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## What Motivates UNL Students to Recreate Outdoors: A Case Study for UNL Outdoor Adventures

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Cortes, Isaac and Woodworth, Christina, "What Motivates UNL Students to Recreate Outdoors: A Case Study for UNL Outdoor Adventures" (2015). *Environmental Studies Undergraduate Student Theses*. 165.  
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WHAT MOTIVATES UNL STUDENTS TO RECREATE OUTDOORS?  
A CASE STUDY FOR UNL OUTDOOR ADVENTURES  
By

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AN UNDERGRADUATE THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Environmental Studies Program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Bachelor of Science

Major: Environmental Studies  
With the Emphasis of: Natural Resources

Under the Supervision of Shannon Moncure

Lincoln, NE

December 2015

**Abstract:**

Participation in outdoor recreation has gradually increased since the mid-1900s, especially among young people in the 18 to 35 year old age range. Growing up in Nebraska, many young people might not have the opportunity to participate in a wilderness experience. That's where UNL Outdoor Adventures comes in. OA provides an outlet for UNL students and community members to experience outdoor recreation activities through an indoor climbing wall, bike shop, equipment rental area, challenge course, academic classes and adventure trips. As trip leaders for OA for more than four years, we have seen the positive effects outdoor recreation can have on a person's life. The purpose of our project is to work with OA as our client, and to create a promotional video for the program to use in furthering their message across campus. This paper will discuss the benefits of outdoor recreation, the history and importance of Outdoor Adventures, and the design process of creating this video.

**Introduction:**

Nearly half of all Americans- 48.4 percent- participated in at least one outdoor activity in 2014 (Outdoor). These activities ranged anywhere from extended backpacking trips in remote places to a daylong bird watching outing at a local park. Outdoor recreation offers a number of valuable physical, emotional and mental benefits, which helps explain why it continues to be a large part of many people's lifestyles. Exposure to a natural environment for recreational purposes can be especially beneficial for college students who, as a population, are collectively experiencing a more transitional period in their lives than the general population and are often under higher levels of stress (Eagan). Studies have shown that participation in college outdoor recreation programs can lead to closer social circles, improved social equity and general improvements in emotional and social functioning (Willett). Additionally, those who participate in outdoor recreation and who feel connected to nature are more likely to have a greater sense of well-being (Wolsko).

As trip leaders at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Outdoor Adventures Center, we have seen and experienced the physical, emotional and mental benefits of outdoor recreation firsthand. We have led more than 40 climbing, backpacking, paddling and cycling trips during our college careers and have helped facilitate groups of students and community members in wilderness situations. We strongly believe in the mission statement of UNL Outdoor Adventures, which is to "engage individuals and groups in adventure experiences for escape, enjoyment and education," (UNL OA). A large part of working for OA is figuring out ways to

encourage students to sign up for our adventure trip offerings. Traditionally, this is done in the form of posters, on-campus booths, brochures, videos and social media posts.

We propose studying the correlation between visual depictions of outdoor recreation used in these marketing efforts and a UNL student's decision on whether or not to participate- specifically as a case study for UNL Outdoor Adventures. There is a hefty amount of research on the overall benefits of participating in outdoor recreation and also on the ways people look at and perceive images used in marketing efforts. We believe this is important because we will be able to help UNL Outdoor Adventures more effectively market their adventure trip program, which will lead to more UNL students having the opportunity to participate in outdoor recreation and experience the valuable benefits of such activities. Overall, this project could lead to a population of students who are more productive, focused, relaxed and happy. As a nontraditional thesis project, our final product will include both a research paper and a short video to be used by UNL OA in their marketing efforts. We will use our marketing and outdoor recreation-focused research to guide our decisions in creating this video. Outdoor Adventures has been an important part of our college careers, and we hope to use this thesis project as a way to give back to the program with something tangible they can use for years to come.

### **Literature Review and Historical Information:**

#### *Defining Outdoor Recreation*

For the purpose of our study, we define outdoor recreation as any leisure activity that a person partakes in outdoors, either in an urban, natural, or mixed

setting, for any length of time from a few hour to several days or weeks. This could include anything from going a bike ride on Lincoln's city trails to going on a weeklong backpacking trip in the backcountry of Yosemite National Park. We wanted to use a fairly open definition of outdoor recreation because, coming from Nebraska, many UNL students probably have not had the opportunity to have true, remote wilderness experiences.

### *Outdoor Recreation Benefits*

A large amount of research has been conducted on the overall benefits of recreating in the outdoors. It has been shown that spending time in nature improves a person's overall physical, mental, emotional and psychological well-being in ways such as decreasing rates of obesity and diabetes, lower instances of mental illness, and better grades in school (Bentley). It has also been shown that participation in outdoor recreation improves one's sense of community and generally leads to closer social circles and more positive interactions with other people (Sunny). Participation in outdoor recreation has also been connected with more environmentally friendly behaviors in college students. For example, a study at a Midwestern University looked at the impact of a semester-long, outdoor leadership course upon the environmental beliefs and attitudes of college students. The study found that, although there was a wide mix of opinions and attitudes, the overall conclusion was that students were more eco-conscious in their decisions and behaviors after going through the outdoor leadership course (Kruger). All of these collective benefits are the main reason driving our project. We believe in the power outdoor recreation can have as a tool for personal and social change.

### *Client Information*

Outdoor Adventures was started in 1972 on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's City Campus. The first indoor climbing wall and the university challenge course were built in the late '90s. The program was one of the first outdoor recreation programs to be attached to a public university. Today, the program has grown from a handful of employees and an office shoved in the back corner of the Campus Rec Center to having its own Outdoor Adventures Center facility with more than 80 employees. Outdoor Adventures offers UNL students and community members a number of services including a climbing wall, bike shop, equipment rental, challenge course, academic classes, and adventure trips. The adventure trip program is maintained by about 12 student trip leaders who plan and prepare for a number of rock climbing, backpacking, bike touring, canoeing/kayaking and cross-country ski trips each semester.

Outdoor Adventures is an important facet of campus because it offers diverse programming, which students otherwise wouldn't have the opportunity to participate in. OA programs are designed for beginners, but can be adapted to fit any skill or ability level. Students from across the country, and around the world, can go on an adventure trip together and learn valuable skills like problem solving, leadership, teamwork and the importance of diversity. Our trips explore some of Nebraska's best-kept secrets, as well as exploring further away destinations like the coast of Southern California and the rivers of Florida.

The objectives for this project are to further Outdoor Adventure's marketing efforts and effectiveness by: surveying potential Outdoor Adventures participants to

determine their image preference and motivations for recreating outdoors, creating a promotional video for OA based on the survey results, and providing recommendations for future OA marketing materials.

## **Methods:**

### *Survey Design*

Our survey had three main components: general background information, motivations for recreating outdoors, and top image preference from groupings of four photographs.

The general background information section of the survey asked basic demographic questions such as: year in school, population of hometown, number of outdoor activities participated in during childhood, comfort level in the outdoors, etc.

The motivations section was based off of the Recreation Experience Preference (REP) scale. This scale was designed in the 1980s by the U.S. Forest Service and has been widely used in research examining motivations for participating in outdoor leisure activities. The scale works to measure intrinsic motivators such as achievement/stimulation, risk-taking, equipment, family togetherness, and similar people. In analyzing responses, the scale also breaks each of these broader goals down into more specific goals. For example, the motivator of 'Family Togetherness' breaks down into: "To do something with your family", "To bring your family closer together", "To realize a good experience for the family", etc. We had respondents select their top three motivators for recreating outdoors from a list of 15 choices.



The image preference section of the survey was designed by choosing groupings of four contrasting photographs showing different aspects of outdoor recreation. Each photograph was selected to convey four categories: nature/landscape, community/teamwork, action/adrenaline, or relaxation. We had respondents rank these images from the one they liked the most to the one they liked the least. We also included an open-response section where respondents could specify why they liked a certain image the most.

*Example of Image Grouping (Figure 1)*



This survey was electronically sent out to UNL students, faculty, staff, and alumni using Blackboard's feature to email class members and also through specific college weekly newsletters. The survey link was also posted on social media

channels like Facebook. The survey was closed after we received 300 responses. Some limitations in gathering survey responses included the fact that we had a greater number of students from the natural resources and journalism programs, since those are our respective areas of study. We were only able to send out the survey to students in classes we have taken at UNL (via Blackboard), or by posting it on social media networks, where we are connected with family members and friends.

### **Results:**

Overall, we found that people in the 18-35 year old age range were much more likely to prefer the landscape/nature imagery than the depictions of community or action. In the four groupings of four photographs each, the nature photograph was chosen as the most preferred image for more than half of the respondents.

In examining the top motivators for recreating outdoors, we found that 18-35 year olds are most commonly motivated by: getting exercise/keeping physically fit, getting away from everyday stresses, and experience excitement and adventure. An interesting area for further research would be to examine the correlation between motivations and image preference.

We also examined the most common trios of motivators that were chosen, since we had respondents pick their top three motivators. Out of a possible 4,096 combinations, or trios, there were 10 respondents who chose these same three

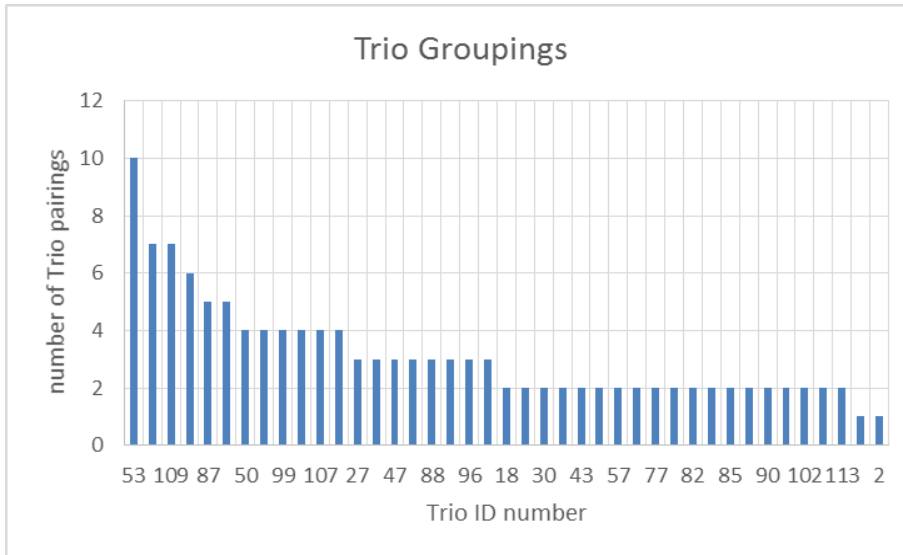
motivators: experience excitement and adventure, be close to nature, and get away from everyday stresses. This would also be an interesting area for further research.

We attempted to find a relationship between several of the survey factors and respondents' image preference. We conducted a Chi Square analysis looking at hometown population, perceived fitness level, comfort level in the outdoors, gender, whether they had gone on an OA trip before and time spent outdoors. None of these factors showed a statistically significant relationship with respondent image preference.

The limitations of our research included the sample size, as we had to throw out many responses when analyzing data due to incomplete answers or incorrectly answered questions (EX: respondents choosing more than 3 motivators). After throwing out these responses, we ended up with 203 complete survey responses. Another limitation was that the list of motivators did not randomly rearrange for each respondent. This means we had a greater number of people who chose motivators 1,2, and 3, which could lead to the conclusion that respondents were just quickly choosing the first three answers they saw. Finally, we were limited in that image preference could have been based off of other factors besides the category we were trying to convey with the photograph. For example, a person could have preferred a certain image because they'd gone on that trip, it reminded them of a trip they'd gone on in the past, image technical quality was better, etc.

## Data

*Number of times each trio of motivators was chosen (Figure 2):*

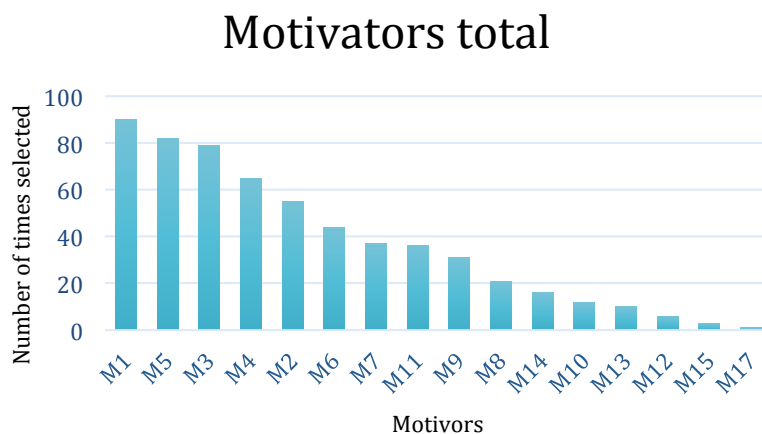


**Key:**

53= Experience excitement/adventure, be close to nature, get away from everyday stresses  
109= Get exercise/keep physically fit, be with family/friends, experience excitement/adventure  
87= Get exercise/keep physically fit, get away from everyday stresses, observe scenic beauty  
50= Experience excitement/adventure, be close to nature, be with people who enjoy the same thing  
99= Get exercise/keep physically fit, experience excitement/adventure, observe scenic beauty  
107= get exercise/keep physically fit, be with family/friends, get away from everyday stresses

\*All other trios had 3 respondents or less choose the same motivators

*Frequency that a motivating factor was chosen (Figure 3):*



**Key:**

- M1= Get exercise /keep physically fit
- M2= Be with family/friends
- M3= Experience excitement/adventure
- M4= Be close to nature
- M5= Get away from everyday stresses
- M6= Observe scenic beauty
- M7= Enjoy the sounds/smells of nature
- M8= Develop my skills/abilities
- M9= Be with people who enjoy the same things
- M10= Gain a sense of accomplishment
- M11= Experience solitude
- M12= Develop a sense of self-confidence
- M13= Be with people who share my values
- M14= It is cool
- M15= Talk with new/varied people
- M16= Other
- M17 = None

*Most common descriptors used for most preferred images (Figure 4):*



*Top four words used by respondents to describe each image category (Figure 5):*

Image 1: Action	Image 2: Community	Image 3: Relaxation	Image 4: Natural
Adventure	People	Solitude	Nature
Challenges	Friends	Relaxation	Landscape
Excitement	Hanging Out	Quiet	Scenery
Accomplishment	Fun	Peaceful	Beautiful

**Video Process**

Creating a video for UNL Outdoor Adventures was a lengthy process that involved gathering new material, sifting through archival footage, learning new computer programs, conducting interviews, and going through the editing process.

## **Materials**

The materials we used to create the video included: Canon 5D Mark II camera, GoPro Hero 2, wireless lapel microphone, and the Canon G12 camera. The Canon 5D Mark II camera is a DSLR camera that allowed us to shoot still photographs as well as high-quality videos. The Canon G12 camera is a small digital point and shoot camera that was smaller and more mobile than the 5D Mark II. We also utilized an underwater housing unit for the G12 that allowed us to shoot video and photographs on paddling trips and during pool paddle sessions. The GoPro Hero 2 was used to take video on backcountry adventure trips, as well as some underwater video and time-lapse portions of the video. The editing programs we utilized for this project were Adobe Premier Pro, Adobe After Effects, and Adobe Audition. Premier Pro is a video-design program with many advanced features. After Effects focuses more on post-production fixes you can make to your video such as color correction and other filters. It also it the program we used to assemble the time lapses used in the video. Audition is an audio editing program that allowed us to fix certain interviews that were conducted in the field and often had heavy background noise from wind, water, or other distractions.

In order to gather enough footage to make an effective video, we took cameras out on every trip we have led over the course of the past year. We also sent cameras out with other trip leaders on their trips and prepared them with lists of interview questions and camera footage shot lists that we wanted them to gather. We sorted through many files of archival footage located on the OA computer servers and organized all of our footage onto one external hard drive. We also

conducted on-campus interviews of several trip leaders and our head supervisor at OA, Jordan Messerer.

We attempted to incorporate our survey data into the video design in several ways. First, we wanted to include as much natural imagery as possible, since that was seen as the most preferred imagery among 18-35 year olds from our survey data. We started the video off with several landscape time lapses to draw attention in right away and appeal to the greatest number of students who preferred this type of imagery. In our interviews, we attempted to include statements with takeaway messages such as: “outdoor recreation lets you get away from it all”, “outdoor recreation is something new and fun”, and “outdoor recreation lets you be active and stay healthy”. These takeaway messages coincide with the top three motivators that were chosen by respondents.

Here is a link to the video posted on the video-sharing website, Vimeo:

<https://vimeo.com/148310965>



## **Summary and Conclusion**

Young people prefer nature/landscape imagery to images of community or action and adrenaline. UNL Outdoor Adventures should keep this in mind when designing future marketing and promotional materials. The top motivators people had for recreating outdoors were getting exercise/keeping physically fit, getting away from everyday stresses, and experiencing excitement/adventure. These are the messages and takeaways OA should be focusing on to gather the most interest and participation from students in their programs. Further research should be conducted on the relationship between students' demographic backgrounds their image preference.

This project gave us a chance to give something back to a program that has given us so much during our college experience. Leading trips for groups of students has been such a beneficial and eye-opening job for both of us, and we are very lucky to have had the opportunity to have such experience in college. We hope OA will be able to use this video and our survey data in future marketing designs in order to reach the greatest number of students. The video will be able to be posted on social media networks, shown at the Outdoor Adventures Center facility, and shown at campus events like Big Red Welcome, Get Rec'd, etc.

This project has taught us a lot about proper survey design, data limitations, and video design. If we had more time, we would have like to create a series of video of varying lengths to give OA more options to utilize them in future marketing efforts.



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