

Wilderness Therapy: The TurnAround 2007 Project

Executive Summary¹

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Introduction

There are approximately 6.7 million young people aged 15-24 in England and a disproportionate number of these live in deprived, urban areas³. The prevalence of adolescent problem behaviour has steadily increased with drug, tobacco and alcohol abuse, aggressive and anti-social behaviour, violence, teenage pregnancy and suicide rates becoming growing problems⁴. Adolescents commonly face choices requiring pressurised decisions about gang involvement, violence, alcohol, drugs, sex and pregnancy, that potentially place them 'at risk'⁵. This cohort of 'youth at risk' are also subjected to other interactive environmental stressors, such as domestic violence, parental drug and alcohol abuse, physical and sexual abuse, family stress/poorly parented, divorced/single parent families, neglect or school failure. A lack of informed choice often leads to poor decision making and these youth at risk become labelled as underachievers, disadvantaged, marginal, underprivileged and remedial. They become socially inept, lack trust and teamwork skills, have poor emotional regulation and have low self esteem. Unless this issue is actively and positively addressed the number of out of work and unmotivated young people will increase along with a concomitant rise in drug and alcohol abuse, criminal activity and general anti-social behaviour, leading to social and economic problems in the community and diversion of police, court, social benefits and social worker resources to deal with the problem.

A wide range of international research has highlighted key health benefits experienced for many people after spending time in the natural environment and a link between nature and health seems to be clearly emerging. Health benefits include reduced stress levels, improved mood; enhanced psychological wellbeing and improved attention and concentration⁶. Natural places facilitate stress recovery, encourage exercise participation, stimulate development in children and provide opportunities for personal development and sense of purpose in adults⁷. Partaking in physical activity in natural surroundings - "green exercise"- may also have therapeutic properties and collectively, such therapeutic approaches have been referred to as "green care"⁸. Although the area of green care is very diverse, the common linking ethos is the contact with nature, which generates the health, social or educational benefits.

Wilderness therapy is an emerging green care intervention which uses a systematic approach to work with adolescents with behavioural problems. Although this is not the only cohort that can benefit from the outdoors, wilderness therapy is most often used with youth at risk⁷ to help them address any emotional, adjustment, addiction or psychological problems⁹.

Wilderness therapy programmes typically provide healthy exercise and diet through hiking and physical activity, individual and group therapy sessions, educational curricula, primitive skills, group-living with peers, opportunities for solo time and reflection leadership training and challenges resulting from 'back-to-basics' living. The rationale for these interventions involves separating disaffected young people from daily negative influences and placing them in safe outdoor environments. Spending time in a natural setting enables participants to access those aspects of their self that may elude them in more conventional personal development or therapeutic settings.

The Wilderness Foundation UK initiated a pilot social project called 'TurnAround 2007' project which was designed to help vulnerable young people in social care in Chelmsford and the mid-Essex area. The Wilderness Foundation UK is a registered charity which raises awareness of the need to preserve and restore wilderness areas, offers wilderness experiences and is involved in various social programmes to demonstrate how wilderness exposure facilitates the education and health of both individuals and the wider society.

The Turnaround 2007 project, a pilot stage of a longer 3 year project, targeted youths aged 15-18 years old who were considered to be 'at risk' and were in danger of drifting into a life of petty crime, drug & alcohol abuse and general anti-social behaviour.



The Turnaround 2007 Project

The TurnAround 2007 project was a nine month intensive personal development project which ran between November 2007 and July 2008 with the aim of encouraging disaffected young people to make long term positive changes. The project was designed to use the power of nature as a catalyst for change, enabling the young people to re-evaluate their destructive lifestyles and give them the self assurance to take personal responsibility for the outcome of their future. It combined the use of wilderness trails (involving experts in wilderness therapy), monthly personal development workshops, one to one life coaching (coordinated by a professional coaching manager) by people drawn from the local community, volunteer assignments and work experience to bring about a change in outlook, foster self esteem, social ability and life skills to encourage the young people to make their own way in the world.

Building self-esteem in young people was a primary goal for the Turnaround 2007 project. Self-esteem is seen by many as an important determinant of psychological wellbeing and

¹ The full report of the TurnAround 2007 project is available by contacting the Wilderness Foundation see: <http://www.wildernessfoundation.org.uk> or by contacting Jo Peacock on jpeac@essex.ac.uk

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³ ONS, 2006

⁴ Resnick *et al*, 1997; Daley, 2001; Stevens & Griffin, 2001; Pesta, 2002; Scott, 2002

⁵ Russell, 1999

⁶ and ⁷ See main report for complete list of references

⁷ Health Council of the Netherlands, 2004

⁸ Pretty, 2006

⁹ Russell, 1999

research has shown that high self-esteem is characterised by having a positive attitude, being competent, showing tolerance and respect for others, being self-motivated, capable of handling criticism and being in control, whereas low self-esteem on the other hand is associated with self-destructive behaviour such as violence and crime, alcohol and drug abuse, dropping out of school, teenage pregnancy, suicide, poor academic achievement and eating disorders.

The distinct stages of the nine month Turnaround 2007 project included:

- Wilderness trail to the Isle of Mull, Scotland
- Monthly activity workshops
- Weekly coaching sessions
- The Morning Star of Revelation Sailing trip, River Medway, Chatham, Kent
- Graduation awards ceremony

Methodology

The wilderness Foundation asked the University of Essex to provide an independent monitoring and evaluation programme to assess key outcomes of the Turnaround 2007 project. A multi-method approach was used to assess the change in young people's behaviour, attitudes and emotional states after participating in various stages of the pilot project. The methodology was designed to provide comparative data over the course of the project, so particular questions were administered repetitively at regular intervals. Researchers collected baseline data using a combination of participatory and questionnaire techniques. Questionnaires were designed for each stage of the project and were completed by both participants and coaches at key points in the programme.

A composite questionnaire which included both recognised and standardised instruments¹⁰ and questions specific to the Turnaround 2007 project was administered at regular intervals throughout the programme. A key component of the questionnaire was the measurement of self-esteem over time to explore whether the programme could act as a positive intervention in enhancing self-esteem and changing behaviour. Self-esteem was measured using the one-page 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE). Other standardised questionnaires included in the composite questionnaire were: i) the standardised 30-item, short-form, one page version of the Profile of Mood States (POMS) was used to provide a 'snapshot' measurement of mood state and to quantify any changes in mood factors; ii) a 30-item self-report questionnaire was used to assess adolescent general wellbeing and iii) the connectedness to nature scale (CNS) was included. The questionnaires also included questions to address key attributes such as self-confidence, trust, belonging, generosity and connection to nature and qualitative narrative was collected using a series of open-ended questions

In addition to questionnaires, the other primary sources of data collection utilised in this study included:

- Participatory events
- On-site participant observation by primary researcher

- Semi-structured interviews with each individual participant
- Video footage
- Participant documentation – e.g. shield drawings, goals set and achieved etc

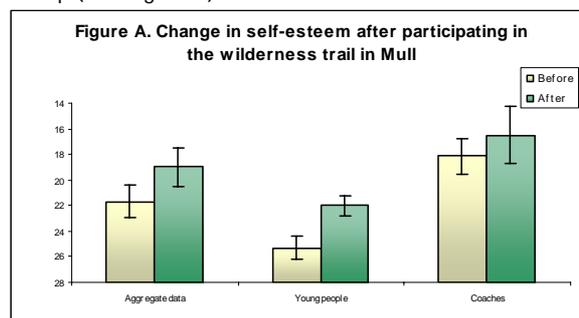
Summary of Key findings

The Turnaround 2007 project is a multifaceted, longitudinal programme which produced a large amount of data and a myriad of different outcomes for the young people, life coaches and researchers alike. Although the 9 month programme consisted of monthly workshops, weekly coaching sessions and other activities, this summary of key findings will focus on the results and experiences of the young people during the wilderness trail and the sailing trip only before examining key long term effects of the programme.

Wilderness Experience in Scotland – Month 2

After an initial participatory event at the first monthly workshop (which was used primarily as an interactive tool to engage both coaches and young people in the evaluative process) the TurnAround Project took the young people out of their urban environment to a remote location in the Isle of Mull, to get them to question their values and way of life. Before they had time to retreat into familiarity and comfort zones, they were taken on a wilderness trail in a remote and uninhabited area of Scotland, where a sense of solitude and natural exposure was experienced. The young people were accompanied by trained guides, wilderness therapists and volunteer coaches who were to become their mentors over the ensuing nine months.

The behaviour of the young people during the trip was often very volatile and disruptive as they dealt with their private issues, learnt how to work as a group, resisted instructions and tested boundaries. However, participating in the wilderness therapy programme significantly improved self-esteem, a Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test reported a significant increase in participants' self-esteem¹¹ over the duration of the trip (see Figure A).

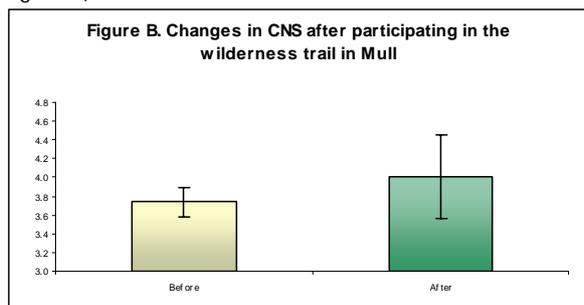


Small changes in participants' mood were observed during the Mull expedition. Total Mood Disturbance (TMD) scores showed that young people experienced a slight overall improvement in their mood, but as the majority of the young people were going through 'detox' as a result of abstaining from both drugs and alcohol this may have negatively affected their mood. Both the young people and the coaches experienced an increase in connectedness to nature (CNS)

¹⁰ See main report for full references for standardised measures

¹¹ (Z=-1.84; p=0.0325) from (M=21.7, SD=4.7) to (M=19.0, SD=5.0)

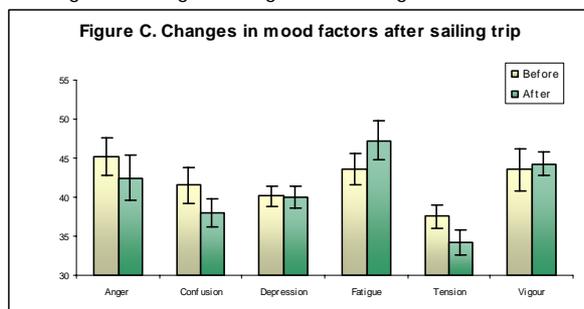
but a bigger increase was reported by the young people (see Figure B).



During the wilderness experience many young people started to demonstrate a willingness to change, a desire to make amends for past behaviour, to re-focus their priorities, learn skills required to avoid any negative influences and take the necessary steps to continue their personal development and growth. The challenge was how to translate their experiences and take their learning back to their home environments, as when they returned to their everyday lives, the people surrounding them, their communities and the negative temptations would remain the same. The wilderness experience in the Isle of Mull represented the first step of a long personal journey. It acted as a 'cleansing' phase, as alcohol and drug substances were banned and it provided the young people with an ideal opportunity to address their behavioural and emotional issues in a safe and inspiring environment. In summary participants saw improvements in self-esteem, overall mood and connection to nature and participating in challenging activities in the wilderness allowed the opportunity for personal reflection and bonding with the outdoor environment.

Sailing Trip around the Medway – Month 8

The final part of the TurnAround programme involved a five day sailing trip along the river Medway in Kent. The skipper and staff of the Morning Star of Revelation (a 62ft gaff ketch yacht) based in Chatham Dockyard oversaw the group activities and ensured there was plenty of work to occupy the crew. The art of sailing is a very physical activity and relies on the crew working as a team, both on deck and in the galley carrying out domestic tasks. Activities included trimming and changing the sails, steering at the helm, mooring, anchoring, cooking and cleaning.



Levels of self-esteem improved following the sailing trip although the increase was not statistically significant. Mood measurements showed that there were considerable changes during the trip (see figure C) reductions in feelings of anger, confusion and tension and a minimal decrease in depression levels. Levels of fatigue increased substantially but all young people were active members of the crew and

engaged in physically demanding work. However, feelings of vigour also increased implying that they felt more energetic and alive. Thus, the experience was a lot more positive in lifting mood in comparison to the first trail.

Participating in the sailing trip contributed to an improved self-esteem, enhanced mood and a greater connectedness to nature. However, the biggest contrast to the first wilderness experience in the Isle of Mull was the behaviour of the young people. After six months into the programme their behaviour was in complete contrast to the disruptive behaviour observed in Scotland. Only two incidents of refusing to cooperate were observed and there were no verbal attacks, physical violence or instances of running away. There were minimal arguments and the group really functioned cohesively as a team, supported each other, both physically and emotionally, and enjoyed each others company.

Box 1. Some comments from young people on the Turnaround 2007 project.

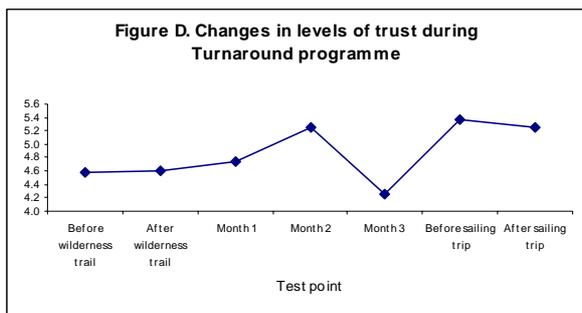
"I enjoyed being in the outdoors more and had more respect for myself"
"I've realised that there is a lot of things about me that need changing"
"The experience of sailing self-sufficiently on sea for five days; learning about sailing, working as a team"
"I can work hard when I put my mind to it"
"The coaches had a huge positive influence on me, they were non judgmental and took a genuine interest in my life and me as a person"

All of the activities on the boat required a joint effort and the young people had to work in synchrony to ensure the activity was completed successfully. This played a pivotal role in improving their team working skills and compelled them to listen to each other. Many of the participants had to overcome their fears to complete tasks, such as venturing out on the bowsprit, when they were hesitant about falling into the water. They all experienced a real sense of achievement when they worked together to hoist sails, and steer the boat on the correct course. They enjoyed being trusted as the Morning Star crew let them take control at the helm of the boat within a short time of setting off.

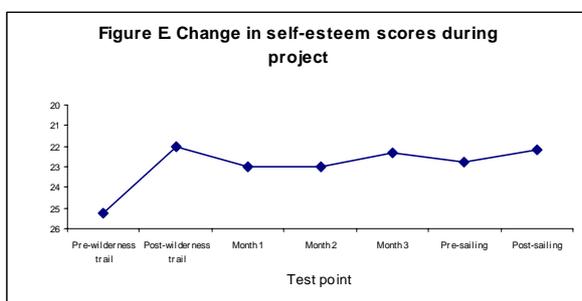
Changes over the 9 month programme

There were many changes reported over the 9 month Turnaround 2007 programme, both in terms of trends for the whole group and for individuals. In general there were fluctuations in all of the measures over the time period, but net improvements from levels at the start of the project were seen across the majority of measurements. It is also interesting to note that not all of the participants showed the same patterns of fluctuation in mood, self esteem etc over time. Some participants showed increases, whilst others show decreases or plateaux. This suggests the need for further research into trends over time.

Findings of the self-reported measures of self-confidence, trust, belonging, generosity and the CNS scale showed that after each wilderness experience, feelings increased and during the months in between levels fell, as participants had less contact with nature; with the final value recorded at the end of the programme being substantially higher than the initial starting value (see Figure D for example).



Similarly the biggest improvement in self-esteem scores was seen after participating in the first wilderness trail, before levels fell when participants returned to their usual environments (see Figure E). However, levels never regressed to starting values and from that point forward they continued to steadily increase. The final score recorded after the sailing trip was significantly higher than the initial score



reported at the beginning of the project ($Z=-1.84$, $p=0.033$).

The TurnAround project was designed as a medium-term intensive intervention which aimed to address negative behaviour in local youth at risk. The programme was successful in initiating many changes in young people's behaviour, attitude and values, and both participants and coaches alike experienced personal developmental changes. Youth behaviour at the outset of the programme was described as disruptive, challenging, disrespectful, obstructive and undisciplined.



Many were involved in substance abuse and required constant smoke breaks at group meetings. However, their journey on the TurnAround project

represented a personal growth process and the majority of participants learnt how to manage their behaviour and express their emotions (ranging from anger to love and affection) constructively. As the programme progressed the frequency of negative events reduced, criminal activity declined, substance abuse improved and they displayed less anti-social behaviour. Thus, major differences in their behaviour were observed and comparisons were extreme between the beginning and end of the programme.

The Turnaround experience contributed significantly to a range of important outcomes, for young people as shown in Box 2.

Box 2. Key outcomes for young people as a result of the Turnaround 2007 project

1. Improved self-esteem, mood and overall psychological health and wellbeing;
2. Enhanced understanding of the natural environment and the enjoyment that can be derived from spending time outdoors;
3. Developed personal awareness skills, self-confidence and discussed choices for change via one-to-one coaching;
4. Significantly improved their coping skills, emotional regulation, communication and problem solving abilities;
5. Learnt that they are accountable for their own decisions both in the program and in normal life;
6. Learnt about responsibility, respect, communication and working as a team;
7. Learnt valuable life skills and gained vital experience to increase their ability to find full time employment and become self supporting instead of relying on the State for their needs;
8. Developed a sense of belonging, reduced their participation in negative behaviours and engaged better at schools, improved relationships with peers and family members;
9. Understood how a supportive community could work together and created a community which supported the relationship building between the coaches and themselves;
10. Left the programme with a greater potential of finding full time employment, engaging in higher education or further training and peer mentoring;

In Conclusion

Participating in the TurnAround project has been a catalyst for change for all of the young people involved. It has instigated an incredible personal growth journey for all concerned and the young people leave the programme with better self-esteem and communicative skills, enhanced psychological health and wellbeing, a new set of coping skills, strengthened family relationships, realisations of personal behaviour patterns, a renewed interest in school and a set of future goals and challenges to address. Participating in the wilderness experiences and monthly activity workshops facilitated life awareness and enabled the young people to begin to understand their potential life choices and expand their horizons of opportunity. One of the key strengths of the programme has been the people involved in the project and its focus on strength based learning. The project was multi-sectored involving development at both a personal, group and community level. Coaches were volunteers from the local community who chose to make a commitment to the project to help youth at risk in their area. Therefore, the project succeeded in linking vulnerable young people to successful adults from the local community who offered a different perspective and cross-cultural dimension.

The whole community has a key role to play in supporting youth at risk by providing an accommodating and positive support system to address their anti-social behaviour and providing new opportunities to make positive changes to their lives. The young people who participated in this pilot project they have started a new journey and the support, coaching and new experiences have really helped them make those first few tentative steps in turning their lives around.