

THE ASPEN TIMES

Call of the Wild

Seminar takes kids deep into the wilderness

Paul Andersen
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We sat cross-legged in a circle on the edge of a wildflower meadow at Sawmill Park. Yellow fawn lilies spread across the recently melted forest glade. Warblers chirped from hidden perches on spruce and firs. I studied the group of middle-school kids before me, wondering if we could give this seminar value, if it could work.

Our group of three adults and eight children composed a small speck within the Hunter-Fryingpan Wilderness, an 80,000-acre expanse of deep forests and high mountain peaks. Across the distant western horizon stood the snow-capped peaks of the Elk Range: Pyramid Peak, the Maroon Bells, Capitol, Daly, Mt. Sopris.

Sawmill Park was all ours. There was no one else within miles. We had hiked a deserted trail for almost four hours and now, deep in the wilderness, it was time for our first discussion. As moderator, it was my job to draw these kids into the assigned readings. I begin with a warm-up: "Why are you here?"

There was no hesitation from a vibrant 13-year-old boy named Gunner. "I'm here because I love the Earth and I love nature." Gunner set the tone and the others followed. They described themselves as skiers, snowboarders, hikers, backpackers. They had walked in the mountains and deserts. They had slept upon the earth. My anxieties melted away like a snow bank on a south-facing mountainside in June. This was going to work.



The writer, center, leads a discussion with students about wilderness and literature. Readings for the youth seminar included Henry David Thoreau, Dave Foreman and Laura Ingalls Wilder. (A.O. Forbes)

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The wilderness means finding your own river crossings. The kids balance on a log over Spruce Creek.

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The Experiment

"This is a first, you guys," announced Willard Clapper that morning at the trailhead. "This is all an experiment."

Clapper, a burly, buzz-cut man with a twinkle in his eye, is a retired Aspen schoolteacher of 30-plus years. He is also co-founder of Tomorrow's Voices, a nonprofit educational program that promotes civic, ethical and intellectual development for children in the Roaring Fork Valley.

When I proposed the idea of a Youth Wilderness Seminar to Clapper and co-founder A.O. Forbes, a thoughtful, guitar-strumming geography teacher at Colorado Rocky Mountain School, they said: "Let's give it a try." With support from the 10th Mountain Division Hut Association, we reserved Margy's Hut, which was funded by former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, for a three-day, two-night stay.

From the first discussion, the kids proved that they had done their five assigned readings. They knew about Laura Ingalls Wilder and how her family had moved from the Big Woods of Wisconsin to the wild plains of Kansas. They were riveted by the frightful encounter the family had with wolves and how Laura described it: "There in the moonlight sat half a circle of wolves. They sat on their haunches and looked at Laura in the window, and she looked at them. She had never seen such big wolves. The biggest one was taller than Laura."

That got us talking about how we would react in a wild setting with predators. That's when 14-year-old Fritz Carpenter of Aspen said that if he were being followed by wolves he would simply throw a tennis ball. The rest of us erupted into laughter at the thought of a powerful wolf bounding over the plains chasing a yellow Wilson. Humor became a refreshing approach to the readings and discussions. We were learning with smiles on our faces - both adults and kids.

Universal Truths

The Margy's Hut is perched on a ridge at 11,300 feet. The views from the cabin door are more dramatic than a Bierstadt painting. The Williams Mountains stand regally to the south and the Elks to the west, both ranges divided by huge expanses of timber and precipitous valleys. We suddenly knew how Laura felt in the Big Woods.

Then we met Buck, the great dog described by Jack London in "The Call of the Wild," one of the most powerful approaches to wilderness in American literature. "The blood-longing became stronger than ever before. Buck was a killer, a thing that preyed, living on things that lived, unaided, alone, by virtue of his own strength and prowess surviving triumphantly in a hostile environment where only the strong survived."

The kids appreciated Buck for his power and vitality, and we discussed how nature and evolution have provided animals - and man - with outstanding capabilities. They were perplexed, however, by Buck's dreamlike visions of the "hairy man," a spectral memory of primitive humanity. We recalled that man came from wilderness and that man lived in wilderness far longer than he has lived in civilization. We marveled at the long view of human history, an anthropological journey that expanded our internal horizons as we gazed across the wilderness at our feet.



Taking five on the trail are, left to right, Lauren, Nikki and Ivano.

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Foreman advocates "mega-linkages" of wild lands for habitat, and the kids were all over it. Kelsey Freeman, an 8th-grader at the Carbondale Community School, mused about being able to hike across the spine of the Rockies through a mega-linkage from the Arctic to Tierra del Fuego. What fun that would be, we all agreed, except that a mega-linkage would not solely benefit man, but would ultimately serve plants and animals. As billowing white clouds sailed overhead in a sky of deep blue, our minds veered from an anthropocentric view of nature to an interconnected one. The kids never missed a beat as their thought processes adjusted to man in nature rather than man vs. nature. Now they were ready for Henry David Thoreau.

The next morning we bushwhacked through dense timber up to the summit of Mt. Yeckel. There is a road almost to the top, but the off-piste experience offered a deeper sense of nature and discovery, and the kids leaped shrubs and scrambled over logs with agility. At the top of Mt. Yeckel, at 11,700 feet, the view opened to a 360-degree panorama of a half-dozen mountain ranges. There we explored Dave Foreman's essay about "Rewilding America," an idea that has been brewing in Foreman's mind for years: "As a young man," he wrote, "I saw raw roads ripped into the wilderness, forests buzz-cut, rivers dammed, coal torn from the badlands - all where I sought the will of the land. And I knew that if my wilderness - no, not mine, but its own - was to endure I had to fight for it."

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After short solos along the ridge, in which the kids were urged to just sit quietly alone and explore how it felt, the thunder boomed and rain pattered down. We gathered in a grove of spruce and tackled Thoreau's essay, "The Meaning of Wildness." I wondered if Thoreau was too elevated for a group of middle-school students, but all eyes were riveted to the text, all minds working over the words written more than 150 years ago by America's greatest wilderness advocate.

"In wildness is the preservation of the world," Thoreau wrote famously. As we

pondered his meaning, our discussion swung back to Buck, back to the wolves on the plains of Kansas, back to Foreman's mega-linkages. We understood the vitality of wild nature, the raw nobility of self-willed creatures, the importance of contiguous habitat for the enrichment and preservation of the gene pool. We saw all of this in Thoreau, but there was more. We were on the verge of something deeper, something vital and unifying.

"We would fain take that walk, never yet taken by us through this actual world," Thoreau wrote about exploring wilderness, "which is perfectly symbolical of the path which we love to travel in the interior and ideal world."

And what do we find in that interior and ideal world? This question was essential to our next big step in our understanding of Thoreau and the wild world around us.

There was a pregnant pause, a moment of quiet tension. Then Giulio Piccolo, our 13-year-old philosopher, said "Maybe it's universal truths."

The words hit Willard, A.O. and me like a lightning bolt. It was like watching a rare and beautiful flower bloom.

"Where did you get that, Giulio?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "It just came up."

At that point our discussion leaped a high hurdle as we explored universal truths as a mega-linkage, not to natural habitats, but to the community of life to which we all belong. Here was the transcendent element we had been looking for, and the kids grasped it intuitively.

The Tribe

That night around the campfire, our minds entertained visions of the readings. The images came alive in the flickering firelight that illuminated a small circle around us, a small sphere of human security in the wilds.

Suddenly a shadow darted from the woods. We all jumped. Our wide eyes probed the darkness beyond the fire. There! It darted again - behind a stump, over a boulder, behind a log. And then it stood in the open - a fox, with sharp, pinprick eyes and a big, bushy tail. It stood, tentatively, glowing in the flickers of flames. It approached, then disappeared into the dark woods on silent paws.

The next morning after breakfast we packed our gear, swept the hut clean, and said goodbye to Margy's, just as Laura and her family had said goodbye to their little house in the Big Woods. We had become a tribe, and we silently slung on our packs and hiked into the silent spruce-fir forest. Our seminar was at an end, but new friendships were just beginning, and so were new ways of looking at ourselves and the wild nature around us.

"Can we do this again next year?" asked 11-year-old Ivano Piccolo as we walked along the rushing creek. Sure, we agreed, we'll do it again next year, with new readings and maybe a hike to Crested Butte.

"Yeah!" they all enthused. And that was the best endorsement we could have had.

Paul Andersen is an Aspen Times columnist and Aspen Institute moderator for the "Nature and Society Seminar" in August. This was his first seminar with Tomorrow's Voices.



Tomorrow's Voices Youth Wilderness Seminar on the 11,700-ft. summit of Mount Yeckel in the Hunter-Frying Pan Wilderness. Left to right are Kelsey, Gunner, Nikki, Lauren, Ivano, Willard, A.O., Giulio, and Fritz.

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