

## LESSONS FROM THE CORNELL WILDERNESS TERM

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- I’ve been asked to make a few remarks about my experience with Cornell’s Wilderness Term in the context of our conversation about off-campus study and student engagement.
- The Cornell Wilderness Term (CWT) is an off-campus program comprising courses in the sciences, social sciences, arts and humanities.
- Those courses are taught during the first term of the academic year at Coe’s Wilderness Field Station on Low Lake, which is in the Superior National Forest of northern Minnesota.
- That Field Station is within walking distance of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, which has been described by *National Geographic Traveler* as “paradise found” and one of the “50 greatest places of a lifetime.”
- I’ll say a little about our experience with the program and suggest two lessons learned.

### Experience

- Cornell’s Wilderness Term is now three years old, and has include courses in ecology, plant morphology, structural geology, geomorphology, environmental ethics, and wilderness politics. There are signs of institutional success.
  - enrollment has grown
  - students are seriously engaged
  - students who have been there once often want badly to return
  - we have a web site: [www.cornellcollege.edu/cwt](http://www.cornellcollege.edu/cwt)
  - Cornell has a very similar program that takes biology, geology, and anthropology students to the Bahamas during the winter. Craig Tepper, who is at this conference, can tell you about that.
- As a student of wilderness preservation and management as matters of public policy, the Field Station’s proximity to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness provided me an opportunity too rich to ignore.
  - The BWCA is the nation’s most visited wilderness area.
  - It is the largest wilderness east of the 100<sup>th</sup> meridian.
  - It has the longest history of protection, and it has been the subject of more legislation and litigation than any other American wilderness.
  - In short, it is the ideal case study for the preservation and management of public wilderness.
- Seizing on those advantages, I organized the Wilderness Politics course around study, action, and reflection. The course

- explores the wilderness concept,
  - the history of wilderness preservation in the United States,
  - the impact of wilderness designation on national parks, national forests, and other public lands,
  - and the host of controversies that inevitably arise when government agencies are directed to "preserve natural conditions."
- We study the laws, administrative regulations, court decisions, and management practices that govern the use of wilderness generally — and the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness specifically.
- We also engage wilderness management directly.
    - We meet with wilderness managers before and after our trip.
    - We participate in the management of the BWCAW by measuring visitor impact at de facto campsites in designated “primitive areas.”
    - We travel for nine days through the wilderness collecting impact data,
      - visiting areas of historical and management interest,
      - learning from each other in nightly campfire talks,
      - and observing the influence of fire and wind — as well as of visitor and management behavior — on the wilderness resource.
- In preparation for our canoe trip and along the way we address significant questions that are rendered tangible by the wilderness around us.
    - What is wilderness? What is nature? Can we measure naturalness?
    - Is preserving wilderness even possible?
    - Should wilderness land managers interfere with natural forces?
      - Should forest fires be allowed to burn?
      - Should predatory animals be reintroduced?
      - Should exotic species be exterminated?
    - And what is the appropriate place of people in wilderness areas?
      - Are we diminishing wilderness by our presence?
      - Should we take steps to protect visitors from the dangers of wilderness?
      - Should we take steps to protect wilderness from the danger of visitors?
      - Should concessions be made to Native Americans whose ancestors once called these "wilderness areas" home?
- Questions like these engage the liberal arts broadly.
    - Students must observe, measure, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate.
    - Science is indispensable to thinking seriously about many of these questions, but ultimately the choices to be made are political choices.
    - So, the course invites students to think about who is making these choices, how and why.
    - It invites them to evaluate the choices made.

- The course concludes with a paper that challenges students to integrate experiential and traditional education. It addresses a policy judgment wilderness managers have had to make in response to an extraordinary event.
  - The event occurred July 4, 1999, when straight-line winds in excess of 90 miles per hour blew down 12 million trees over 600 square miles, heavily impacting one-third of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.
  - The policy judgment concerns fire.
    - With literally millions of trees blown down, there was and is a significantly increased risk of a major forest fire in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. Such a fire would be very expensive to fight, and it might be difficult or impossible to extinguish. [When giant fires broke out in Yellowstone National Park in 1988, they were not extinguished until the first snows fell despite the efforts of more than 10,000 firefighters and the expenditure of more than \$100 million.]
    - On the other hand, the BWCA is supposed to be managed as a wilderness, an area where nature is allowed to take its course. The July 4 storm was certainly a natural event, and so are many forest fires.
  - With this in mind students are asked “what, if anything, should the Forest Service do to reduce the fuel load — and thus the probability of catastrophic fire — in that portion of the BWCA Wilderness most impacted by the July 4th storm?”
  - In answering this question students are asked to take into account the nature of the BWCA ecosystem; the philosophy of wilderness preservation; the variety of measures that might be utilized; and the various laws, policies and management guidelines applicable to the BWCAW.

### **Lessons about Student Engagement:**

What have I learned from undertaking to teach this particular content in this particular context? I suspect I could make a long list, but I'll relate just two lessons today — lessons that I suspect may be self-evident to anyone who had transported students away from their natural habitat.

### **Lesson No. 1 speaks more to the field station program generally: Real engagement may require significant disengagement.**

- As anticipated, the success of the Wilderness Term has resulted in part from students' disengagement with much of their daily lives.
- They are separated from family, friends, news, sports, clubs, motor vehicles, restaurants, bars, telephones, television, and electricity after 11 p.m.
- This is a massive shock to the student system. A void is created that must be filled.
  - Students throw themselves into their field work — sometimes in a spectacularly

literal fashion. I have seen plant morphology students spend hours half submerged in a bog.

- Students desert the shelter of the dormitory to sleep under the stars and complain that they are unfamiliar with the constellations.
- They search the horizon for northern lights.
- They cheerfully walk miles in the dark, trying to sound like wolves and hoping for a response.
- In all these ways they demonstrate an openness to new experience and new learning that would be shocking to me if it occurred on campus.

**Lesson No. 2 speaks more to the experience of my Wilderness Politics course:  
Changing the context changes the content.**

- All of us who teach know that what we teach and what students learn are two different things—and that occasionally that is a good thing. The best education sometimes results from the unexpected question. Or the conversation after class—or under a tree.
- Well, the BWCA has a lot of trees, and students have a lot of time to observe, think, and react.
- I was able to capture some of that thinking by asking my students keep a daily journal. I offer a few samples. They lose some of their richness by virtue of my editing for length, but hopefully the authentic student voice remains. I'm a political scientist; I can't write this stuff.
- Course content clearly influenced student thinking and student conversation outside of class. Here is a report of one such conversation:
  - “Anyway, on to the two topics I wanted to talk about. The first one I think we pretty much all agreed on was the different perspectives of wilderness managers and users. Our book says that managers need to be more aware of the users’ perspective when putting into practice management techniques. I strongly believe that users should be more informed and aware of the goals of wilderness managers. I think that as users of wilderness, we have a responsibility to take care of it. And since most people don’t know what’s best for the wilderness, it makes sense for them to learn from the people who have a pretty good idea what’s going on.
  - “The second topic was a debate on whether humans are natural or not. I’m kind of conflicted on this issue, but I think I’ve come to a conclusion at least until someone comes along with a convincing counter argument. I’ve decided that humans are natural, and we cause damage just like beavers and ants do. But the huge difference is that there are so many more of us! And we’re so much bigger. And we have so many more tools at our disposal.”
- Students exhibited unusual sensitivity regarding their own ecological impacts: two

examples that demonstrate making the connection between learning and life.

- “even what we might consider minimal impact on a campsite, based on what we see when we arrive and leave, can greatly alter the ecosystem of the area. While there are definitely measures campers can take to reduce damage, I wonder how many of those we will actually be implementing on our trip.”
  - And a bit more hyperbolic: “The other thing I did was to pack food. I think it will be great, but I suppose I am sort of frustrated by all the waste that was produced because of it. I sort of feel like I’m going into the wilderness to enjoy nature, but in order to do that, I have to kill 50 million trees in the process. Just kind of makes me think about how I could be more ecologically responsible.”
- I mentioned the expectation that the context would make issues tangible: three examples
- First, “even though the Forest Service guy said the hunters and canoers don’t have any problems interacting, I’m still slightly wary of people actively using rifles in the same general vicinity of myself and our group. It makes me rethink my opinions on multiple use.”
  - Second, “I was really surprised by the number of people we saw today. Everyone was nice and friendly. However, it does make me understand the solitude argument better than I have previously.”
  - And finally, “The whole concept of indirect usage of wilderness is something we have never really thought about, but the more I think about it now, the bigger it gets. I mean, who hasn’t read a poem or book about wilderness, or seen a picture of a forest, or an animal in its natural setting? Indirect wilderness usage is quite possibly universal, even if people don’t realize it.”
- Cornell’s mission statement talks about integrating theory and practice. On that good liberal arts theme I offer you this:
- “We got lost trying to find the Three Eagle Lake campsite.” [Editor’s note: they not only failed to find the campsite; they failed to find the lake.] The journal continues, “I guess I should have gotten a better look at the map or used a compass.”
- And I was surprised — although I should not have been — by the degree to which students reported learning about themselves. Here are five excerpts that reflect on personal growth. Are we seeing evidence of metacognition here?
- “There’s a pretty awesome sense of accomplishment in traversing places that nobody has obviously been in quite a long time. It’s also pretty nice to push my own conceptions of what I’m capable of. In any other circumstances I may not have deemed a lot of our passageways navigable,

but you never know until you try.”

- “As is probably evident in this journal, nearly every day on this trip I did something that surprised me. I never would have thought I could carry a canoe over a 200 rod portage or canoe across oceanic waves in a little piece of tinfoil, or survive a hellishly cold and wet day and night, and I’m also proud of myself for learning to light a camp stove.”
  - “I really did survive, which was something I doubted a number of times. There was more than one occasion when I really didn’t think I could do something, and I ended up kicking some ass. I really do feel like a stronger and better person for it.”
  - “I did a 360 rod portage with an aluminum canoe today. About halfway through the portage my arms and hands were cramping up and some of the rock was so treacherous that in my mind I could see myself falling and the canoe flying and breaking everything, but somehow I just kept trucking. Even though experiences like that make me draw on personal strength, I have also realized just how important being surrounded by strong people is, too. I’ve been challenged so much intellectually, emotionally, physically, and spiritually by experiences and people on this trip, but I couldn’t have had nearly the same experience without any one of the people here. Good and bad, I have stories that I’m looking forward to telling involving everyone here, and I’m happy about that.”
  - Finally, “Today as I sat on the shoreline curled up in the ball, silent and motionless, I realized that maybe I had something right. There is a virtue in pure observation – and removing myself as much as I can from my environment and really watching and listening.”
- Since I am a political scientist and this was a course on wilderness politics, I’ll close with a reflection on politics.
- “A few times in class we touched briefly on the fact that forests are disproportionately represented as wilderness areas, leaving many other types of ecosystem to be destroyed. I just kills me such a small percentage of prairie land is in existence today, not to mention marshes and many other types. Don’t get me wrong, I love trees as much as the next girl, but why all the forests and no Midwest prairies or anything else even similar? Before this class I had never thought about just how much politics is associated with wilderness designation, and I must say, now that I know, it truly makes me sick.”