Wilderness Vision Quest Clients: Motivations and Reported Benefits from an Urban-Based Program 1988 to 1997

Marilyn Foster Riley
John C. Hendee

Abstract—A questionnaire survey of clients participating in an 8-day vision quest operated by Wilderness Transitions, Inc., from 1988 to 1997 yielded a 78 percent return. The vision questers were older than typical wilderness visitors; two-thirds were female, with the stated motives for questing suggesting a spiritual and deeply personal search for self-discovery, insight, and meaningful life transition. Reported benefits were greater connections to self, self-empowerment, and connections to other, reflecting an outward focus, including the spiritual idea of connection to all things. Respondents were emphatic that wilderness naturalness and solitude were essential to gaining their benefits. Findings and respondent testimony suggested a process by which increasing degrees of connections to self, culminating in feelings of empowerment, may then lead to experiences of spirituality, defined as "connections to other." This study documents that wilderness vision questing, an ancient, cross-cultural practice involving time alone in nature while fasting, also attracts modern people seeking personal growth and renewal, and demonstrates the spiritual and healing values of wilderness.

Wilderness Vision Quest Study

This paper reports results from a study of participants over 10 years in one kind of WEP, a wilderness vision quest program featuring time alone in nature while fasting (or solo fasts) that is commercially operated by Wilderness Transitions, Inc., a nonprofit educational organization near San Francisco, California (Riley and others 1998).

International Roots of Vision Questing

Vision questing, or vision fasting, is a spiritual tradition that has been practiced for millennia in countless traditional cultures around the world (Cruden 1996). It may best be known as a growing-up rite of passage for adolescents entering adulthood in some Native American cultures. The vision quest tradition among Native American cultures is described in many books, including Nabokov (1987), Lame Deer and Erdoes (1972), Storn (1972), Neihardt (1972), and Mahdi and others (1996). However, many indigenous cultures around the world practice similar rites of passage, initiation, or renewal, involving time alone in nature in search of insight as to who they are (self-knowledge), and direction and purpose for their next phase in life.

For example, rites of passage involving time alone in nature are reported among indigenous cultures such as: the Australian aborigines (Elkin 1948), the bushman of the Kalahari (Bjerre 1950), the Mayan Indians of Guatemala and Belize, the Zuni of New Mexico (Tedlock and Tedlock 1993), the Mende of West Africa (Gilmore 1990), and many others. These ceremonies of initiation and renewal are valued because they confirm the importance of the individual to the tribe. They provide a safe and valuable transition test bridging one life phase to the next and which, because of the discipline and guidance required, enhance the self-esteem of participants, develop character, and provide great social value for the tribe by enforcing the common beliefs and values of the community (Elkin 1948; Van Gennep 1960).

Modern Wilderness Vision Questing

Modern people have lost their vision, beliefs, and values. We feel separated from our roots in nature and in history. Fortunately, modern wilderness vision questing retains the three-stage process of traditional rites of passage: preparation (severance from everyday life), completion of a 3- or 4-day fasting time alone in nature (threshold), and re-entry back into daily life (incorporation) (Foster 1995; Foster...
and Little 1988). This time-tested formula for reconnecting to that which is most important to individuals and communities works to reconnect the body, mind, and heart (or repair the lost connection to earth and spirit). Constantly bombarded by the pressures of our culture, where many things profound or beautiful are trivialized or popularized, where life is for the young and beautiful, we are led to believe that status or material possessions will make us happy or that finding the right person, mate, or guru will solve all our problems. But of course that is not true—the answers lie within each of us—we just have to find them. Wilderness has long been known as a place of peace, self-discovery, and renewal, where it is possible to slow down and gain insights on the most profound issues in our lives (fig. 1). Such are the goals of modern wilderness vision questing (Hart 1996; Riley 1986).

We estimate that there are about 50 active vision quest programs in the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, mostly small operations offering one to five quests per year, with perhaps a dozen programs leading six to eight a year, a few more than that. These findings are based on over 200 dues-paying members of the Wilderness Guides Council, the international organization of vision quest guides (Riley 2000). Most vision quest programs serve mixed groups of men and women, but some focus on specialized clients, for example, youth, women, men, families, recovering addicts, or persons in counseling.

Vision Quests by Wilderness Transitions, Inc.

One company that offers vision quests is Wilderness Transitions, Inc. They conduct five or six quests a year for clients who pay $595, plus their own transportation expenses, to attend four pretrip meetings, an 8-day trip to wilderness that includes 4 days and nights of solo fasting, and a trip reunion 2 weeks after the return (Riley and others 1998). The vision quests are advertised at activity fairs like the San Francisco Whole Life Exposition and in local resource directories such as “Common Ground,” always inviting potential clients to a free slide show about the vision quest. After the slide show, viewers who are interested and make the financial and emotional commitment for going on a vision quest stay for the first pretrip meeting.

A Typical Wilderness Transitions, Inc., Vision Quest—The lifeblood of any business is satisfied customers, so questers are prepared carefully in four pretrip meetings, covering such things as how to prepare for the 4 days and nights of fasting alone, and what kind of backpacking equipment is needed. “Leave no trace” camping and safety procedures are taught. Travel arrangements are made. A constant focus is helping questers develop their intent—that is, what they hope to get from their quest.

In addition to practices such as journaling and recording dreams, time-honored rituals, ceremonies, and meditation techniques are often suggested as ways to help certain questers achieve their intent. A key part of the preparation is the nature walk, a day alone in the out-of-doors early in the preparation, and during which exposure to nature may stimulate deeper thoughts about the intent of one’s quest (Riley 1997). Wilderness Transitions, Inc., has used the process described for 10 years. Other vision quest programs may vary in the time spent in different activities, but always include preparation, a solo fast, and sharing stories after the return.

Trips usually begin on a Saturday, when the six to 12 questers travel the 300 to 500 miles to a base camp near the end-of-road access (fig. 2) in a desert or mountain area.

Figure 1—The wilderness vision questers we studied perceived wilderness as a spiritual, healing, and growing place where reflective experiences are available as an antidote to the pressures of modern society, and for life renewal and transition (photo by Marilyn Riley).
in California or Nevada; the location and elevation of the trip depends on the season. After setting up base camp and providing orientation and safety information, questers explore the area to find a solo site with their desired degree of isolation (fig. 3), but usually only one-half to 2 miles from base camp. In the evening, preparation continues around a campfire, always using a fire-pan and wood brought from home in desert areas. The next day, questers continue their search for a solo site and, on finding it, may take out some of the 4 gallons of water they will use during their fast—1 gallon for each day. During this time, a personal conference is held with each quester to help them further prepare, clarify their intent for the solo fast, relieve anxieties, and ensure safety.

Group meetings in a traditional circle (council) these 2 days in base camp are rich in sharing of excitement and anticipation, further instruction in safety, and tips on journaling to record their questing experience and the abundant dreams that will come on the solo fast. Depending on personal preference, simple rituals and ceremony may be suggested to help questers get in touch with their feelings and address the issues that brought them on their quest. Early the third day in base camp, after hot drinks, a final group meeting and goodbyes, the questers—now backpackers—go out to spend 4 days and nights alone. Each day they will leave a sign of their well being at a predetermined place in a mutual check-in with a buddy. On the morning of the fifth day they return to the base camp, usually clear-eyed and feeling empowered, to joyously greet their community of fellow questers. After a breakfast of fruit salad, a council is held where each quester’s story is heard, acknowledged, and appreciated (fig. 4). High emotions continue in the now close knit group as the journey home begins, stopping at a hot springs or sauna, salad bar, and often camping overnight. Two weeks later a reunion is held, and questers share their experience in the hardest part of the quest—the return to daily life. Here they learn the truth of Black Elk’s wisdom, that the real difficulty of a vision is living it in the world for all the people to see (Niehardt 1972).

Methods and Findings

Because we studied clients from only one wilderness vision questing program, operated by Wilderness Transitions, Inc., we make no claim that these clients represent those from other organizations offering similar experiences. The value of studying this one program is that during the entire 10-year period of the study, the same process was led by the same leader, Marilyn Riley (assisted by Betty Warren), which minimizes two potentially important sources of variation—the program process and leadership.
How Many Questers?

During the 10-year period 1988 through spring 1997, a total of 297 persons went on vision quests with Wilderness Transitions, Inc.; 65 percent of them were women and 35 percent were men. Thirty of these individual quests were by repeat clients (about 10 percent), so we subtracted them and also subtracted 27 former clients whose addresses could not be located, thereby arriving at a total of 240 potential questionnaire respondents. Seventy-eight percent of these former vision questers responded to our one-page questionnaire after three mailings—a 76 percent response rate for women and 81 percent by men.

Who Were the Vision Questers?

The questers were almost exclusively urban, and while some had been camping, most had never been to wilderness. About three-fourths were from the San Francisco Bay area, but with an increasing number from out of state and some from other countries. Since this is a commercial wilderness program advertised to the public, we were interested in how these clients compared demographically to the typically young adult, upper middle class wilderness recreationists (Hendee and others 1990). We found them to be similar in that they were highly educated: 63 percent were college graduates, and 36 percent had done post graduate work. Not surprisingly, given this high degree of educational attainment, most were employed in upper middle class jobs such as healing and counseling (26 percent), business or government (24 percent), teaching/education (13 percent), and computer/technical (11 percent). We think it is interesting that more than one-fourth were employed in jobs in the healing and counseling category, which includes psychotherapists, nurses, massage therapists, and others one might expect to believe in the natural healing qualities of a vision quest experience in nature.

Thus, in education and occupation these vision questers resembled traditional wilderness recreationists, but they differed from traditional wilderness visitors in age and gender. The vision questers were older, 52 percent of them being over 40 and 17 percent being over 50 years old. Women outnumbered men two to one and were also older, with 62 percent of them being over 40 compared to 38 percent of the men. The predominance of women may be due to the fact that two women led Wilderness Transitions' trips. The leaders also felt that a great many of the women questers were seeking healing from wounds related to their gender, such as sexual discrimination, harassment, or abuse. The older age of the vision questers may reflect the greater likelihood of mature persons to seek introspective experiences.

Why Did They Quest?

Each respondent indicated their first and second most important reason for going on a wilderness vision quest from a list of common reasons gleaned from leader perceptions and trip evaluation reports collected by Wilderness Transitions, Inc., over the years (Anderson and Hendee, unpublished). Based on conventional wisdom about wilderness recreation, one might think that “adventure/challenge” and “recreation/nature experience” would have been selected as key reasons for going on any wilderness trip. Only 7 percent of these wilderness vision questers, however, selected “adventure/challenge,” and only 3 percent selected “recreation/nature experience” as their most important reason for going on a vision quest (table 1). Further, only 9 percent selected “adventure/challenge” and 2 percent selected “recreation/nature experience” as their second most important reasons (table 1).
Table 1—First and second most important reason for going on a first vision quest.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>First reason</th>
<th></th>
<th>Second reason</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>no.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual journey/self-discovery</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>(33)</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>(24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal renewal—fresh perspective</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>(18)</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>(25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life stage transition</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>(14)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>(12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal empowerment—strength</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>(11)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>(12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolve personal issues</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>(3 )</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>(6 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life work/more meaningful work direction</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>(3 )</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>(6 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grieving loss</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>(5 )</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>(3 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call to adventure/challenge</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>(7 )</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>(9 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation—nature experience</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>(3 )</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>(2 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical healing</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>(3 )</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>(11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>(100)</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>(100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first and second “most important reasons” cited by our respondents for going on a vision quest were: “spiritual journey/self discovery” (33 and 24 percent); “personal renewal, fresh perspective” (18 and 25 percent); “life stage transition” (14 and 12 percent); and “personal empowerment” (11 and 12 percent). Thus, the motives for going on a wilderness vision quest overwhelmingly suggest a spiritual and deeply personal search for self-discovery, insight, renewal, and meaningful transition in these clients’ lives.

What Benefits Did They Report?

We also asked the questers: “In your own words, what were the most important benefits you gained from participating in a wilderness vision quest?” On the average, respondents included two concepts in their narrative answer. We coded their responses to this open-ended question into 406 comments using qualitative analysis procedures described by Strauss and Corbin (1990). We began by tabulating key words and phrases actually used by the respondents (open codes), gradually combining them into 12 similar categories called axial codes and finally merging them into a few central themes called selective codes (table 2). Axial codes implied benefits relating to the “self” (56 percent), and 44 percent relating to what we call “other,” or a greater connection to the larger universe.

Benefits Related to the self—More than half (56 percent) of the key words and phrases in the respondents’ descriptions of benefits they said they received related to “the self” (table 2). There appeared to be a “Self Awareness

Table 2—Themes and key categories* of response to the question: “In your own words, what were the most important benefits you gained from participating in a wilderness vision quest?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key category</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Total response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connection to self</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Self connection/awareness</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>(9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Self discovery/identity/purpose</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>(6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Clarity/insight (self-understanding)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>(11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Self knowledge/acceptance</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>(7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self empowerment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Self confidence/reliance</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>(9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Facing fears/trusting nature</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>(5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Empowerment/strengthened</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>(9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection to other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Connection to nature</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>(15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Spirituality/connectedness</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>(11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Healing/renewal</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>(11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Community</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>(6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>(44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>406</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These categories and themes were developed by open, axial, and selective coding of key words and phrases in the narrative responses, following qualitative analysis procedures described by Strauss and Corbin (1990).
leading to Empowerment leading to Connection with Other (Spirituality)' continuum in the pattern of responses (fig. 5).

There are two important elements in this continuum. First, the responses implied various degrees of depth of self-connection ranging from self-awareness (shallower) to feelings of self-reliance and empowerment (deeper). For example, benefit comments in category 1 “self-connection/awareness” seemed shallower than comments in category 2 “self-discovery/identity/purpose” or 3 “clarity/insight/self-understanding.” The apparent depth of self-connection trend continues with category 4 “self-knowledge/acceptance,” followed by 5 “self-confidence/reliance,” 6 “facing fears/trusting nature,” and then category 7 “empowerment/strengthened.”

The data forming these seven categories are based on key words and phrases from individual respondents, which often implied that the person was at one point on the continuum or another. But actual phrases from some respondents implied movement along the continuum during the course of their quest. It was as if the fruits of increasing depth in “connections to self” are borne in feelings of self-reliance, courage to face fears, and empowerment.

Benefits related to other—Forty-four percent of the key words and phrases in the respondents’ descriptions of benefits implied “Connections to Other” or the larger universe. Specifically, several categories reflect an outward focus on “other” rather than “self,” for example, table 2, category 8 “connection to nature” reflects a focus on “other,” category 9 “spirituality/connectedness,” which included comments reporting feelings of being “interconnected to all things” or “the universe” (a spiritual idea). Likewise, category 10 “healing/renewal,” reflected such things as “new perspective” and “new direction,” which also implies a focus on “other” rather than self because they reflect a different (healed and renewed) view of the world in relation to the individual. For example, one quester wrote, “I gained a new perspective on my life. A renewal of my spirit. Reconnecting to the earth.” Another quester wrote, “Fasting and solitude in the wilderness for 4 days provided the space to go inwards and relate to my own internal world while at the same time experiencing myself as part of the vast universe—that is, connection with inside and outside.” Our “spirituality/connectedness” category included many comments such as “feeling connected to all things” or “oneness” that parallels the definitions of spirituality in the literature (McDonald 1989).

We believe these data suggest a process by which spiritual experiences in wilderness and nature may come about. That is: increasing degrees of connections to self, culminating in feelings of reliance, strength, and empowerment, may then lead to experiences of spirituality—defined as a focus on “other” rather than “self,” including feelings of oneness and inter-connectedness to all things (fig. 5). It’s as if one must progress from a strong connection to self in nature as preparation for experiencing spirituality in nature. For example, one quester said, “The benefit I gained from participating was having the experience of opening to continuous deeper layers and levels of myself and my surroundings.”

![Diagram of Connections to Self and Other](image-url)

**Figure 5**—Benefit categories imply a process—increasing degrees of connection to SELF, leading to feelings of EMPOWERMENT, which may lead to spiritual experiences defined as connections to OTHER.
Another quester said, "The benefit I gained was the time alone away from all distractions to really search within and find my answers and I was able to [then] really connect through nature to my higher self."

We were surprised that comments reflecting "community" as a benefit comprised only 6 percent of our response because the group is an important part of vision questing, and strong bonds of friendship are formed in the course of sharing such a deep experience. But the data obviously indicate that such sociability, while important, is subordinate to the enhanced self-awareness, empowerment, and spiritual benefits.

Is Vision Questing Wilderness Dependent?

But is wilderness, defined as an area with naturalness and solitude, really needed for vision quests to result in the kind of self-discovery, empowerment, and spirituality benefits we found? The respondents in our study emphatically said "yes." When asked the question, "Would the vision quest experience have been just as effective in a developed recreation area with roads and campgrounds?" 100 percent of them said, "No!" Their reasons given to support this answer were: distractions (evidence) of civilization (25 percent); lack of solitude (26 percent); lack of (dilution of) naturalness (27 percent); threat of human intrusions (13 percent); and lack of (less) challenge (9 percent).

Thus, reduced solitude and naturalness, distinguishing characteristics of wilderness, were decisive reasons for rejecting "developed recreation areas with roads and campgrounds" as potential locations for a vision quest. Further affirming the importance of naturalness and solitude was response to a direct question: "How important was being in a wilderness setting with naturalness and solitude to gaining benefits from your vision quest?" Conclusively, 98 percent checked "very important," with the remaining 2 percent saying "important." Nobody said "unimportant" or "very unimportant."

Summary and Conclusions

Wilderness Experience Programs bring paying clients to wilderness and related areas for personal growth, therapy, and education. This study of wilderness vision quest clients (one kind of WEP) from a 10-year period, 1988 to 1997, revealed that the vast majority of these novice, urban wilderness users went on their vision quest in search of spiritual insight, personal transition, and renewal—not challenge adventure or recreation. These vision questers resembled typical wilderness recreationists in being highly educated and engaged in upper-middle class occupations, but they were older, and two-thirds were female. The reported benefits from their wilderness vision quest experience, which included 4 days and nights fasting alone, suggest that increasing degrees of connections to oneself in nature, culminating in feelings of self-reliance, strength, and empowerment, may then lead to experiences of spirituality. Here spirituality is defined as a focus on "other" rather than "self," and include feelings of oneness and interconnectedness to all things. It is as if one must progress from a strong connection with self in nature as preparation for experiencing spirituality in nature.

The questers were emphatic in their view that their vision quests needed natural surroundings, with 100 percent of them stating that their experience would not have been as effective in a developed recreation area with roads and campgrounds because of the lack of naturalness, reduced solitude, and distractions of civilization. Being in a wilderness setting with naturalness and solitude was cited as very important or important to gaining benefits from their vision quest.

In conclusion, we believe these findings reveal that:

1. Wilderness vision questing, an ancient rite of passage featuring time alone in nature while fasting, also attracts modern people seeking personal growth, renewal, and transition from wilderness experience. They quest in the wilderness because they seek to know who they are and the meaning of their life journey.

2. The vision questers we studied perceived wilderness as a spiritual, healing, and growing place, where reflective experiences are available as an antidote to the pressures of modern society, and for life renewal and transition. They document the spiritual and healing values of wilderness.

3. Naturalness and solitude, distinguishing characteristics of wilderness, were perceived as essential conditions for gaining the personal benefits reported by these vision questers. Protection of wilderness to insure the continued existence of areas with naturalness and solitude is important to modern people who may seek healing, new insights, and personal truth through wilderness vision questing and other wilderness experiences.

Acknowledgments

Financial support for this study was provided by the University of Idaho Wilderness Research Center, the McIntyre-Stennis Program of Support for Forestry Research, and Wilderness Transitions, Inc.

References


MacDonald, B. 1989. The outdoors as a setting for spiritual growth. Women in Natural Resources. 10(2).

Riley, M. [This proceedings]. The Wilderness Guides Council: expanding professionalism and community among leaders of wilderness vision quests and rites of passage programs.