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### The Ethics of Outdoor Education: Increasing Access while Minimizing Environmental Impacts

Steven Sassaman

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# The Ethics of Outdoor Education: Increasing Access while Minimizing Environmental Impacts

STEVEN SASSAMAN, M.ED.

PHD. CANDIDATE, PRESCOTT COLLEGE

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF CAMPUS RECREATION FOR EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION, STUDENT SUCCESS, & RISK MANAGEMENT  
WEST CHESTER UNIVERSITY OF PA

# I acknowledge

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The Unami People and other members of the Lenapé or Delaware Nation who are the original inhabitants of this land.





# My Positionality

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# The Why

“This trip had way more of an impact on me than I anticipated. The beginning of the trip was a little overwhelming for me because it was out of my comfort zone, but I feel like I grew because of that. I learned to be ok with things that aren't "routine" for me. The biggest part about this trip for me was that I really understand now that I should take the opportunity to go for an adventure when I'm given the chance.”

~ OAP Program Participant



## The Why

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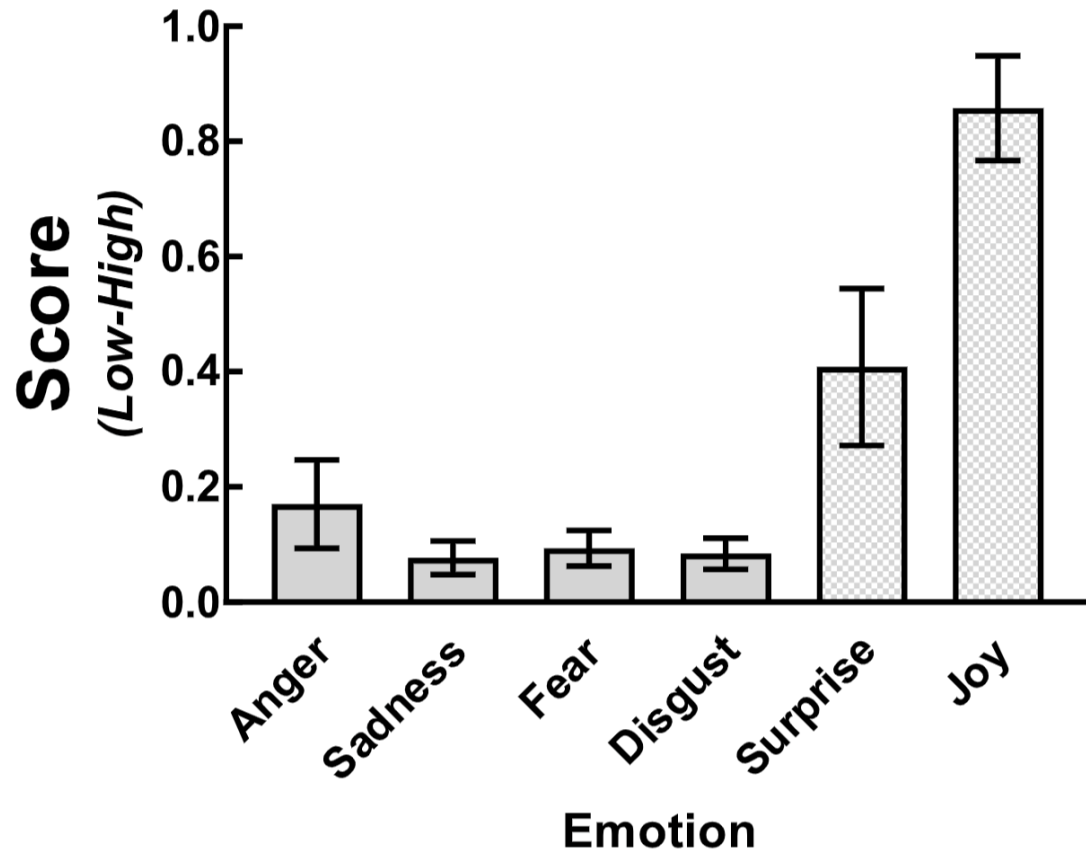
“Outdoor recreation is a great stress reliever. It is very nice to be in nature and seeing all its beauty. Another benefit is the learning experience. Through outdoor recreation I learned skills I would have not been able to learn in the classroom.”

~OAP Program Participant

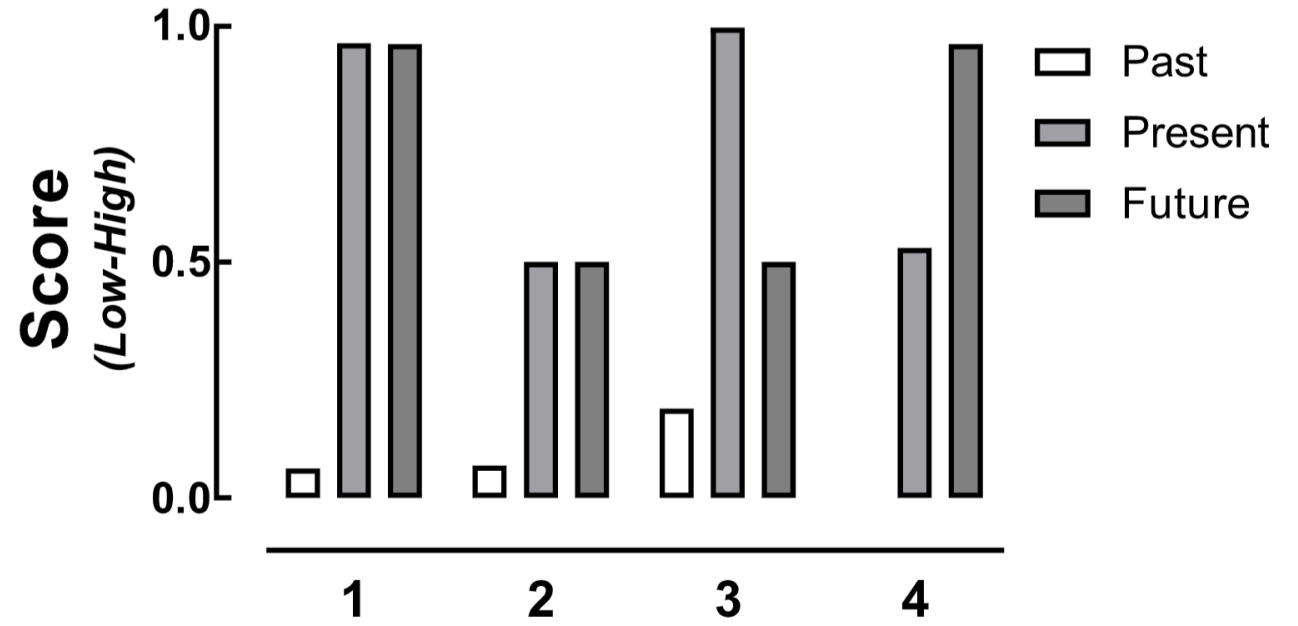
"Outdoor recreation elicits a strong sense of unity. When people are in an adverse or exciting situation, the bonding capability of those individuals increases because they're sharing a unique experience. Time spent with people in an outdoor recreational environment increases the quality of that time, because everyone is able to focus on each other and the activity at hand. Depending on the nature of the activity it increases trust and communication between the group to ensure safety and fun for everyone."  
~ OAP Program Participant

# The Why

## Emotional Valence of Feedback



## Temporality of Feedback



Source: Sassaman & Sofis (2018), unpublished analysis of qualitative data collected from OAP program participants over four years





# The Challenging History of Outdoor Recreation

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Settler's Grabbing the Land

Settler Colonialism Triad

Eradicating Indigenous People

"Chattle" Slaves in chains

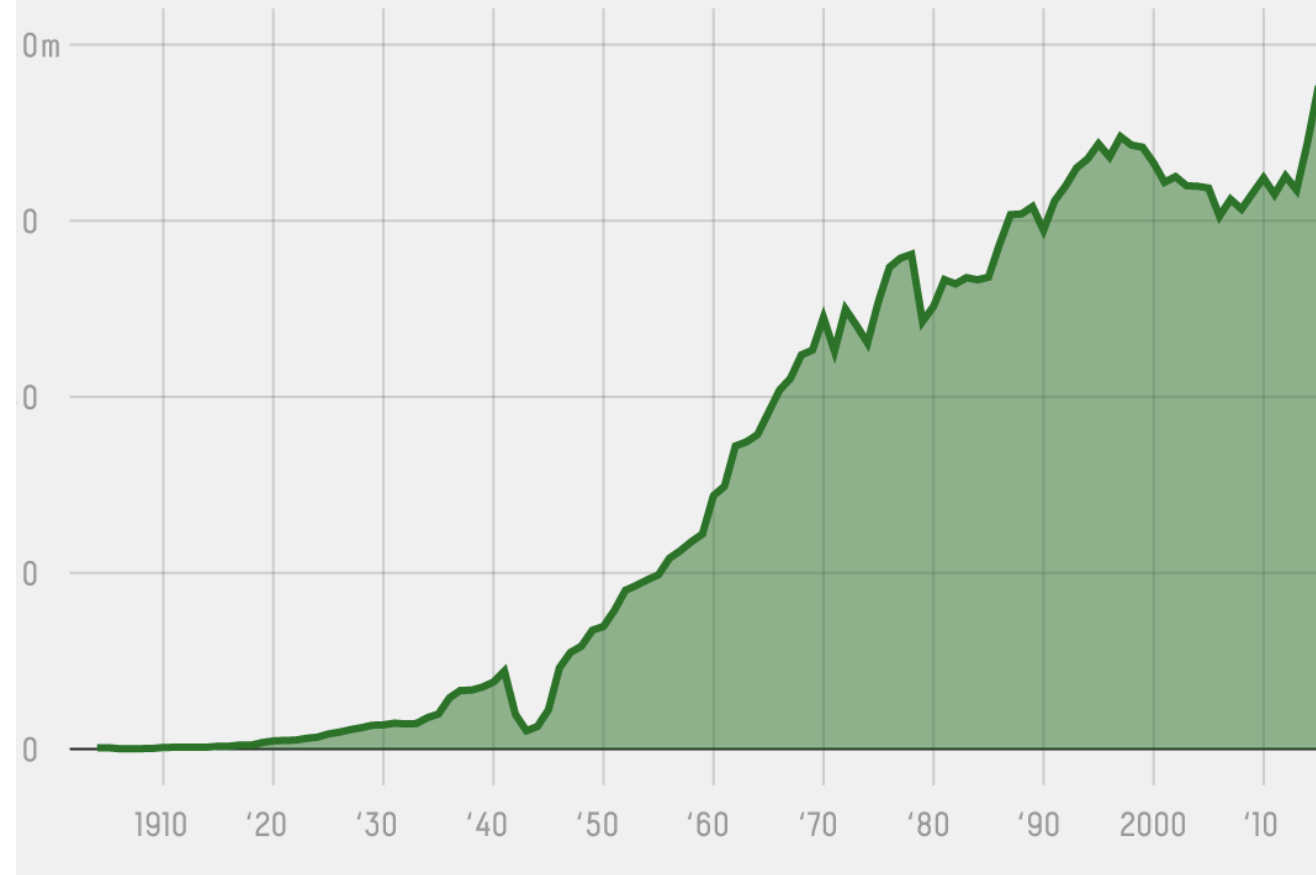


km847 [www.fotosearch.com](http://www.fotosearch.com)



## J.S. national parks have never been so popular

Annual recreational visits to national parks since 1904



318 Million  
Visitors Last  
Year!

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According to a study conducted in Rocky National Park, 55% of those surveyed “felt it was very appropriate ( $M = 4.64$ ) to leave food scraps behind as a food source for animals” (Lawhon, et al, 2013)



PHOTOGRAPH BY J. BICKING, SHUTTERSTOCK [HTTPS://WWW.NATIONALGEOGRAPHIC.ORG/ACTIVITY/PEOPLE-AND-PARKS-CHALLENGES-AND-SOLUTIONS/](https://www.nationalgeographic.org/activity/people-and-parks-challenges-and-solutions/)

Approximately 66% of visitors bring items into the park which are also disposed of in the parks. Lawhon, Taff, Schwartz, Miller, & Newman (2018)





Photo: Nancie Battaglia



130 miles of trails are damaged due to overuse in the Adirondacks (Adirondack Council, 2018)

Off-Road Abuse threatens Pine Barrens habitat and access for other recreationalists

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A group of rock climbers is seen on a steep, rocky mountain peak. The climbers are wearing helmets and harnesses, and are positioned at various points along the rock face. The background shows a vast mountain range under a blue sky with scattered clouds. The overall scene is one of a challenging and scenic climbing experience.

# The Balancing Act

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# Whose Authority?

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Source: Asiah Scharaga <https://www.chicoax.com/2017/09/13/whats-in-store-for-chicos-sworn-armed-park-rangers/>

Regulation, enforcement,  
and fee increases tend  
to reinforce systems of  
oppression and deviate  
from the joy of  
immersing oneself in  
nature

The value and  
challenge of  
Leave No Trace

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What is the value of this space?

**110,000**  
Direct Jobs

**\$12.3 BILLION** In  
Consumer Spending

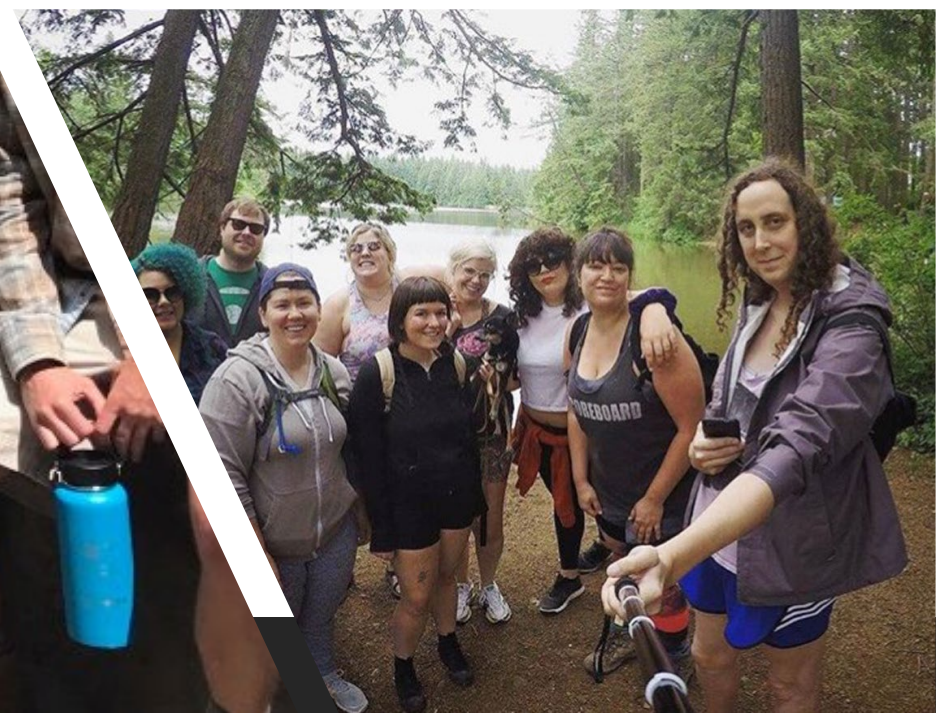
**\$3.9 BILLION** In  
Wages and Salaries

**\$737 MILLION** In State  
and Local Tax Revenue

A price can not be placed  
on any of the sacred land  
on this earth

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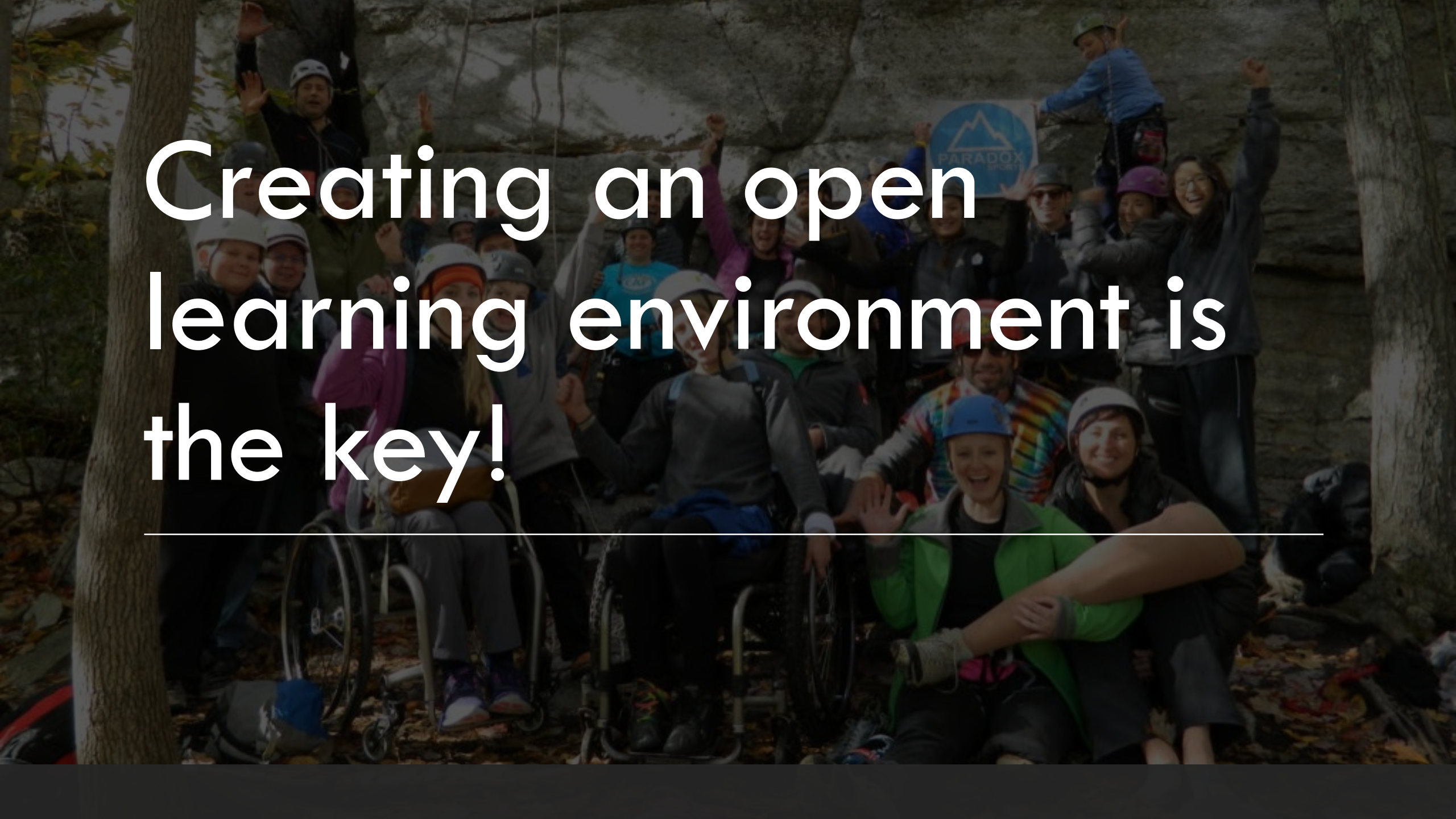




# Our Strategies

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- 📄 Minimal costs for trips (between \$10-\$25)
- 📄 Free access to all required equipment (tents, sleeping bags, rain jackets)
- 📄 Intentional conversations about the why behind our practices (straining food from gray water)
- 📄 Overview of the seven principles of Leave No Trace for all programs (all Trip Guides complete Trainer Course)
- 📄 Inclusive Language (saying “short torso” rather than women’s packs)
- 📄 Non-gendered tenting arrangements
- 📄 Marketing focused on wellness language rather than the traditional “thrill and conquering of nature”
- 📄 Clearly defined levels of programs (Beginner, Intermediate, Advanced)
- 📄 Essential Eligibility Criteria focused on participant ability
- 📄 Establishing community standards with the entire group for every program
- 📄 Conducting a land acknowledgment for space we recreate

A group of people, including those in wheelchairs, are gathered outdoors in front of a rock wall. They are wearing helmets and gear, suggesting an outdoor activity like rock climbing. Many are smiling and raising their hands in celebration. A sign in the background features a mountain logo and the word "PARADOX".

Creating an open  
learning environment is  
the key!

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Please accept  
my gratitude  
and share your  
insight!

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