Mountain Center (SFMC) is a leader in this field as a great prototype for multicultural experiential programming in this country. One of the authors of this paper, Sky Gray, is the Executive Director of the SFMC and is providing her personal experience in this section.

As an organization we have been faced with a series of risk management issues in regards to both our clientele and with our staff. We serve a diverse community including, people of color (primarily Latino/a, Pueblo & southwestern Indian), GLBT youth and adults, people with HIV/AIDS, vulnerable youth who present with a variety interpersonal and interpersonal challenges, and women who have been violated by domestic and sexual violence. Collectively, we have been on a quest about how to be a relevant experiential program in the 21st century. One way we have approached this is by staying current with pressing social issues and another is the hiring of staff that represent and/or reflect the clientele we serve thus, for this reason and others, we consider ourselves a multicultural organization.

At the SFMC, our staff composition is from varied Indian tribes, African American, people from New Mexico who identify as Hispanic and or Latino/a, people from the Middle East, Euro-Americans, people who identify as gay, bi-sexual, lesbian and transgender, people who identify as heterosexual, and of course a mixture of all of the above. Through mistakes and triumphs, we have also learned a great deal about the significance of the topic reflected in this article. Perhaps one of the most momentous

lessons learned has been the discovery of how pervasive dominant cultural norms and values are, and the negative and damaging effects they can have on other and people and cultures. Subsequently, we immerse ourselves in pertinent trainings, on-going and open dialogue, and staff briefings that focus on cultural understanding and competency.

We also try to align our philosophies with our risk management policies and procedures accordingly. While not without our share of problems, we experience ourselves as collectively learning from each other and gaining knowledge of the varied backgrounds and histories that we bring to our programs. This is one way to embrace our differences as well as likenesses and this enhances our capacity as better practitioners, better administrators and overall, better humans. Our hope is that in so doing, our programmatic delivery and risk management approach is as powerful, relevant and as appropriate as possible. We learn every day, more and more, about the many things we still have yet to learn and discover. As a learning organization, if we remain content with the traditional template of Euro-American experiential education (which has been an incredibly powerful methodology), we reinforce educational stagnation, and miss the value of progressive, forward thinking solutions and programmatic soundness.

### Conclusion

This paper included a couple of programs on opposite ends of the spectrum. The Boy Scouts and Santa Fe Mountain Center are only two examples of hundreds of programs that exist with practices and beliefs that lay on multiple places along this continuum. As the population changes in regards to a new ethnic majority, instructors, and all who would provide outdoor and adventure-based programs, must be smart about the changes and challenges to this field. As inheritors of both programmatic and political power, today's minority groups will be tomorrow's majority and will decide whether to be involved as participants and/or leaders or demand for changes to occur that we might not be ready for. As instructors and program directors, it is up to us to forge the connections between the programs that we operate and the diverse populations that must be better served.

You and your organization should be examining the relevancy of the outdoor environment and your programs in general, and need to begin discourse on the changing demographics of this country as well as the training issues that your staff may need to meet the emotional and cultural components of well managed risks. If this is not occurring, then our word of advice is simple, wake up and get busy! Our world is changing at a rapid pace and sometimes, as horrifically experienced on 9-11-02, a disturbing rate. Our overview, understanding, and obligation as educators, reformists, therapists, instructors, and administrators are critical to our staff, clients/customers willingness to show up, and be visible in every sense of the word. Thinking in multiplicity about the needs and possible concerns of diverse constituents, and programming accordingly, is not only logical and responsible, it is the right thing to do. This fact notwithstanding, conscious or unconscious cultural incompetency is pervasive. Cultural mores, considerations and concerns deserve attention, just as much as having the appropriate gear, route selection, medical certifications, and similar program and administrative protocols. Without them, some professionals perpetuate the myth that "the world" (a.k.a. our programs) is a safe place for all, and we do not need to pay attention to such matters of the heart and explore the depths of life among different cultures. We do, as a profession, have a choice however, to make our programs "safer" (in all aspects) or not.

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Appendix 1

**Humanistic Risk Management Model<sup>35</sup> (expanded version, 2002)**  
 (Gray & Roberts, 1998)

