

## Introducing Generation Y to the Wilderness

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### Abstract

Today's Western culture is characterized by high technology, time compression and a disconnection from the natural world. What happens when a group of young adult students who are firmly embedded within this world, embark on a 6-day unassisted wilderness experience? When divorced from the structural support of the everyday, and placed in an emotionally and physically taxing environment, one would imagine students would retreat to the security of the known world upon return. However, our study sheds new light on this phenomenon by revealing its antithesis. These students manifest a strong desire for a simpler life. What is the nature of the simpler life they envisage? What is its innate appeal? And what are the implications for those involved in Outdoor Education? Even if such a desire for a more primal existence were expressed, is it possible or probable, that this notion can be executed? Our research proposes that a necessary precursor for sustainable living and a deep attachment to the environment is for educators to provide experiences that strip back the superfluity of everyday life and introduce bare subsistence. This facilitates the transition into a heightened and more sensitive environmental ethic.

## Introduction

The very foundations of Western education are shifting dramatically in response to the developing world and the changing nature of the modern student. In order to keep pace with advancements in education and society, Outdoor Education in Australia also needs to ensure it remains relevant to current generations. Outdoor Education is both an educational subject and a process of facilitating outcomes, primarily concerned with developing the health and well-being of the relationships we have with ourselves, others, and with the natural world (Gray & Martin, 2012). Outdoor Education in the Australian educational context includes adventurous outdoor activities, developing skills for journeys in more remote settings and environmental knowledge development (Gray & Martin, 2012). Australian research has, to date, highlighted the benefits of outdoor adventure interventions across many domains, predominantly within the cognitive, behavioral and social well-being fields (Pryor, 2009).

However, through a rigorous systematic review of research within the Australian setting, Pryor (2009) identified other domains such as environmental well-being, emotional well-being, cultural well-being and spiritual well-being which were severely unaccounted for in Australian research. Particularly, Pryor (2009) was able to highlight the failings of current research to account for the impact the natural environment has in outdoor adventure interventions. In addition, a systematic review of global outdoor learning literature by Rickinson et al (2004) highlighted a significant gap in research; the need for deeper insights and stronger research evidence on the effectiveness of outdoor learning opportunities that offer adventure activities.

In order to address gaps in the literature, this research will propose to explore the impact an Australian wilderness experience may have on Generation Y tertiary education students. By observing the effects of such an experience specifically on Generation Y students, we may be able to better understand the influences of similar experiences on future populations. Currently there stands the opportunity to strengthen gaps in wilderness and Outdoor Education research, while integrating an entirely new perspective – that of Generation Y. Generation Y is profiled as being born between the early 1980's and the late 1990's and are identified as being vastly different to past generations, with the impact of generational change thought to be significantly greater in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than in any previous era (McQueen, 2010). Therefore, it was felt that a new lens was needed through which to view traditional Outdoor Education and wilderness experiences. This study was driven by a desire to understand what impact a wilderness experience in Outdoor Education could have specifically on Generation Y students.

Initially, Generational Theory was addressed to illuminate the differences between Generation Y and past generations, in order to identify the significance of Generation Y's experience of wilderness. The goal was to conceptualise a profile of the Generation Y student, subsequently developing a phenomenological research design investigating the essence of student transformation, as a result of a wilderness experience during a tertiary Outdoor Education subject. This study explores the response from Generation Y students, after being placed in a physically and mentally challenging remote wilderness setting, devoid of the technology, networking and comforts of modern life as they know it.

The wilderness experience referred to is a grueling six day hike that covers a distance of approximately 120 kilometers from Katoomba in the Blue Mountains through to Mittagong in the Southern Highlands of NSW Australia. The Katoomba to Mittagong (K2M) hike is part of an Outdoor Education subject in a NSW University Course for pre-service training teachers. The K2M creates a unique environment for many Generation Y students, one free from mobile phones, the internet, Facebook and the pressures of daily life, where students are challenged in new and dynamic ways, facing true, authentic, risk taking. In a world where adventure and risk are tipped to be edited out of the modern experience (McQueen, 2010), the K2M is designed to expose participants to situations that are outside their comfort zones, where new experiences can enhance learning (Lyng, 2005).

## Generational Theory

According to McQueen (2010), if we observe the 20th century, there are five main generational categories which attempt to classify and understand the common characteristics of a group of people that are born at about the same time (as seen in Table 1 below, adapted from McQueen, 2010, pg 14):

**Table 1**

NAME	BIRTH YEARS
The Builders	Early 1900s – Mid 1940s
The Baby Boomers	Mid 1940s – Mid 1960s
Generation X	Mid 1960s – Early 1980s
Generation Y	Early 1980s – Late 1990s
Generation Z	Late 1990s - ?

In light of this, it was necessary to acknowledge an awareness of generationalism as having some limitations. A person's generation is only one factor in understanding their behavior (Davis, 1997). A generational profile is therefore a generalisation which is helpful in describing patterns of behavior within a cohort, rather than a rule without exception. This study accepts the patterns and trends of the significant majority in the cohort, while appreciating that there will be diversity and exceptions within the generational group.

## Generation Y

The body of literature surrounding Generation Y is extensive in the fields of social research, business management and employment (McQueen, 2010); however, there are negligible resources available regarding how this generational profile applies specifically to Outdoor Education or wilderness experiences. Generation Y has been profiled in regards to their positive attributes and negative characteristics, predominantly by teachers, prospective employers and parents. For the purposes of this study, four dominant characteristics of Generation Y are highlighted to conceptualise how their paradigm differs from that of past generations and to function as a framework for comparison during data collection.

### Tech Savvy

It is widely accepted that Generation Y are the most technologically savvy cohort the world has ever seen (Dyment, O'Connell & Boyle, 2011; McLoughlin & Lee, 2008; McQueen, 2010; Louv, 2008). Where older generations such as the Builders or Baby Boomers are often frustrated with or ignorant of modern technology, Generation Y have only known a world where access to and an understanding of technology and its instant gratifications are the norm (McQueen, 2010). These "digital natives" (McLoughlin & Lee, 2008, pg 10) are masters of technology who use social networking tools such as Facebook as a fundamental part of their academic and social lives. Generation Y are dependent on technology and instantaneous communication via a host of media as part of the always switched on culture permeating the group (Black, 2010).

In stark comparison to the high tech world that modern students are familiar with, this study observed the effects of disconnecting Generation Y students from this digital existence. While on the six-day hike in the Australian wilderness as part of an Outdoor Education subject at a NSW University, students had no access to the internet, social networking, mobile phones or any other technology which might aid their progression or distract from the realities of their experience. Students were required to navigate their way unassisted through a remote, challenging bush wilderness which was quite foreign to their urban reality at home. It was hypothesized that upon returning home after the wilderness experience, students would immediately seek the familiar, instant gratification that technology and social networking bring to their communicative lives.

## Disconnected from the Natural World

Current research suggests that younger generations are becoming increasingly detached from the natural world. A study in the United States (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001) found that between 1997 and 2003 there was a 50% decrease in the amount of young people who spent time in outdoor activities such as hiking. Similarly, a study in New York revealed results indicating that younger generations are generally spending far less time playing outdoors than their mothers did when they were young (Clements, 2004). This phenomenon does not appear to be limited only to the United States, however, with research in Israel revealing a diminishing connection to the natural world in their younger population (Sebba, 1991), children from the Netherlands reporting a lack of contact with nature (Verboom, van Kralingen & Meier, 2004) and British children also, were found to possess more knowledge about Japanese cartoon character animals than native species in their local natural environment (Balmford, Clegg, Coulson & Taylor, 2002). These widespread results all tend to suggest a contemporary experience that is common to young people globally and Australian young people are no exception to this occurrence (Malone, 2008).

The aforementioned phenomenon spreading through the developed world has now been given a name. Nature Deficit Disorder is an expression conceived by Richard Louv (2008) in his work titled *Last Child in the Woods*. It is a term that refers to the cost of alienation from nature, including diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties and higher rates of physical and emotional illness. Louv (2008) presents a strong case for the growing concern that the child in nature is an endangered species and the health of children and the health of the earth are inextricably linked. This statement directly highlights the importance of our research in understanding the essence of how Generation Y students respond to a wilderness experience. Through this understanding lies a potential pathway to reconnecting young people and nature.

The basis of our study was focused on participant reflection of an experience that takes place in the wilderness, therefore it was deemed important to understand the psychological and emotional underpinnings between humans and the natural world. Examining this human – nature interaction required the application of a theory that explores how meaningful, caring relationships with nature have implications for Generation Y. To determine the impact of a wilderness experience, it seems crucial to develop an understanding of both the impact the natural world has on participants and how Generation Y conceptualise nature. Theories such as Attention Restoration Theory (ART) and Biophilia were important in addressing the relationship between Generation Y students embarking on a wilderness experience and the potential impact on their views and attitudes towards nature.

Biophilia theorises that humans have a genetically based need for affiliation with life in all its forms (Kellert & Wilson, 1993). In addition, ART proposes that nature helps refocus the mind, reviving the spirit, and that effortful directed attention can become fatigued in modern urban environments (Herzog, Black, Fountaine & Knotts, 1997). Studies centered on ART have found that direct exposure to nature has a restorative effect on humans (Felsten, 2009). These theories have direct implications

for the human – nature connection of Generation Y students. This study was concerned with exploring the idea that Generation Y students could be ‘unplugged’ from the trappings of modern life by exposing them to a wilderness experience which could initiate a reconnection to the natural world. ART and Biophilia lend shape to the conceptualisation and discussion of the importance of human – nature relationships, separate from the common Western cultural notion of conceptualising nature as a resource (Stremba & Bisson, 2009). The underlying theory of the human – nature connection is relatively new to Outdoor Education wilderness experiences; however the concerns of our current planetary ecological predicament are encouraging researchers to find increasingly more effective ways of teaching *for* the natural world as opposed to simply being *in* it.

## Time Compressed

Another characteristic of the Generation Y student identified in current literature is a fast paced lifestyle and overall time compression. For Generation Y, lifestyles have been getting faster in an attempt to increase personal productivity, and Honore (2004) believes that we have entered the phase of diminishing returns. Generation Y are empowered by choice and are commonly found to have weekly schedules that are as busy and full as their career driven parents (McQueen, 2010). They have been given every chance to experience all life has to offer. In turn, this has resulted in Generation Y leading an increasingly busy lifestyle in an attempt to not miss out on any opportunity afforded. This ‘roadrunner’ culture is taking a toll on everything from student’s health, diet and work to our communities, relationships and the environment (Honore, 2004).

In contrast, the K2M wilderness experience undertaken by our Generation Y participants, in a sense simplifies life. They are removed physically and mentally from life at home, and are faced with the adversity of overcoming any challenges the Australian wilderness provides. Students are at the mercy of the natural world, and often find they develop new cyclical circadian rhythms, waking with the rising sun, enduring physical and emotional adversity during the day and sleeping not long after sun set. This routine is dictated by the innate cycles and rhythms within nature, and is often a far cry from the time compressed days and caffeine induced late nights in communicating via social media, to which Generation Y students adhere to.

## Overprotected and Risk Averse

Interestingly, another significant issue which may be adversely affecting Generation Y is society’s micromanagement approach to raising children. Current literature suggests that learning is enhanced by experiences which place individuals outside their comfort zones (Markos & McWhinney, 2003). This highlights a concern that hyper-vigilant parents of Generation Y are possibly eliminating adventure and risk from young people’s lives, including the opportunity for children to find themselves outside their comfort zones.

The Comfort Zone Model commonly found in Outdoor Education literature is based on the belief that when placed in a stressful or challenging situation people will respond, rise to the occasion, overcome hesitancy or fear and grow as individuals (Luckner & Nadler, 1997; Brown, 2008). Of concern is the idea that we are living in a culture where adults are manipulating their children’s lives based on their own fears, anxieties and agendas - the common agenda being that, childhood is too precious to be left to children, and children are too precious to be left alone (Honore, 2008). As a result of wanting the best for their children and a fear for their safety, many parents may be editing risk and adventure out of the modern life experience.

This social phenomenon now characteristic of the Generation Y student is in complete contrast to the wilderness experience undertaken by the participants in this study. The six-day hike demands that

students face adversity unassisted, and make informed logical decisions under pressure where perceived risk is often confrontational and challenging for students. By taking participants out of their comfort zone and placing them in this unfamiliar wilderness environment, students are given the opportunity to have a life-changing and transformational experience.

## Methodology

Essentially a qualitative study as it involves finding the “meaning that individuals give to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2007, pg 37) this research begins to build on the lack of literature profiling Generation Y in a wilderness experience. Our study used phenomenology as the underpinning research strategy. The application of phenomenology as a research strategy is widely used and has been defined with different nuances by different authors. For Creswell (2007) phenomenology describes the meaning of a lived experience of a concept or phenomenon for individuals, in which multiple sources of evidence can be used. Similarly, Moustakas (1994) identified more specifically with one approach to phenomenology: *transcendental (or psychological) phenomenology*. This approach to phenomenology focuses less on the interpretation made by the researcher, and more on a description of the experiences of participants. Moustakas (1994) belied the researcher should set aside their own experiences, taking a fresh perspective of the phenomenon under examination as if for the first time. In contrast, for Van Manen (1990) who utilises the second approach to phenomenology, *hermeneutic phenomenology*, the process involves interpreting the “texts of life” (pg. 4). One of the hallmarks of hermeneutical phenomenology is a lack of rules or methods and a focus not only on a description of a lived experience, but interpretations made by the researcher (Van Manen, 1990).

This research is situated somewhere between the two approaches to phenomenological research. As researchers, we embrace the idea of describing our own experiences in relation to the phenomenon, but then continue by bracketing out personal views before proceeding with the experiences of others. We believe it is important to be transparent about our viewpoints and acknowledge them, then put these aside to get to the essence of the participants lived experience whereby interpretations can be made.

## Research Design

The purpose of this phenomenological research is to conceptualise Generation Y’s experience of wilderness. In this study, the wilderness experience referred to is the ‘Katoomba to Mittagong Hike’ (K2M) in which Outdoor Education students at a NSW University participate in at the culmination of their program. For this study, twenty five Generation Y tertiary education students who have experienced the phenomenon in question – the K2M – were carefully selected to participate in the research. The Outdoor Education subject runs as an elective option for students studying a Bachelor of Education PD/H/PE at a particular NSW University. The K2M hike was introduced into the Outdoor Education subject in 1993, and has proceeded to develop an almost legendary reputation among Education students at the University. Participant’s experiences of the K2M were collected to begin to conceptualise Generation Y’s response to the wilderness.

Essential aspects of the phenomenological protocol included field procedures, question guidelines, analysis procedures and feedback procedures with participants. In this research, the database largely consisted of open ended questionnaires, interview transcripts and notes, audiotapes and reflective journals, which were classified and stored in a logical manner. A strategy employed to increase the validation of this qualitative research was to have prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field (Creswell, 2007). Essentially, this included building trust with participants, learning their culture, and checking for misinformation. The researchers combined history of experience in Outdoor Education and wilderness environments at the tertiary level totals more than 30 years.

The participants for this study were chosen using criterion sampling to reflect individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon in question, thus allowing a forged, common understanding of the essence in question (Creswell, 2007). As the main purpose of this study was descriptive (Creswell, 2007) it was important that the participants represent the group of students being studied as defined in the operational definition (as having experienced the Outdoor Education elective at the University). We were able to recruit twenty five participants, ensuring data saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

As well as fitting the criteria of being an Outdoor Education student at this particular University, essential criteria for participant selection included falling under the Generation Y profile based on age, having a gender balance and allowing access to personal journals for accuracy in reflection. Such a participant sample provided triangulation through both data source and setting, thus increasing confidence in our research findings (Glesne, 1999). Snowball sampling was also a technique used (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007), whereby participants meeting the criteria for inclusion in the study then put the researchers in contact with others who were suitable.

The primary source of data for this study was obtained through open ended questionnaires and personal interviews with individual participants. Due to the nature of this inquiry, semi-structured interviews with an interview guide approach were used, enabling a comparison of responses (Patton, 1990). The guide approach ensured that the same general areas of information were collected from each participant, providing a degree of freedom and adaptability in getting information from the interviewee. Moustakas (1994) identified two broad questions which we asked of all participants to focus attention on gathering data that lead to textural and structural descriptions of participant's experiences; 1) What did you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? 2) What situations influenced your experiences of the phenomenon? Participant interviews in data collection all began using these focus questions and then progressed to incorporate other open ended questions regarding how the wilderness experience had impacted participants in relation to the profile developed for Generation Y. These questions helped conceptualise what impact a wilderness experience had on Generation Y students.

In conjunction with open ended questionnaires and participant interviews, the data collection procedure included gathering additional documentation of the participant's experiences during the K2M. This particular Outdoor Education subject requires students to keep a record or journal throughout the duration of the term as part of an assessment task. These journals include reflections from before, during and after the wilderness experience. To add depth and clarity to the data provided in interviews, participant journals were collected and discussed as a form of member checking, to aid the recovery of memories and to clarify answers provided to the stimulus questions in interviews (Creswell, 2007). These journals provided a valuable insight into participants lived experiences and were an ideal way of checking that participants were reflecting in a true and honest manner.

As this phenomenological research design involved extensive data collection from twenty five participants, data analysis was undertaken concurrently with data collection. Reflecting on the data, organising the data and developing clusters of meaning, was ongoing. Highlighting significant statements in interview transcripts that provide an understanding of how participants experienced the phenomenon (termed Horizontalisation) was used to write a textural description of what the participants experienced (Moustakas, 1994). These significant statements were also used to write a structural description of the context or setting that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Both the textural and structural descriptions were combined to develop an understanding of the essence of the phenomenon. Once participants were identified, our focus was to create rich, interconnected descriptions of the shared common experience. The underpinning process was focused on illuminating the essence of what takes place in this wilderness experience, with the aim of generating understanding relating to how this impacts upon Generation Y students.

Meeting basic criteria for trustworthiness and authenticity was a way to establish the quality of our

research outcome. Based on the framework developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) strategies previously mentioned such as identifying and bracketing out personal experiences, prolonged engagement, triangulation of data, developing rich description and member checking were all ways of contributing to the validity of the research. In the context of this study, ensuring that the outcome fairly represents the viewpoints of the Outdoor Education students from the University was crucial to the phenomenological research design (Creswell, 2007).

## Results and Discussion

Participant interviews and reflective journals provided a rich description of many valuable issues that resulted from the student's experience of wilderness. The resultant data was coded to classify and interpret participant meanings, according to the four Generation Y characteristics identified in our profile framework. For the purposes of this study the codes were prefigured to align with the identified literature, however have also acknowledged additional, emergent coding categories, which surfaced during the analysis process. Examples have been provided of the key significant statements with their formulated meaning below in Table 2, which encapsulates the findings.

**Table 2** Selected Examples of Significant Statements from Participants and Related Formulated Meanings

<i>Significant Statement</i>	<i>Formulated Meaning</i>
Being out in the natural surroundings made me feel like I belong there. Feelings and emotions when out in the bush are almost amplified because the distractions of the busy world are not there to smother them. You can work through your emotions out there instead of ignoring them. This was its innate appeal	Being in the wilderness removed the distractions of modern life and enabled clearer thought process.
For the next three days I 'hid' from the world because I didn't want to integrate back into the real world without those who I had shared this amazing experience with. I felt down for the three days. Describing the experience we had had to others was frustrating because words cannot describe what we had all gone through, what we had seen and how we had bonded together. In some ways the experience put a different perspective on my future, where I was at and where I wanted to be. It made me see life differently.	Depressed mood is a result of returning to 'normal' life.
It is more returning to the simple life, surviving off what you need, not what you want. Returning to the simple life reminds us that we don't need all those (extra) things to survive.	The wilderness reminds us of the necessities in life.
The innate appeal was the fact that there are no worries. Life is no longer rushing, you just have to be content with being and enjoying all the little things you encounter. You are simply existing in the moment and enjoying everything	There is enjoyment in simply existing in the moment.

<p>that is happening at that point in time.</p>	
<p>By the end of it I felt as if I had a connection with the bush... I loved being there and began to take everything in, sights, sounds and smells particularly... I hated being home, when I got back I was really depressed for a few days. I looked around and saw so many dickheads oblivious to what they were doing and how they were living their lives. I felt sorry for them. Society has too many pressures... There are external pressures which in a way force you to go out and get a good job, make money, get a big TV, get a house/mortgage and work for the rest of your life. It's kind of the norm back in real life. The hike me realise you don't need any of that superficial stuff. On the hike there was none of that at all, the food tasted better, the air smelt cleaner; there was no pressure or responsibility. Life was sweet.</p>	<p>The superficiality of modern life is not a necessity. Being immersed in the wilderness instilled a connection to the natural world.</p>
<p>It has definitely changed me, I have a massive urge to get back to nature. I hate that I rely on technology to make my life more exciting... You don't need that. Good company is the key to happiness. (I) Can't wait to get back into the bush.</p>	<p>A realization that technology can not be a replacement for human interaction.</p>
<p>The K2M placed me in quite an unsafe environment yet I have never felt so safe in my life.</p>	<p>The perceived risk in the wilderness was great, however the reality was perhaps less so.</p>
<p>It seems obvious to me now that risk is essential for growth and inspiration. When a person understands that what he or she has just done is risky, they will appreciate its challenge more, which I think has profound consequences for learning.</p>	<p>The wilderness experience instilled a sense of understanding risk and the benefits associated with risk taking.</p>
<p>You learn to appreciate simple biophilic relationship we have with the wilderness, you learn to find joy in overcoming fear, and you re-enter the world with a whole new lens. E.G. walking into the shopping center on day 6...feeling like an alien to the shoppers around me. Strange realization that our lives are filled with superficial things, and that wild places are insanely underappreciated.</p>	<p>Wild places are underappreciated.</p>
<p>It's about going in thinking that with only the basics you will survive and finding out you flourish instead.</p>	<p>Initial ideas of surviving in the wilderness were daunting. After the experience, perceptions changed and we realised we were ok.</p>

<p>Once lost and in the dark I became quiet and negative. My weaker side was beginning to show. They say you can judge a person's character by how they react during the hard times. If people were judging me at that moment then I believe they would have compared me to a spoilt little teenager – not good.</p>	<p>The experience was challenging and brought out your true character, strengths and weaknesses.</p>
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## Facing Adversity

Prior to embarking on the K2M, many participants viewed their wilderness experience with some trepidation. Responding honestly and without hesitation, participants predominately envisaged that their trip would be “risky”, “unsafe” and “daunting”. A sense of apprehension was evident from participant reflections prior to departing on the experience. The K2M was viewed as being “out of our (participant) comfort zones”, and in an “unfamiliar wilderness environment”. Participants stated that both the environment and the task were foreign to their usual routines and lives at home. The experience pushed them out of their comfort zone and created a space where students were challenged both physically and mentally. The main outcome of being challenged this way was that participants felt they had a healthy new respect for facing adversity and taking educated risks.

## The Simple Life

Participants identified that the wilderness demanded their attention and focus, thereby removing the distractions of modern life. One participant reflected on this phenomenon by stating that “feelings and emotions when out in the bush are amplified, because the distractions of the busy world are not there to smother them”. It was generally accepted among the participating group that being out in the challenging wilderness environment removed them not only physically from their busy lifestyles at home, but mentally and emotionally. This removal, or disconnection, from the “real world” as some termed it, had participants realizing a simpler way of life and experiencing an innate sense of belonging to the natural world. One young woman described this as reminding her “how much the simple things in life can bring so much happiness when you have the time to notice them. In such a busy life back at home working, studying and trying to juggle everything, you become too distracted to simply appreciate friends and laughter. I can't remember the last time I laughed as long or as loud as I did out there (in the bush)”. Participants felt that the experience showed them a simpler way of living, reminding them of the bare necessities and removing the superfluity of ‘real’ life.

## Connection to Nature

The wilderness itself was paramount to participant's experiences. A common theme arising from the data showed that the wild, bush environment encountered was one which participants were not overly familiar or comfortable with, and yet it was a connection that seemed to develop throughout the experience. One student stated that he learnt “to appreciate (the) simple biophilic relationship we have with the wilderness. Walking into the shopping center (afterwards) I was feeling like an alien to the shoppers around me. (I had a) strange realization that our lives are filled with superficial things, and that wild places are insanely underappreciated”. Participants generally felt that they developed a deeper connection with the natural world and a greater appreciation for the benefits that can arise from being immersed in the natural world. Future studies could investigate whether or not this connection to nature, which was developed as a result of the wilderness experience, actually has an impact on an

individual's future environmental stewardship. This research proposes that a necessary precursor for sustainable living and a deep attachment to the environment is for educators to provide experiences that strip back the superfluity of everyday life and foster these connections to the natural world. This could potentially facilitate the transition into a heightened and more sensitive environmental ethic.

## Technology Re-Emersion

Another predominant theme arising from the data emerged from participant comments regarding Generation Y's technology use. When asked to describe what they were leaving behind prior to embarking on the K2M, a common reply was that they were "leaving behind technology". The general assumption among both researchers and participants was that there would be a level of withdrawal and frustration at not having technology to distract or assist students during their wilderness experience. However, our study revealed the antithesis to this phenomenon. The majority of students reflected on their experience stating that, in fact, they rather enjoyed the separation from their high-tech worlds at home. Students were reticent to reconnect to the high tech world they had previously craved. One student clearly explained this feeling stating "It has definitely changed me; I have a massive urge to get back to nature. I hate that I rely on technology to make my life more exciting... You don't need that. Good company is the key to happiness. (I) can't wait to get back into the bush". Comments indicated a realization and understanding among participants that technology can not be a replacement for human interaction. Another participant stated "All I want is my 15 sidekicks, a tent, fire and debriefing circle". She was referring to her feelings regarding her re-immersion back into the high-tech, time compressed lifestyle she lived back in the "real world".

Generally participants did not look forward to reconnecting with technology upon their return home. One student in particular reported that he had removed his profile from Facebook and was no longer using the social networking site due to its lack of enabling a "real connection with other people. It all just seems so superficial and fake in light of the connections we made with each other out there".

The majority of participants also reported a sense of sadness or depression at returning back to their 'real' worlds. They were genuinely upset that their experience in the wilderness did not seem to be fully understood by friends and peers. The realization that they were not able to share the enormity of their learning and understanding was frustrating, with one student reporting that he "hated being home, when I got back I was really depressed for a few days". Another girl commented on the enormity of her learning from the experience stating "I lost 4 kilo's in weight but gained 4 lifetimes of knowledge and understanding". The data suggested that generally participants felt their learning had been profound as a result of their wilderness experience, and they were frustrated at not being able to make others understand this.

## Concluding Comments

In depth interviews with Generation Y participants of the K2M indicated that students experienced a significant transformation as a result of their six-day wilderness experience. More specifically, participants described developing a strong desire for a simpler life. The simpler life was described as being one which relied less on the use of technology, was not as busy, where calculated risk taking was valued and where connections with nature could flourish and develop. Further, participants displayed a desire to form social connections and relationships with others that were "real and meaningful" as opposed to superficial networks developed via social media sites.

When considering this study within the context of prior research on characteristics of Generation Y and their experiences of wilderness many similarities and some startling new revelations were discovered. Participants confirmed much of the research earlier highlighted by authors such as Louv (2008) and McQueen (2010), whereby technology has been suggested to inhibit deeper connections to

the natural world. Generation Y students are comfortable with technology in their lives and thrive on constant access to technology. The removal of technology in such an experience can potentially be seen as a tool to help Generation Y students to move outside of their comfort zone, whereby learning can be enhanced. Further research into Generation Y and wilderness experiences could focus more specifically on investigating the ways that technology may impact on connections of young people to the natural environment. This study could also be a springboard into the development of ways to increase the desire in young people to develop a sustainable future.

The changing nature of Generation Y students and their response to a challenging wilderness environment presents interesting implications for those involved in Outdoor Education. With Generation Y students in this study displaying a desire for a more primal existence, we propose that a necessary precursor for sustainable living and developing a deep attachment to the environment is for educators to provide a context that focuses on the simple things in life and the benefits of 'unplugging' from technology and experiencing wilderness. This may facilitate the transition into a heightened and more sensitive environmental ethic.

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