

# OUTDOOR RECREATION INCREASES SELF-CONFIDENCE IN WOMEN

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*The potential benefits of participating in physical activity in the outdoors are known to be highly therapeutic and empowering. The last two decades have seen an increase in outdoor recreation research focusing on the social, mental, and physical implications for women in particular (Bosteder & Appleby, 2015). Inequities regarding participation in outdoor recreational activities exist between men and women, and women face constraints unique to their gender. These constraints include but are not limited to: societal and behavioral expectations, perceived low body image, self-consciousness, misrepresentation in the media, and a lack of appropriate gear designed for women. However, when women are able to overcome these barriers or even simply dare to step into a canoe in the outdoors (as an example), research has found that positive outdoor recreational experiences dramatically increase a woman's self-valuation, self-confidence, and belief in her ability to lead.*

If you have ever followed a dirt trail through a forest of sweet-smelling ponderosa pines or rested at the foot of a chalky aspen tree while listening to the leaves rustle in the wind, you can probably attest to the sense of peace or calm that washed over you. The outdoors can be a therapeutic destination, and outdoor physical activity can lead to positive physical and emotional health benefits (Bosteder & Appleby, 2015).

Many studies have been performed to determine the benefits of outdoor recreation, but the 21st century has seen an increase in directing these studies specifically toward the benefits experienced by women.

Women are typically confronted with more societal constraints than their male counterparts in regard to outdoor recreation, including traditional gender roles, social pressures, and misrepresentation in the media. Overcoming these constraints can lead to increased self-confidence, self-worth, empowerment, and a healthier body image in women (Evans & Anderson, 2016).

Outdoor recreation could be defined as recreation that requires physical and intellectual fortitude, such as whitewater kayaking, rock climbing, skiing, mountaineering, and many other activities. Such activities have been considered marginal sports, as compared to traditional team sports like baseball and football. However, recent events—such as the Olympic Games—have increased their mainstream acceptance (Evans & Anderson, 2015). In addition to these sports, outdoor recreation includes any leisure activity performed outdoors, and studies have determined that at least fifty percent of the population over six years old participates in some kind of outdoor endeavor (Bosteder & Appleby, 2015).

Researchers Lloyd and Little (2005) examined how participation in outdoor-adventure recreation can enhance the quality of life for women. Quality of life, as the researchers noted, can be determined in many ways. Traditionally, the principal determining factors have been objectives, such as household income, employment rates, and the number of possessions. However, because individuals may differ in opinion when it comes to what constitutes their own quality of life, subjective factors must also be considered. Personal skills, abilities, and sense of belonging, as well as balanced mental, physical, social and spiritual health, are significant factors contributing to one's quality of life.

To evaluate the effect outdoor recreation has on quality of life, Lloyd and Little (2005) studied the experiences of participants in an all-female organization designed to encourage outdoor adventures. This organization offered a broad definition of adventure to encourage the women to engage in activities they had previously avoided due to fear or lack of experience, including yoga, dance, yard games, archery, water-based sports, and aviation. The majority of the participants expressed an improvement in their quality of life due to increased access to novel opportunities. Furthermore, this program provided the basic structure of organization necessary to plan and execute outdoor excursions, which encouraged the

women to pursue future adventures on their own (Lloyd & Little, 2005). In another study performed by researchers Libby and Carruthers (2013), participants of an all-female canoe trip expressed an increase of confidence in their ability to learn new and challenging skills. The acquisition of such skills encouraged them to participate in and prepare for future outdoor activities and adventures.

Similarly, researchers Bosteder and Appleby (2015) interviewed participants of an all-female wilderness program and discovered a correlation between the outdoors and an increased interest in exercise and physical health. They found that the women had a greater desire to exercise with clear air and beautiful views than when running on a treadmill in a gym. One participant expressed that working out at a gym is temporary, but exploring the outdoors can be a life-long, sustainable endeavor. As such, the participants expressed that they were inclined to join outdoor activities for mental invigoration and emotional benefit.

Within this wilderness program, the activities were designed to facilitate the needs and skill levels of the women, and an emphasis was on participation instead of expertise or excellence. Due to this method, many women expressed that they had more confidence in themselves and their ability to lead. One participant mentioned how, despite being out of shape, she felt empowered by her accomplishments and was inspired to explore the outdoors in her free time (Bosteder & Appleby, 2015).

As recreating in the outdoors can lead to a desire to increase physical activity due to mental invigoration and a sense of personal achievement, it can be inferred that an individual's perception of body image may also improve. While low body image can initially deter an individual from participating in a physically demanding activity (Lloyd & Little, 2005), studies show that the majority of individuals who engage in outdoor recreation, regardless of their initial level of perceived body image, experience an improvement of self-valuation and positive body image (Hovey, Foland, Foley, Kniffin, & Bailey, 2016).

However, in order to develop a healthier and more positive perception of self, one must first acknowledge any personal inhibitions. Studies have found that self-confidence improves when the individual recognizes

the origins of personal weaknesses or fears and consequently pursues a course of action to overcome said weaknesses or fears (Evans & Anderson, 2016). Persistence in making and pursuing personal goals can influence potential implications for a female participant, including a recognition that her body is strong, that she is capable and competent, and that positive body perception is important (Hovey et al., 2016).

Many participating women expressed that, in addition to the intrinsic motivation to improve self-valuation, their experience in outdoor recreational programs provided the opportunities for them to develop support groups and social connections (Lloyd & Little, 2005). They expressed social satisfaction and a preference for an all-female environment, as they were less inclined to compare themselves to each other and there was no pressure to perform in front of male peers. Most of the women felt more confident in leading an all-female group and found it easier to confide in one another and develop interpersonal relationships (Bosteder & Appleby, 2015).

Despite age differences, the emphasis on participation over performance convinced the women that they were capable of accomplishing the same feats as the younger women, even if it took them longer to do so. This support group and newfound confidence encouraged continued activity, the pursuit of exercise, and the will to develop new skills (Bosteder & Appleby, 2015).

Insofar as outdoor recreation can be extrinsically rewarding, prolonged immersion in the wilderness can engender mental, emotional, and even spiritual benefits. Nature provides a platform to learn new skills, make individual physical goals, and discover and challenge new personal limits, while also encouraging recovery and self-care. As the women in these studies were removed from their daily routines and the busyness of city life, the serenity of the natural environment allowed them to develop a sense of connectedness and renewal of spirit (Libby & Carruthers, 2013). For a group of women who regularly found themselves outside the city limits, nature was an intrinsic part of them. To these women, nature was a sensory experience in which you could experience touch, smell, and feel a power greater than self. Here, the women felt a sense of belonging and purpose (Cosgriff, Little, & Wilson, 2009).

Although it can be inferred that participation in outdoor recreation increases self-confidence in women, there are many factors that discourage women from participating in such recreational activities in the first place. Of these factors, perhaps the most prevalent are social expectations and societal constraints. Many of society's structural components, such as politics and religion, have contributed to institutionalized gender differentiation that normalize typical gender roles. This process began with the government's enactment of gender-specific laws, such as prohibiting the women's right to vote and authorizing lower pay for women, and is continued today by the depiction of women in the media (Evans & Anderson, 2016).

Studies have shown that women are more likely to claim that familial responsibilities restrict them from participating in outdoor recreation (Evans & Anderson, 2016). Some women feel that participating in outdoor recreation would remove them from their duties at home and to their family and that doing so would be selfish (Lloyd & Little, 2005).

Gender and society's perception of gender roles directly affects a person's social interactions. According to these studies, people are more apt to judge each other simply due to age, gender, or race. Men are typically associated with traits relating to power, competence, strength, and being proactive, while women are typically associated with ostensibly negative traits such as being over-reactive, emotional, and less competent (Evans & Anderson, 2016).

Other factors that discourage women from participating in outdoor recreation include feelings of incompetence and negative body image, as well as a disbelief in the relevance or usefulness of outdoor recreation (Lloyd & Little, 2005). A concern for personal safety can deter women from venturing out alone or in a group of male participants due to fear of being marginalized, harassed, or worse, which can unfortunately pervade society (Kilgour, 2007).

In the United States of America, the national lands are advertised as belonging to all Americans, but the actual visiting demographic varies dramatically depending on socioeconomic status, race, and gender. While the number of female visitors is increasing, males still make up the majority. Factors contributing to this disparity include women's concerns

for safety, perceived competence and comparability in skill, and ability to retain their femininity as a participant in outdoor activities (McNiel, Harris, & Fondren, 2012).

In some cultures, nature has been affectionately termed Mother Earth, implying its nurturing, productive, self-healing traits as the mother of all living things. Nature was feminine and powerful. However, due to modern technological and industrialized advancements, nature has since been conceptualized as insentient and subordinate to man. Even though women were once believed to be kin with a wild earth, women have been displaced in this more masculinized nature (Cosgriff et al., 2009).

Consequently, outdoor recreation participation has historically been male-dominated and activities tailored to women have been modified to accommodate their presumed weaker builds (Cosgriff et al., 2009). Customarily, the definition of femininity has conformed with gender norms, and deviation from such can result in social sanctions and stigmas. The desire to conform and be accepted can deter women from engaging in outdoor recreation—or can hinder their full participation in such (McNiel et al., 2012).

These societal expectations can directly influence women and their propensity to engage in outdoor activities. While many traditional organizations have focused on fathers and sons, traditional organizations for females have altered their methods to align with societal expectations. The Girl Scouts of America was initially founded to provide unique outdoor opportunities for girls but eventually changed its approach to better prepare girls to be homemakers, focusing on domestic skills and self-improvement (Evans & Anderson, 2016).

This early indoctrination limits the opportunities young girls have to develop practical outdoor skills, causing them to fall behind their male counterparts and discouraging them from risking outdoor endeavors in the future. Recently, the Girl Scouts of America has reintroduced wilderness exploration requirements, but the organization has significantly fewer participants and is less promoted than the Boy Scouts of America (Evans & Anderson, 2016).

In a study examining the discrepancies between the representation of men and women in the media and advertisements, researchers discovered that the culturally accepted definitions of masculinity and femininity determined the portrayal of the featured men and women (McNiel et al., 2012). Men are typically portrayed as adventurers or risk takers, often venturing out alone, while the women are portrayed as passive participants and are typically found in group settings. Women were consistently pictured with clean faces and kempt hair, indicating a short-term activity or an inaccurate depiction to maintain so-called femininity (McNiel et al., 2012). Ultimately, this study determined that the constant exposure to and indoctrination of women having a passive role in outdoor recreation could, subconsciously or otherwise, discourage women from taking risks and pushing their physical and mental limits (McNiel et al., 2012).

Correspondingly, outdoor gear had been designed specifically and solely for the male body up until about a decade ago. As female participation in outdoor events has been historically discouraged or even prohibited, there was little demand for female-specific gear. When the demand first became apparent, the industry began designing lighter, softer, and pinker products instead of equally tough or high-quality gear such as that which was available for males. Only very recent years have seen the arrival of adventure-worthy female gear (Sanford, 2017).

Gender equality in recreational activity has many facets, some of which we have addressed. Though progressive movements have improved the situation, the pursuit of further action can be deterred by women's reluctance to disrupt the status quo and challenge biases, which has been referred to as feminist fatigue (Gray, 2017). Nevertheless, while there are many factors that may cause women to hesitate before strapping on a pair of snowshoes or throwing on a heavy backpack, these issues are mainly societal blockages that can be ignored or conquered. Women must be bold in demanding presence and relevance in the outdoor industry. By daring to step out of comfort zones and into a canoe, literally or figuratively, working together as a support group, women can overcome their inhibitions and make dramatic changes in legislation, culture, and social expectations.

Indeed, it can be determined that participation in outdoor recreation increases a woman's self-confidence. As a result of this self-confidence, these women develop a belief in their ability to attain and excel in leadership roles. Furthermore, they dare to believe in their ability to succeed in other aspects of life, including aspects that were once their constraints.



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