

The Positive Story of Couples and Wilderness

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my loving wife Laura and all of the adventures in store for us. Nothing is more valuable to me than the story we are writing together.

## Abstract

Interdisciplinary researchers from a variety of fields have recently become interested in studying the consequences of wilderness experiences. Different scholars have theorized about the impact of time spent in the wilderness, including implications for individual-level physiological, psychological, and emotional health. Before attempting to incorporate wilderness experiences into programming for couples, we must first begin exploring the relational implications of shared time in the wilderness. The purpose of this study is to develop a preliminary understanding of how wilderness experiences affect couples. The specific research question being addressed in this work is: What are the perceived relational implications of positive shared wilderness experiences for couples? Using a qualitative methodology and a phenomenological approach, the author gathered and analyzed stories from times that couples ventured into the wilderness together. Ten couples participated by telling twenty stories of positive shared wilderness experiences. Findings shed light onto the lived experience of couples in wilderness. Shared wilderness experiences allowed for uniquely intimate encounters, provided opportunities for rest and rejuvenation, and brought couples closer together through both challenges and conversations. Implications for programming and future research are discussed.

*Keywords: couples, green exercise, nature, qualitative research, phenomenology, recreation*

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## The Positive Story of Couples and Wilderness

### Chapter I: Introduction

*There is a love of wild nature in everybody – John Muir*

#### **Statement of the Problem**

Even though the phenomenon of wilderness-based recreation has been discussed in scholarly literature for decades, little is still known about the implications for couples. Specifically, the body of literature on the relational implications of shared wilderness experiences is in its infancy. Outdoor programmers (e.g., Gass, Gillis), social scientists (e.g., Barton, Freeman, Pretty, Roe, Russell, Zabriskie), and mental health practitioners (e.g., Bandoroff, Fletcher, Hinkle, Mason, Norton, Scherer) have only recently begun to empirically explore the implications of wilderness experiences. The edge of family science knowledge regarding wilderness experiences has been to describe the combination of systems theory tenets with symbolic experiential metaphors. Although this approach helps to understand how wilderness-based recreation can promote emotional, physical, and social development, we know little about how couples are actually experiencing this phenomenon. Is it enjoyable? Is it helpful? Is it seen as different or unique from other recreational pursuits? And in what ways are the impacts perceived or felt?

#### **Purpose of the Study**

To develop an understanding of the perceived relational implications of how shared wilderness experience impacts couples, how it might be used more effectively in health and wellness programming for couples, how it might be utilized in couples' therapy, or how it might be advocated for as part of a future public health initiative, we

must begin by deeply exploring this phenomenon. The purpose of this study was to develop the initial understanding of couples' perceptions regarding experiences in the wilderness. Utilizing a qualitative methodology and a phenomenological approach, the author gathered and analyzed couple's stories from shared wilderness experiences. The specific research question being addressed in this work was: What are the perceived relational implications of positive shared wilderness experiences for couples? Based on advice from my committee, the researcher opted to pursue couples who claimed to have had positive shared wilderness experiences. The primary reason for the 'positive' designator was that we wanted to minimize the negative impact that this study had on people's lives by purposefully sampling couples who look back on their experience fondly. We did not want the interview to be disruptive or destructive for their relationship. I also wanted to do our best to make sure that our conversations as co-researchers would be edifying and bonding for them as a couple. Seeking out positive experiences is a justifiable approach simply because this is the first dyadic study in this subject area.

### **Importance of the Study**

Recent research has shown green exercise, defined as physical activity in preserved natural settings, to be more beneficial to health than either aerobic activity in routine environments or sedentary time in natural environments (Barton, Hine, & Pretty, 2009; Hansmann et al., 2007; Hartig, Mang, & Evans, 1991; Mind, 2007; Pretty et al., 2003; Pretty, Peacock, Sellens, & Griffin, 2005; Roe & Aspinall, 2011; Ulrich, 1981). Many countries around the globe have begun instituting public health initiatives that promote this type of nature-based recreation to combat rising healthcare costs (i.e. New

Zealand, Japan, England). Despite the popularity gain these programs are experiencing, no research has investigated the relational effects of time in preserved natural areas on couples.

As of 2008, annual healthcare expenditures in the United States surpassed \$2.3 trillion, outpacing both inflation and growth in national income (National Healthcare Expenditures Data, 2010). Unfortunately, access to and experiences in nature are becoming rare as more and more Americans find themselves in urban areas (Pretty et al., 2005). Before implementing a domestic public health initiative aimed at promoting nature-based recreation, it is imperative that we first understand the perceived relational implications of shared wilderness experiences for couples.

There are several reasons why little has been published on this topic within the family field. One reason is that family scientists have historically focused on the cognitive-affective domain. Wilderness experiences are unique in that they equally weight both the physical domain and the cognitive-affective domain (Mason, 1987), meaning that they were outside of the scope of most family scholars. A second reason is that family scientists have focused more on the prevention of preexisting familial and relational ills. Since the conceptualization of wilderness as an asset is a relatively recent invention, it is no wonder that early family scientists did not spend time subjecting people to its effects. That said, the phenomenon of wilderness-based recreation has now been addressed in many interdisciplinary studies over the past several decades (Barton, Griffin, & Pretty, 2011; Coon, Boddy, Stein, Whear, Barton, & Depledge, 2011; Bowler, Buyung-Ali, Knight, & Pullin, 2010; Focht, 2009; Harper & Russell, 2008; Hartig, 2003; Iso-Ahola, 1984; Kugath, 1997; Pretty et al., 2003; Pretty et al., 2005; Ulrich, 1981;

Ulrich, 1983; Ulrich, Simmons, Losito, & Fiorito, 1991; Walsh & Golins, 1975; Warburton, Nicol, & Bredin, 2006). As international wilderness-based public health initiatives gain momentum, it becomes imperative that family scientists uncover the ways in which wilderness experiences influence couples.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Wilderness* –preserved natural areas accessible to the public for various kinds of outdoor recreation pursuits

*Recreation* – pleasurable activity outside of work; stimulating, refreshing, and amusing pursuits done for the enjoyment they provide

*Couple* – any two people in a committed relationship regardless of biological sex, gender identity, or legal distinction (i.e. marriage)

## **Chapter II: Literature Review**

### **History of Wilderness Experiences**

Historical attitudes toward wilderness have changed dramatically over recent American history. Early European settlers understood wilderness to be the place “in which a person feels stripped of guidance, lost, and perplexed” (Nash, 1982, p. 3). This Biblically-influenced viewpoint led settlers to antagonistically see wilderness as something in need of subjugation and dominion, a viewpoint that carried over throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Perspectives regarding wilderness areas shifted in the 1960’s with the establishment of the National Wilderness Preservation System. Wilderness was then legally defined as an area “where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain” (Wilderness Act, 1964). With wilderness areas preserved, outdoor recreation programs

(e.g., Outward Bound, NOLS) gained in popularity and further helped to de-vilify wilderness areas, instead providing opportunities for participants to remove themselves from urban life, recreate, navigate challenges, and be exposed to nature (Pretty et al., 2005). Modern wilderness therapy and wilderness family therapy, both byproducts of outdoor recreation programming, now specifically understand wilderness areas to be capable of promoting emotional, physical, and social health (Bandoroff & Scherer, 1994; Burg, 2001; Davis-Berman & Berman, 1994; Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002; Gass, 1993; Gass, Gillis, & Russell, 2012; Mason, 1987; Russell, 2000). While the edge of family science knowledge has been to describe wilderness experiences in terms of systems theory tenets with symbolic-experiential metaphors, we have yet to phenomenologically explore couples perceptions of shared experiences of wilderness. To better understand how wilderness experiences might be useful for couples, we must begin by developing a deep qualitative understanding of shared wilderness adventures through an investigation of couple's lived experiences.

### **Effective Couple Relationships**

When discussing the positive implications of wilderness experiences for couples, it is crucial to begin with research into healthy and effective relational interactions. Recent research has identified the following as characteristics of healthy relationships: commitment, satisfaction, admiration, clear communication, conflict resolution skills, lack of domestic violence, fidelity, expressions of gratitude, building shared meaning, forgiveness, positive interactions, intimacy, humor, play, respect, a willingness to be vulnerable, and emotional support (Gottman, 1999, 2007; Johnson, 2008; Meunier & Baker, 2012; Moor et al., 2004; Rauer & Volling, 2013). Although the amount that any

one of these elements positively contributes to a couple's relationship may fluctuate (Moor et al., 2004), all elements should be identified and explored during an investigation into healthy relational interactions.

Relationship quality and marital quality have been the most frequently studied variables by family scholars because of their link to discord and relationship breakdown (Jacobson, 1985; Knapp & Lott, 2010). Although researchers have chosen to operationalize these variables differently over the years (Fincham & Linfield, 1997), the most recent perspectives highlight the subjective, self-interpretive aspects of relationship quality (Knapp & Lott, 2010). Historic results began by demonstrating bi-directional relationships between relationship satisfaction and both mental health (Gove, Hughes, & Style, 1983) and physical health (Weiss & Aved, 1978). For example, the social support gained through healthy interactions between intimate partners has been shown to positively impact wellbeing, immune function, productivity, and longevity in partners (Kantrowitz & Wingert, 1999). Modern research continues to support these initial findings (e.g., Erol & Orth, 2013; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009).

Researchers have also found it is important for couples to focus on positive elements while reducing the impact of negative elements; a technique that increases a couple's level of happiness (Gottman & Silver, 2000; Meunier & Baker, 2012). In fact, several studies have concluded that happy relationships are a source of inspiration and vitality for committed partners (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Waite & Gallagher, 2001); something that is especially true when intimacy is built after beginning with a foundation of friendship (Fincham & Beach, 2010; Sandhya, 2009). Gottman's Sound House Theory (1999, 2007) details how the actions required to build a foundation of

friendship between partners are the same actions that nurture and preserve love in relationships.

### **Theoretical underpinnings of effective couple relationships**

Gottman's Sound Relationship House Theory (1999) is one of the primary couple-level theories used to facilitate in-depth discussion and research about couple relationships. This theory posits that successful relationships require a level of positive affect in both partners and an ability to reduce negative affect while resolving conflict. Gottman describes how relationship satisfaction and relationship stability are based on seven progressive levels of action: build love maps, share fondness and admiration, turn towards each other, maintain a positive perspective, manage conflict, make life dreams and aspirations come true, and create shared meaning. Gottman specifically encourages couples to have an awareness of and fondness for their partner. Positive expressions of admiration and respect in relationships lead to gratitude which, in turn, leads to improvements in self-esteem (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). Healthy couples respond to each other's bids for attention, turn towards each other, and utilize both playfulness and humor when creating shared meaning during time spent together (Fredrickson, 2009; Gottman & Silver, 2000). Gottman (1999) also explained how effective couples navigate conflict by utilizing soft language and humor while avoiding what he called the four horsemen of the apocalypse: criticism, defensiveness, contempt and stonewalling (1999). When put into practice, Gottman's theory engenders resilience among partners, stimulates thriving relationships, and empowers each member to be proud of their commitment.

### **Variables influencing effective couple relationships**

The field of couples research has demonstrated that relationship satisfaction is influenced by psychological and physiological variables. Relationship discord has been consistently associated with a variety of psychopathological variables (e.g., mood, anxiety, depression) (Whisman, 1999; Whisman, Sheldon, & Goering, 2000). Focusing directly on the lived experience of relationship participants, personal anxiety and depression along with partners level of depression have been shown to be significant predictors of relationship satisfaction through both hierarchical linear modeling and path analysis (Whisman, Uebelacker, & Weinstock, 2004). A recent meta-analysis of 5,071 couples documented the medium effect size between hostility and low relationship satisfaction (Woodin, 2011). Several studies have also documented a positive relationship between self-esteem and relationship satisfaction (Fincham & Bradbury, 1993; Sciangula & Morry, 2009; Shackelford, 2001). Interestingly, the self-esteem of either partner has been shown to influence and predict the relationship satisfaction of both partners (Erol & Orth, 2013).

Bahr (1979) researched the relationship between stress and marital stability with 4,332 women. Results showed that the addition of several internal stressors led to much higher rates of relationship dissolution than couples experiencing few internal stressors. The influence of stress on relationship satisfaction continues to be well documented, with researchers now agreeing that stress in couples is a dyadic phenomenon that impacts both partners and is the variable that most accurately predicted low relationship quality (Bodenmann, 2000; Bodenmann, 2005; Bodenmann & Cina, 2006; Story & Bradbury, 2004).

### **Wilderness and Health**

Wilderness recreation has been shown to produce more restorative health benefits than exercise in urban or indoor settings (Hartig, 1993; Hartig et al., 1991; Herzog, Maguire, & Nebel, 2003; Pretty et al., 2005). Major health-related findings show significant correlations between wilderness experiences and: improvements in blood pressure (Hartig et al., 2003; Pretty et al., 2005), increases in cognitive performance (Berman et al., 2008), reductions in anxiety (Mackay et al., 2010), increases in self-esteem (Barton et al., 2011), decreases in depression and hostility (Morita et al., 2007), increases in positive affect (Focht, 2009), improvements in mood (Pretty et al., 2007), improvements in well-being (Bowler et al., 2010), and reductions in stress (Hansmann et al., 2007).

### **Theoretical underpinnings of the wilderness-health relationship**

Two theories have been utilized in the majority of research aimed at uncovering the health benefits available through time in wilderness: Stress Reduction Theory and Attention Restoration Theory. Stress Reduction Theory (SRT) (Ulrich, 1981, 1983) posits that individuals have a biological predisposition to physiologically reduce autonomic arousal when viewing and experiencing natural spaces (Ulrich, 1983; Ulrich et al., 1991). SRT claims that experiencing unthreatening wilderness environments activates a positive affective response, decreasing negative feelings, level of arousal, and stress. Attention Restoration Theory (ART) (Kaplan, 1995; Kaplan & Kaplan 1989) was developed while studying the restorative influence that natural environments had on depleted attention capacities. Kaplan and Berman (2010) identified four restorative qualities of natural environments: *being away* from your regular surroundings, *compatibility* between your interests or experience level and what the environment provides, the *extent* or scope of

the environment, and the opportunity to experience *fascination* by directing attention toward interesting yet undemanding phenomena. Although many different environments are capable of fostering restoration, ART posits that wilderness settings consistently contain a greater amount of these four attention-restoring characteristics than environments without preserved natural elements (Kaplan & Berman, 2010).

### **Recreation and Relationships**

Over the past half a century, research has consistently demonstrated positive relationships between leisure involvement and outcomes in couples (Orthner & Mancini, 1991). Increased marital satisfaction (Holman & Jacquart, 1988), positive couple communication (Holman et al., 1988; Orthner, 1976), relational bonding (Shaw, 1999), and improved relational stability (Hill, 1988) have all been shown to be related to investment in and experiences of communal leisure time. Identified as a type of leisure activity, outdoor recreation has specifically been shown to improve relational communication and satisfaction (Huff, Widmer, McCoy, & Hill, 2003; Kugath, 1997), improve collective efficacy in couples (Wells, Widmer, & McCoy, 2004), increase problem-solving and social support (Orthner, 1997), improve functioning and feelings of unity (Smith, 1997), increase family cohesion (Hawks, 1991), and improve both marital stability and relational quality (Hill, 1988; Holman & Epperson, 1984). That said, data collection and analyses have primarily taken place at the individual level. Dyadic research into the impact of wilderness-based outdoor recreation on couples is limited.

### **Wilderness Recreation and Relationships**

In her pioneering work on wilderness family therapy, Mason (1987) identified seven premises that help to conceptualize the impact of wilderness experiences on

relationships: immediate feedback, trust, real vs. perceived fear, eustress, facing edges, physiological empathy, and equality. *Immediate feedback* refers to the merging of awareness and action during wilderness pursuits. Consequences in wilderness areas are clear and unambiguous, lending equal value to both the cognitive-affective and the physical domains. *Trust* refers to the mutual commitment that wilderness participants must share with each other, particularly in high-risk and high-stress situations. *Real vs. perceived fear* refers to the cognitive sorting out process that wilderness participants undergo to differentiate justified fears from unjustified ones. The risk inherent to wilderness experiences is one aspect of what differentiates wilderness recreation from leisure activities (Ewert & Hollenhorst, 1994; Hamilton-Smith, 1993; Sung, 2004). Understanding wilderness experiences as unique from other more accessible recreation opportunities agrees with Csikszentmihalyi and Selega's 'peak experience' (1990), the notion that the greatest personal satisfaction comes through negotiating challenges, balancing the risks involved with an accurate sense of personal competence. *Eustress* references the positive use of stress during wilderness recreation. *Facing edges* refers to the process that wilderness participants undergo to appropriately match up their environment with their perceived physical capabilities. *Physiological empathy* refers to the natural caring and affection that is elicited when we see a loved one struggling in a high-stress situation. Finally, *equality* references the notion that the many dimensions provided by wilderness experiences are equally accessible to both men and women.

Mason's (1987) work with graduate students at the University of Minnesota demonstrated the psycho-social implications of shared wilderness experiences among classmates. In addition to the seven premises above, Mason demonstrated how new

experiences, unfolding in unfamiliar and unique environments, have the potential to induce anxiety, something that systems theorists have long believed to be responsible for change. Mason also hypothesized how families could be strengthened through role flexibility, individual growth, integrating multiple systems (affective, physiological, biological, interpersonal), and shared risk taking while in the wilderness. Mason's (1981, 1987) work specifically utilized metaphors from wilderness experiences to translate the implications back into everyday contexts. The major limitation to Mason's work is that it was done with students and not based on intimate couples. Although the findings were translated to have implications for couples, research specifically on the effects of wilderness experiences for intimate relationships is still needed.

More recent research on wilderness experiences has specifically targeted the impact of: unique environments and unique responsibilities (Stringer & McAvoy, 1992), the biophysical characteristics of nature (Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999), transitions from 'ordinary' to 'extraordinary' environments (Beedie & Hudson, 2003), the potential for risks (Vargias, Morais, & Dziubek, 2005), and a search for spiritual connections (Heintzman, 2008, 2009; Livengood, 2009). In terms of social value, wilderness is seen as a location to develop self-reliance while avoiding negative social pressures (Pohl & Borrie, 2000), a restorative environment (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1982), a medium for education and therapy (Scherl, 1989), and a place to foster both familial and fraternal bonds (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997; Schuster, Tarrant, & Watson, 2003). Quantitative studies have also shown that challenging wilderness recreation experiences help to establish and maintain strong families by highlighting feelings of connectedness (Shaw & Dawson, 2001; Wells, Widmer, & McCoy, 2004).

In much the same way that Mason's work needs to be expounded upon to include couples, these studies also are limited in their focus on intimate relationships. This is a major gap in the current literature and the primary motivation for the current study. The other major limitation is that the paradigms utilized in many wilderness-focused research studies may inaccurately or incompletely interpret the essences of this phenomenon. Structured interventions, formal psychometric inventories, and experimental or quasi-experimental design, although incredibly valuable to this line of research and the field as a whole, may not fully conceptualize the impact of shared wilderness experiences for couples. That said, the literature does allow family scholars to conclude that: 1) wilderness-based recreation provides unique benefits to mental and physical wellbeing (Beedie & Hudson, 2003; Ewert & Hollenhorst, 1994; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Hamilton-Smith, 1993; Heintzman, 2007, 2008, 2009; Livengood, 2009; Riley & Hendee, 1999; Stringer & McAvoy, 1992; Vagias, Morias, & Dziubek, 2005; Winter, 2007), and 2) these benefits have both intrapersonal and interpersonal implications (Barton, Hine, & Pretty, 2009; Hansmann, Hug, & Seeland, 2007; Hartig, Mang, & Evans, 1991; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1982; Mannell & Kleiber, 1997; Mind, 2007; Pohl & Borrie, 2000; Pretty, Griffin, Sellens, & Pretty, 2003; Roe & Aspinall, 2011; Schuster, Tarrant, & Watson, 2003; Schuster, Cordell, & Phillips, 2005; Schuster, Cordell, & Green, 2007; Smithe, 1997; Ulrich, 1981; Wells, Widmer, & McCoy, 2004; White & Hendee, 2000). In order to take the next step in advancing our understanding of the essences of this phenomenon at the couple-level, a phenomenologically-based qualitative study is required.

**Wilderness considerations.** Although the previously reviewed body of research has demonstrated that wilderness experiences offer many benefits, there is one main caveat to consider: couples must be receptive to the particular location and activity in order to enjoy their experience (Schuster, Cordell, & Phillips, 2005). This overlaps with ART's notion of *compatibility*, which recognizes the necessary alignment between an environment and a participant's interests. People with minimal expertise may experience the benefits of wilderness recreation during front-country excursions (*front-country* refers to destinations like city or state parks that are easily accessible and close to civilization). Others may prefer back-country wilderness preserves in order to feel immersed in nature (*back-country* refers to difficult to access destinations that are removed from civilization and modern amenities). Pretty et al. (2007) found that either option results in significant improvements to well-being. As such, participating couples need to select environments for shared wilderness recreation that are well suited to their interests and experience level.

### **Statement of Purpose and Research Question**

To accurately understand the relational health benefits of wilderness immersions and the potential to utilize wilderness experiences as part of clinical interventions, programming for couples, or public health initiatives, we must begin by exploring the phenomenon of shared wilderness experiences. The purpose of this study was to develop a preliminary understanding of how wilderness experiences affect couples. Using a qualitative methodology and a phenomenological approach, the researcher gathered and analyzed ten dyadic interviews that provided twenty stories from times couples ventured into the wilderness together. The specific research question being addressed in this work

was: What are the perceived relational implications of positive shared wilderness experiences for couples?

### **Chapter III: Methodology**

#### **Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is a specific approach to qualitative research that inductively elicits descriptions of particular phenomena (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), who is often described as the founder of phenomenology (Cohen, 1987; Koch, 1996), criticized psychological research that only attended to physical and external stimuli, ignoring contextual details and fabricating artificial situations (Laverly, 2003). He responded with a research paradigm oriented towards studying the world as it was experienced by people; a paradigm that explicated the essences of experiences as they were consciously interpreted by participants. The objective of a transcendental phenomenological study is to identify the meaning that individuals ascribe to their lived experience of a phenomenon, “to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). Given the positivistic approach employed by previous wilderness studies, a phenomenological study is the most appropriate strategy for answering the research question at hand.

Transcendental phenomenology, as described by Moustakas (1994), details the process of seeking these essential meanings by uncovering, isolating, and interpreting thematic statements. Particular attention is paid to the spatial, corporeal, temporal, and relational dimensions of interview data in order to ascertain the different layers and dimensions of a shared wilderness experience for couples. “In determining the universal or essential quality of a theme our concern is to discover aspects or qualities that make a

phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 107). Beginning with the interviewees words and then moving towards abstraction, Moustakas’ style of phenomenology led the researcher to generalize the commonalities found in subjective accounts in order to explain the essential meanings of shared wilderness experiences for couples.

### **Bracketing**

Bracketing, or seeing things as they are, is a crucial aspect of transcendental phenomenological research that allowed the researcher to achieve the self-reflective state known as *epoche* (Lavery, 2003; Moustakas, 1994). Also known as phenomenological reduction (Klein & Westcott, 1994; Osborne, 1994), bracketing is the process of first acknowledging and then suspending the researcher’s beliefs, values, judgments, and outer world influences. Epoche enables researchers to intuitively see the essences of phenomena by freeing themselves of preconceived ideas, a concept Moustakas (1994) referenced as *transcendence*, and instead cultivating a sense of doubt (Klein & Westcott, 1994; Lavery, 2003; Polkinghorne; 1983). Based on wisdom from practiced phenomenological researchers (Colazzi, 1978; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989; Van Manen, 1990), the researcher bracketed himself by actively keeping a research journal throughout all stages of research. Journaling provided a venue for the researchers own history with shared wilderness experiences to be visible throughout the study. This journal also helped to heighten awareness and allowed the researcher to acknowledge and suspend any expectations, assumptions, and working hypotheses that could have prevented him from seeing things as they truly are.

**Self as researcher.** As the sole designer and investigator in this study, I am deeply drawn to the concept of shared wilderness experiences. I am a thirty one year old Caucasian male with English, Irish, and German ancestry. My background includes personal, professional, and academic affiliations with outdoor recreation, marriage and family therapy, ministry, and experiential education. My parents were both avid nature lovers who took our family on camping trips throughout my entire childhood. My wife is a competent outdoorswoman with an abiding affinity for wild places. As such, I have spent my entire life seeking out natural wonders with loved ones. My reflective tendencies have led to many conversations with my parents, my sister, and my wife about the influence that time in nature can have on individual and relational wellbeing. This personal history informs the lens through which I see this phenomenon. As such, I created a list of expectations, aspirations, and hopes for this research prior to meeting with any participants. I wanted to be intentionally cautious of the influence that my background could exert on this research. I have included the following journal entry describing these biases as an example of my bracketing process.

April 4, 2014. I am anticipating much in the way that wilderness has shaped my own relationship: as a place for adventure, for unique responsibilities, for simplicity, and for laughter – all things my wife and I treasure. Simply put, I want people to say that they love camping with their partner! I think that shared wilderness experiences, when done right, have the power to positively transform relationships. I also think that shared wilderness experiences gone wrong have the capacity to bring out less desirable qualities in partners. The distinction between positive and not-so-positive trips is often a very fine line determined more by

personality, mood, or relational stability than by circumstance. As such, I imagine that some participants will share experiences they deem positive that a different couple would view negatively.

Because wilderness trips can be challenging experiences to explain, I am worried that participants won't talk reflectively enough about their shared wilderness for me to fully understand its value. I also worry that this interview could become too intimate for some participants, causing them to refrain from full disclosure of their thoughts/memories/emotions/etc. Although I have prepped everyone for this conversation, there is only so much that an email from a stranger can accomplish.

As instructed by Moustakas (1994), I participated in continual bracketing exercises throughout the study. Emerging themes and hypotheses were routinely engaged through journaling exercises and discussions with colleagues. This personal reflection also allowed me to process validations and disappointments as they arose. Although a laborious process, intentionally bracketing my own experiences allowed the essences of participants lived experiences of shared wilderness to shine through (van Manen, 1990).

### **Recruitment**

Following approval of this research by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Minnesota, the author began recruiting sample participants via purposive and snowball sampling; both non-probability sampling methods. Flyers were posted around town at recreation centers and outdoor retailers. Colleagues of the researcher who regularly engage in shared green exercise were also accessed as initial participants. Inclusion criteria for study participants were that they must: 1) self-report they are in a

committed relationship, 2) have shared wilderness experience(s) together as a couple, 3) deem this experience to be positive, and 4) both members of the couple are willing to collectively tell the stories of these experiences to the researcher.

Phenomenological investigations utilize different sampling criteria than the strategies based on meeting various statistical requirements. Instead, phenomenologists look to recruit participants who have relevant lived experience, who are willing to tell their stories, and who are different enough that their stories will be unique (Laverly, 2003; Van Manen, 1997). Recommendations for sample size in phenomenological research range from 2-10 participants (Boyd, 2001), 5-25 participants (Creswell, 1998), or 6-12 participants as long as the narratives of the initial 6 participants produce thematic redundancy (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). "Saturation has, in fact, become the gold standard by which purposive sample sizes are determined in health science research" (Guest et al., 2006, p. 60). Conversation with the author's committee members resulted in a goal of 8 couples. That said, the exact number of participants required in this study depended on the presence of new information, theme reinforcement, and thematic saturation (Daly, 2007). Saturation was reached after interviewing ten couples, leaving this study with twenty stories of shared wilderness experiences.

### **Participants**

Participants ranged in age from 22 to 58 years old ( $M=35$ ). Ten of the participants identified as female and ten as male. Although not a demographic question of interest, every couple participating presented as heterosexual. Eight of the couples identified as married. Of these, marriage lengths ranged from 1 to 34 years ( $M=9$ ). The other two

couples identified as dating. One of these couples had been dating for 2 years and the other for 4 years. Sample participants are described in Table 1 at the end of the paper.

### **Pre-survey**

After being recruited, participating couples were asked to complete a pre-survey prior to scheduling their interview (Appendix C). This survey asked each partner to identify their level of previous wilderness experience on a scale of 1 (“Not at all Experienced”) to 5 (“Extremely Experienced”). Responses ranged from 2 through 5 ( $M=3.4$ ). Participants were also asked to individually identify one positive wilderness experience shared with their partner and to describe what made this experience memorable. These stories became the focus of the interviews that followed.

### **Interview Data Collection Procedures**

After describing the purpose of the investigation, interested couples were asked to spend roughly ninety minutes with the researcher to discuss their shared experiences of wilderness. Informed consent forms (Appendix A), a list of potential interview questions (Appendix B), a short pre-survey (Appendix C), and the researcher’s contact information were provided to potential couples prior to their interviews. As mentioned above, the exact number of couples needed for this research could not be predetermined and, as such, the author relied on the sampling guide set forth by Daly (2007). Both interviews and participant recruitment were discontinued upon thematic saturation when no new themes emerged (Daly, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998); a justifiable data collection procedure given the exploratory nature of this study in addition to the awareness the researcher maintained with the data as it developed (Glaser, 1965).

As in other exploratory phenomenological research, this research gathered participant's lived experiences through semi-structured interviews. Since the focus of this study was specifically on the relational implications of shared wilderness experiences (as subjectively understood by members of the couple), it was crucial to simultaneously include both partners or risk seeing individuals as isolated rather than as part of the relational subsystem (Keeney, 1983). As such, dyadic interviews were completed with both partners present. Interviewing couples together also allowed partners to supplement each other's answers, provide rich data through dialogue, and to create shared meaning out of the research experience (Beiten, 2007).

Participants were asked to individually identify a positive wilderness experience they had shared with their partner. Participants were also asked to refrain from communicating with their partner about the story they chose until the interview. A total of ten dyadic interviews produced twenty stories of shared wilderness experience that were used for data analysis. These stories included wilderness experiences shared by the couple alone along with experiences shared by the couple with friends or family members present. Experiences lasted between 4 hours to 7 days and took place anywhere from 4 months to 10 years prior to the interview.

### **Initial Interviews**

Participating couples were asked to describe in detail the shared wilderness experience(s) they identified on their pre-survey. The research question was written specifically to address the aim of this exploratory phenomenological study. Because this interview took place in the context of a relationship between the researcher and participating couples, support and a caring presence were critical elements that the

researcher needed to provide (Marcel, 1971; Polkinghorne, 1983). Openness was another critical element to the interview experience. Asking few direct questions, allowing the participants to lead, and encouraging the interview to stay close to the lived experience were all components that helped elucidate what participants really experienced (Creswell, 2007; Geertz, 1993; Kock, 1996). Couples were encouraged to answer open-ended questions (Appendix B) as thoroughly as they would like, allowing the researcher to gather rich descriptions and assign meaning clusters (Moustakas, 1994). In addition to participant's responses, the researcher paid attention to and noted silences as they arose throughout the interview (Van Manen, 1997). As understood by van Manen (1990), stories in phenomenological research bring vitality and detail to past experiences, transcending the original event, personalizing the memory, and engaging all who listen. Based on this understanding, dyadic interviews were focused on couples' stories of shared wilderness experiences.

This research took place within the Minneapolis – St. Paul metropolitan area of Minnesota. Participating couples chose the interview location that was most convenient for them. Location options were either in the researcher's office on the University of Minnesota campus or at their home, both safe and confidential environments (Laverty, 2003). Each interview began with a review of the informed consent form (Appendix A), a discussion of risks and benefits associated with participation, and a reminder that the interview could be stopped at any moment. I answered any lingering questions and then had all participants verbally consent.

Initial interviews began by collecting basic information (e.g., participant's names, relationship status, length of relationship, level of previous wilderness experience).

Following this, the interview schedule was focused on the research question at hand (Appendix B). Participating couples were asked, “I’m curious about the stories that each of you wrote down on your pre-survey. Could one of you begin by telling me about a time when you shared a positive wilderness experience with your partner?” This initial question was followed by additional probes aimed at gathering structural and contextual descriptions of the experience, a technique that lined up with this study’s claimed methodology. After one partner recounted the positive experience they identified in their pre-survey, the other partner was asked probing questions about that same trip. This technique allowed for each partner’s unique voice along with a collective narrative to emerge.

Although interviews focused on recollected stories of shared wilderness experiences, attention was also given to participants’ reflections, thoughts, and feelings related to the phenomenon. I aspired to provide participants with an opportunity to discuss shared wilderness experiences in a way that illuminated their own words, conceptualizations, and definitions. Interview length ranged from 45 to 80 minutes. Participants were emailed individually within two weeks after their interview with information regarding data analysis. In addition to providing updates on the research process, this email helped to keep participants engaged until they were sent a final thematic analysis of the data for member checking.

### **Transcription**

In-person interviews were videotaped and transcribed solely by the researcher immediately after completion. Particular attention was given to de-identifying data and maintaining confidentiality throughout all stages of the research process. Verbatim

transcriptions were completed for all recordings within a day of the interview. I began by listening to each interview recording in its entirety after completing the interview. After transcribing I re-listened to each interview to verify the accuracy of my transcription. I then re-read each transcription in its entirety as a final confirmation step. Reduced transcripts were then created within one week of the interview. These transcripts were reduced to only include stories of shared wilderness experiences, removing out all casual conversations and digressions to streamline the wilderness story.

### **Member Check**

Participants were individually emailed a summary of the overall data analysis after all interviews were completed and colleagues had affirmed the thematic analysis. The email included a chance to review the data and to verify the accuracy of my summary. Participants were given opportunities to provide commentary or corrections for findings that were not accurate portrayals of their lived experience (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Participants were also invited to discuss any additional thoughts about shared wilderness that arose after our initial interview. Additional reminder emails were sent to 7 participants who had not completed their member check in the first two weeks. Within three weeks of completing the initial interviews, all twenty participants responded to the member check email. Out of these, all twenty confirmed that the initial analyses were an accurate portrayal of their experience and 2 wrote additional clarifying comments that reiterated the importance of shared wilderness for their relationship. No participants elected to discuss additional thoughts in a follow-up interview.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

#### **Data**

Data were collected, transcribed, read, re-read, subdivided based on meanings, organized to provide consistent statements and essential structures, and then summarized for scholarship purposes (Giorgi, 1985, 1997). I relied on two copies of each interview transcript to complete this analysis. One verbatim copy of the entire interview and one copy that had been reduced to only include stories of shared wilderness experiences. As soon as interview transcripts were completed, stories were then summarized in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to facilitate comparison between accounts regarding details about context and structure of the wilderness experience. Spreadsheet information included the type of activity, the location of the experience, the length of the trip, the previous experience level of participants, how wilderness was experienced by couples, how wilderness influenced couples, and overall outcomes from the experience. Data analysis simultaneously focused on researcher journal entries, verbatim transcripts, transcripts reduced to stories, summaries of individual stories, and a summary grid of all stories.

Next, I slightly modified Moustakas' transcendental reduction process (1994). Instead of omitting repetitions, I kept all statements for analysis. I felt that complete reduction here risked minimizing statements that were most vivid. Deleting repetitive statements could have also caused me to lose sight of repeated events. This decision was influenced by my reading of van Manen and the way that he wrote about maintaining 'sensitivity' in his hermeneutic approach to phenomenology (1990).

I then began the process of structural and textural data analysis within individual relationships and across all cases as soon as the second set of interviews was complete and continued until all interviews were finished (Moustakas, 1994). This approach

allowed each unique experience to exist alone while also combining all experiences to uncover meanings and better understand the essences of the phenomenon. Clusters of invariant constituents and meaning units were identified as potential themes, described via vivid quotes, and then verified as additional interviews were completed (Daly, 2007). The goal of this analysis was to “reach a place of understanding of the experience through the development of an integrated statement about the experience” (Laverly, 2003, p. 30).

### **Analysis of Text and Structure**

The data analysis plan in this study focused first on analyzing textural and structural details. Textural details describe the nature, qualities, and characteristics of a phenomenon. Structural details describe the thoughts, feelings, and emotions elicited when experiencing a phenomenon. Textural details were considered from a variety of different angles, a process known as *imaginative variation* (Moustakas, 1994). Combining textural details (the *what*) and structural details (the *how*) helped to provide unique insights that are often referenced as *invariant constituents* (Moustakas, 1994). Textural details focused on what happened during a couple’s shared wilderness experience. Structural details focused on how partners felt and thought during the experience, paying attention to the relational context that these thoughts and feelings emerged from. The researcher was responsible for manual coding of textural and structural details that illuminated the perceived meaning, value, and relational impact of shared wilderness experiences that emerged from within and across the transcribed stories. Beginning immediately after the second set of interviews, the relationship between these two sets of details was analyzed on an individual story basis and then

analyzed across stories from other participants as more interviews were completed. Specific attention was paid to areas of both consensus and disagreement between partners. In the event of disagreement, separate lived experiences were recorded for each partner. By attending to possible textural and structural meanings of a phenomenon, the researcher was able to integrate the various aspects into a vivid description while also beginning to identify potential underlying themes (Moustakas, 1994). These notes allowed the researcher to separate from the data, acknowledge changes between the narrative and the researcher's readings, accurately discern meaning units from the transcripts, and then directly express the insights gained in the form of consistent statements that have scholarly merit within the discipline of family science.

### **Analysis of Themes**

The researcher made detailed analytical notes during interviews, immediately after interviews, and after data collection was completed. Through the process of textural and structural analysis, these notes served to identify clusters of significant, memorable, interesting, and recurring statements identified as invariant constituents and meaning units (Gilgun, 2005; Moustakas, 1994). After completing the second interview, I also began the continuous process of examining, probing, essentializing, and then textually redescribing these meaning units as themes that would speak directly to family science scholars (Daly, 2007; Giorgi, 1997). Elements that provided understanding or insight into the phenomenon were determined to be potential themes. As more interviews were completed, verbatim and story transcripts were then re-read to see if the themes were supported both within and across narratives. Once confirmed, themes were then combined into essences and meanings that collectively detailed the experience of shared

wilderness for couples (Moustakas, 1994). This process continued until interviews were complete and all participants had responded to the member check.

**Noema and noesis.** According to Moustakas (1994), noema and noesis are the collective components that help to clarify and illuminate phenomena. Noema references the phenomenon of interest to the researcher. Noesis references the feelings and memories that are associated with the memory of a phenomenon. In this research, noesis are the example stories that couples tell about previous shared wilderness experiences and noema are the relational implications of shared wilderness experiences. Harnessing both noesis and noema through discourse helped the researcher more fully understand an experience's perceived meaning which, in turn, led to greater clarity of an experience's essences (Moustakas, 1994).

**Audit team.** I also chose two colleagues to help as my audit team for this study. Both colleagues are advanced social science doctoral students who are familiar with qualitative methodologies and phenomenology. I chose them because of their credentials and because they are at different ends of the wilderness experience spectrum (with one having had lots of outdoor recreation experience and the other having very little). I thought that this diversity would add a richness to our conversations as the research progressed.

We met together two times during which I shared all transcripts and summaries, providing them with access to the data, and inviting them into the process of imaginative variation and thematic analysis. The main intention of this was to triangulate and cross-check findings, both of which would add to the level of accuracy and trustworthiness in this study. Our first meeting was after the initial interviews were complete to review

transcripts, work on textural and structural analysis, and discuss potential themes. Our second meeting was after receiving results from the member check. This meeting was held to finalize themes, confirm thematic saturation, decide to halt recruitment, and translate findings into language appropriate for family scholarship.

### **Trustworthiness**

To continue gaining respect in a numbers-oriented world, qualitative research needs to be executed and presented with the highest degree of professional integrity. Validity and reliability, as they pertain to this phenomenological study, can be discussed in terms of rigor, credibility, adequacy, and trustworthiness (Laverty, 2003). Bracketing was one component that established rigor by removing bias and intentionally focusing the researcher upon the phenomenon of interest. Credibility was established when saturation was reached, no new themes emerged, the researcher no longer saw any new information, participants responses reinforced existing themes, findings resonated with participants, and participants said they had nothing further to share about the topic (Daly, 2007). These factors help to substantiate the knowledge created from this research by demonstrating support from key stakeholders of the study (Gerhart, Ratliff, & Lyle, 2001). Adequacy occurred when the researcher reflected on the entire inquiry process relative to the study's purpose (Hall & Stevens, 1991). Trustworthiness was established with a thorough reliance on interview data in the results section. Because phenomenological interviewing allows for interviewees to put things into their own words, the researcher was truly invested in the perspective of study participants. The researcher also attempted to provide accurate supporting information (via concise and well-edited excerpts) for the claims

made in the results section, weaving together assertions and evidence in a way that depicts their value to the reader.

Triangulation and cross-checking of findings took place by reviewing all available data, transparently sharing findings with participants, and soliciting feedback from my colleagues. Colleagues were encouraged to read transcripts after all initial interviews were completed. Once they had affirmed the thematic analysis, major theme summaries were shared with participating couples via member checks, presenting partners with an opportunity to provide feedback on the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations (Daly, 2007). Although the findings are not free of bias, due to the emic nature of this phenomenological research, this study's confirmability is supported through the presentation of raw data and the clear analytical process describing the conclusions, interpretations, and recommendations of the author (Daly, 2007). As is true of most qualitative data, external validity or broad generalizations of the findings are limited for this small study of ten dyadic interviews. That said, the transferability of findings to other couples in other wilderness contexts has been supported by the inclusion of both purposive sampling and rich descriptions.

#### **Chapter IV: Findings**

Both Moustakas (1994) and van Manen (1990) suggest that findings from phenomenological research be preceded by a personal account of the phenomenon written by the researcher. Although I have participated in numerous wilderness experiences over the years, I found it challenging to identify only one story to use as my example. I finally elected the following shared wilderness experience because it fit with

my assumptions about the phenomenon while also encouraging personal reflection on the influence of shared wilderness experiences for other couples.

Laura and I had only been dating for six months when we decided to backpack the Superior Hiking Trail (SHT) together. The SHT is an arduous wilderness path connecting Duluth, MN with Ontario, Canada. It navigates rocky crags, river valleys, and secluded beaches. The SHT was intentionally designed to cross every high point and low point in the region, presumably in an attempt to compensate for Minnesota's lack of mountains. This fact is not lost on hikers who end up spending their days walking up steep hills only to walk directly back down the other side.

Being relatively experienced backpackers, Laura and I spent very little time preparing for this trip. After finishing a hectic work week, we frantically grabbed our backpacks, clothes, camp stove, tent, and headed out of town on a Friday afternoon in June of 2010. We planned to finalize our itinerary during the drive and to buy groceries in Duluth. Laura and I had been looking forward to this three-day trip for quite some time. Despite still being anxious from my stressful work and school situations, I could feel that things were beginning to change for the better the farther we drove North. Food in hand, we decided to head to the Onion River trailhead.

The Onion River forms a deep gorge as it flows into Lake Superior. The hiking trail and campsites along the river are surprisingly reminiscent of trips that we have taken in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado and Montana, places we often experience as sacred. Laura and I started hiking just as the sun was setting along

the ridge. The air was refreshingly cool and crisp; the birch trees were a deep shade of green. Our packs felt heavy as we settled into the hiking routine. The first few miles of wearing a backpack are always a little cumbersome for both of us. As such, we didn't talk too much, instead letting the evening breeze provide our entertainment.

By the time we made it to our first campsite, dusk was setting and Laura's sense of humor was in full effect. We were laughing, telling jokes, and slowly forgetting about the responsibilities and stressors we left back at home. I have a distinct memory from that night of sitting together by the fire enjoying our dinner as the stars began to shine through the cloudy night sky. Even though our meal of bean burritos sounds like nothing to write home about, it was an amazing feast for our taste buds. My food always seems to taste better in the woods. Relaxation led to conversation, which then led to intimacy. We cuddled together as the remaining embers turned from red to orange to grey. Future hopes were a staple of our evening dialogue. Laura talked about her dream vacation and I about my dream job. We fantasized about what life would be like for us in 5 years, 10 years. Satisfied with the day's events, we then made our way back to the tent for a solid night of rest.

The next day on the trail was exactly what we were looking for. No itinerary and no responsibilities. We only needed to remember to stay hydrated, everything else was superfluous. With an entire day of freedom and fun ahead of us, Laura and I opted for some quality self-care. I went fly fishing and trail running; she made a cup of tea and read her book in a hammock. Since we often

prefer to take different paces during our morning routines, this divide-and-conquer approach tends to work best during bouts of down time. We then met up for lunch and decided to do a 3-mile hike to a waterfall together before coming back to camp for dinner. Our conversation was jovial and light-hearted while on the hike. I remember Laura playfully pushing me into the river at one point. I then grabbed her and pulled her in with me. Laughter, splashing, and goosebumps ensued. After seeing the beautiful falls, we headed back to cook dinner and spend one more night in the woods before hiking out the next morning to return home.

Although I do not have too many other memories from this trip in particular, I have a distinct feeling that it cemented our relationship while also helping each of us de-stress and relax. Our conversations were about everything and nothing. We were lazy at times and sweaty at others. I remember the trip being a great experience that we both referenced for the next several years. Experiencing Laura in the woods on this trip helped me to better understand her personality, to have great conversations, and to play together. This shared wilderness experience also reminded me about how my own capacities for patience and affection are improved when I am able to decrease the amount of stress I carry. It is this lesson, along with many others, that have motivated us to continue seeking out shared wilderness experiences.

Before starting this research, the above story was an example of shared wilderness to me. I experienced the physical challenge, the relational connection, and the feelings of stress relief that all seemed to accompany time in nature for me. Anecdotally, I knew that this type of leisure activity had the potential to be greatly beneficial for individuals. I also

believed that, given the right attitude and environment, shared wilderness experiences had the potential to be incredibly beneficial for couples. Now that this study has been completed, understanding shared wilderness experiences through the data collected leads me to frame the phenomenon differently.

Based on findings from this research, the above story was an example of a positive shared wilderness experience because: I had meaningful conversation with my partner, was disconnected from technology, experienced opportunities for rest and rejuvenation, appreciated the beauty of nature, offered partner support during challenging times, and had authentic exchanges where being my true self inspired more intimate encounters with my partner. I experienced improvements to my level of optimism, openness, and patience. The wilderness area felt ‘bigger’ and ‘deeper’ than me, eliciting thoughts and feelings that were both philosophical and spiritual in nature. I experienced the stress-relieving benefits of preserved natural areas. I also experienced a sense of wonder and adventure while exploring untouched landscapes. In building fires, navigating trails, and filtering water, I provided a variety of unique types of care for my partner. These caregiving opportunities allowed me to reform the type of love and support I share as a partner while improving my own perceptions of self-efficacy. Wilderness tasks also allowed for cooperation and problem solving with my partner. All of these factors led to me feeling more emotionally connected to my wife, more appreciative of our time together in nature, and more excited about the relationship upon returning home.

### **Stories of Couples in Wilderness**

Twenty stories of shared wilderness experiences from ten couples were analyzed in this study. Every participant came to the interview prepared to tell their own story about a positive shared wilderness experience. First, five example stories are shared to introduce the phenomena. The number five has no relevance; these stories were simply selected because together they represented the broad array of locations and activities discussed by study participants. Example stories have been named based on a direct quote from that interview.

### **Example story 1: Caught in a cloud**

One couple who participated in this study decided to climb Mount Rainier three months into their relationship. They arrived near the tail end of a large storm and ended up postponing their first few days of hiking due to intense rain, instead soliciting route-finding advice from local rangers and playing board games in a bed and breakfast. When the weather cleared, they hit the trail. Unfortunately, the advice given to them from the park employees added an additional eight miles to their uphill journey. Another challenge during their climb was that they unknowingly divided camping gear and food relatively evenly, leaving the much smaller partner carrying an excessive amount of weight. Many tears were shed by one partner when both of these errors were realized simultaneously. After a few hours of emotional upheaval, they redistributed weight before continuing their hike through the fog to Camp Muir – the established basecamp that climbers stay at prior to summiting.

Seven hours of climbing through dense fog finally led them to Camp Muir. Clouds parted as they arrived, providing the first glimpse of the surrounding natural beauty. They took off their packs and hugged in celebration of their accomplishment.

Unfortunately, that joy was short-lived when a park ranger approached and informed them that the summit route was closed. A sense of defeat was palpable between them. What just happened? They had invested hours of training throughout the summer working on the skills and endurance needed for this summit. They also spent the majority of their savings on making this trip a reality. And now everything was lost.

The couple sat down in the snow together feeling dejected. As the minutes passed, one partner began singing softly. The song was a Celtic spiritual about walking in the air. And although the words were foreign, the message was exactly what the other partner needed for consolation. Within a few minutes they had begun strategizing how to make the most of their time left. That night consisted of a candlelit feast complete with storytelling and jokes under a clear night sky. The couple decided to hike back down to their car the next morning. But, instead of taking the route they followed up, they went *glissading* – a mountaineering term that loosely means ‘sledding’. Screams of joy and laughter ensued as they slid their way down 4,000 feet. And as they made their way back to the parking lot, plans were already in the works for a return trip.

### **Example story 2: Alone on the water**

One participant told a story about their time canoeing a small river in Western Wisconsin. The trip was very familiar to one partner and completely new to the other. Since that tended to be a successful dynamic in their relationship, they imagined this trip would work out just fine. The couple left work late on a summer Friday afternoon and drove two hours to the boat launch. Their plan was to paddle a few miles that night, camp, paddle the next day, camp one more night, and then get off the river on Sunday morning.

It was a beautiful July evening when they got into the water. Fireflies were glowing and frogs were chirping. Although they were only 100 feet from the highway, it felt like they were a world away from the stress of jobs and city life. The river was peaceful and quiet, streaming slowly along the sandy banks. The couple made it to their first campsite without seeing anyone else. They talked about how rejuvenating the solitude felt while eating their dinner. One bottle of wine and several shooting stars later, the couple decided to head to bed in their tent.

The next day was beautiful and sunny. A breakfast of eggs and coffee was served at the edge of the river. The couple then lounged in hammocks and read books for an hour before packing up camp and getting back into their canoe. Conversations included previous shared wilderness trips, future plans, and reflections on how great it is to spend time with a loved one in beautiful natural areas. Both partners specifically appreciated knowing that their partner was enjoying themselves, a thought that liberated them from caretaking or entertaining.

After another casual day of canoeing on the river, the couple made it to their second campsite. Having only passed two other boats, they reflected again on how great it was to be away from crowds. They each spent the next few hours reading before digging out the cooking supplies. After dinner, one partner left for the tent and returned with a surprise dessert. The two sat together on the bank eating chocolate cake and feeling lucky. They left camp the next morning and finished the remainder of their trip in similar style.

### **Example story 3: Hiking in paradise**

One participant told a story about their time hiking in Hawaii. The trip was a postponed honeymoon taken six months after their wedding. In the midst of relaxing beaches and posh resorts, this couple decided to take a hike along the rugged coastline to see a remote village near the island's tip. The hike was surprisingly strenuous. Many sections of the trail were washed away, requiring the couple to hold onto each other for safety and stability. Despite the conditions, the couple persevered and arrived at their destination five hours after beginning their hike.

The remote beach was beautiful. The couple described it as a place that surpassed all of their expectations. They sat in silence appreciating the majesty and splendor of the environment. One of the partners decided to go swimming a bit later. Unfortunately, his glasses were washed away by a giant wave that slammed him into the sand. Luckily it was only his pride that was injured. Being the more experienced camper, he ended up having to give instructions to his partner about how to properly filter water, how to light the camp stove, and how to make the meal that they had carried in. During their dinner, the couple talked about the contrasting beauty and potential destruction that surrounded them. The conversation was philosophical, spiritual, and ecological, leaving both partners inspired for the remainder of their Hawaiian honeymoon.

After eating, the couple packed up their gear and headed back to town. Since the more experienced member still was unable to see well, the other partner took on the responsibility of navigating for both of them. Although both partners referenced this unique experience as a challenge, they both also commented on the value they found in the natural beauty, the physical rigor, and the role reversal. As their headlamps danced on the trail, they hiked through the evening and into the night. The return hike ended up

taking an additional 3 hours. Finally, they emerged from the woods and joined the path that would take them back to their hotel.

#### **Example story 4: Northern lakes adventure**

One participant told a story about their canoe trip to the Boundary Waters while pregnant. They planned a very easy trip in order to make sure that things did not get too risky. Since the pregnant partner was not able to carry any camping gear, the other partner ended up doing a lot of heavy lifting. This took a toll on his arthritis and ended up with the couple changing their itinerary to include additional time for rest.

They canoed through the first lake, finished the first portage, and were well on their way into the second lake when one partner realized they had misplaced their car keys. Knowing that their wedding rings, wallets, and phones were in the car, it was a big deal to make sure the keys were found. The couple backtracked all of their steps over the next several hours with no luck. Feeling defeated, they finally decided to continue on with their trip in order to make camp before nightfall.

Clouds began to roll in as they set up camp and started making dinner. The couple ended up eating dinner in the tent as a cool rain fell on the area. Although they each believed the other to be optimistic, both partners admitted to feeling very sad about the loss of their keys. They decided to wake up early and re-trace their steps one more time. This plan provided enough solace for a good night's rest. The next morning they left camp and made their way back toward the parking lot. The plan was to start at the beginning and slowly comb their steps back towards the campsite. Fortunately, upon arriving at their car they noticed that the keys had been set on the windshield. Some other canoer found them on the trail and was kind enough to bring them back to the vehicle.

Both partners were elated by the expression of kindness. They were also comforted in knowing that their valuables were safe. Keys in hand, they returned to their campsite for another two days of relaxation.

The next afternoon a massive thunderstorm rolled into the area. Being on a rocky peninsula, the couple had to secure their belongings or risk having them blown away by the wind. They cooked dinner as quickly as they could, but were unable to beat the rain. Thunder and lightning crashed around them while they huddled in their tent. As the storm grew in intensity, they gave up on dinner and decided to play cards together. They joked about how the situation was at once scary, intense, boring, and foreign. The storm finally passed and they were able to eat dinner around midnight. The couple paddled out the next day. Memories from this trip ended up playing an unexpectedly significant role for this couple six months later.

#### **Example story 5: Sanctuary in the mountains**

Another participant told a story about a backpacking trip in Montana. The trip took place during a very tumultuous time: one partner was simultaneously dealing with job loss and a recent disheartening diagnosis for both herself and her mother. As such, the trip was seen as an opportunity to escape these challenges and simply be together in nature.

Upon arriving at the trailhead, they found the river flooded and their bridge to be impassable. The couple spent the next four hours bushwhacking through willows trying to locate another place to safely cross and begin their hike. They finally found a shallow location, took off their boots, and waded through the water together. Five more miles of hiking brought the couple to their secluded campsite at the foot of a mountain lake. Both

partners described the area as breathtaking. Luckily, they had the next three days to hike, read, fish, and adventure together. One partner was able to catch a number of trout, allowing them to have a feast for dinner on their second night camping. The other partner spent time catching up on sleep and reading books in a nearby hammock. That night, the couple huddled together quietly under a blanket and watched the stars come up from behind the mountain peak.

The next few days on this trip provided them an opportunity to have space from their troubles with work and health. This distance allowed them to be reflective, supportive, and patient in ways that neither had been at home. Feeling refreshed, they packed up their camping gear and hiked back to the trailhead. The river had subsided enough that they were able to safely cross, allowing the stress-free feelings of rejuvenation to persevere into their drive home.

### **Themes from Stories of Shared Wilderness**

The context of shared wilderness experiences for couples varied dramatically across the ten dyadic interviews. Wilderness experiences were shared by couples in county preserves, state parks, national parks, and federal wilderness areas. Stories told by couples reflected experiences lasting between 4 hours to 7 days that took place anywhere from 4 months to 10 years prior to our interview. Some couples reflected on positive car-camping experiences where amenities were provided and everything went smoothly. Other couples reflected on deep backcountry experiences where life was challenging and struggles were a daily occurrence. While all of the couples spoke about a specific experience shared with their partner, one participant's story involved a trip where other family members were also present. Despite contextual differences, all stories had a

predictable pattern in which shared wilderness experiences prompted unique individual and relational shifts, leading to a variety of positive outcomes. The following themes provide insight into the perceived value of shared wilderness experiences for couples.

- 1) Disconnection leads to connection: partners explained how disconnecting from technology, jobs, responsibilities, and everyday stressors allowed them to be fully present with their partner and to connect in deeper ways.
- 2) Rest and rejuvenation benefits relationships: couples experienced unique opportunities for rest and relaxation, leaving them energized about their relationship and rejuvenated when they returned to their normal routines.
- 3) Challenge leads to partner support: partners explained how challenges during wilderness experiences helped to bond them together, provided unique opportunities to be caring and supportive of their partner, and prepared them for future hardships in life.
- 4) Beauty and spirituality lead to relational connection: partners explained the importance of appreciating nature and valuing areas not damaged by humans. Some couples mentioned that this experience of nature's beauty was awe-inspiring, bonding, and even had spiritual or religious implications.
- 5) Experience of authentic self leads to intimacy: couples explained how wilderness experiences drew out their true identity. Rustic, simplistic, and vulnerable settings enabled joy, laughter, and play. Couples also explained how this experience of authentic identity in their partner led to feelings of attraction and intimacy.

### **Wilderness experiences leading to connection**

Shared wilderness trips were found to be experienced as opportunities for connection between partners. Many participants began their story by describing how their shared wilderness experience came in the midst of stressful life events. Whether it was the strain of a challenging job or the heartbreak of a recent cancer diagnosis, participants saw their wilderness trip as an opportunity for “liberation from schedules, stress, and busyness.” Although this stress-relief was often conceptualized at the individual level, participants also discussed a number of couple-level implications. Participants talked about the value of disconnecting from technology while in wilderness, saying that it led to them having “no distractions”, a “hell of a lot simpler lifestyle”, and an “opportunity to unplug, take a breath, and just be present together.” “When we step away from our daily distractions, we realize that there’s nothing pulling us away from this place...and it allows us to focus on each other and the time we have together in nature.” One partner remarked that when he intentionally sets aside time to take trips in nature with his wife, “that is where the intimacy piece comes in...now you have my full attention...I’m listening.” Another partner said that time in wilderness rekindles romance. “It makes me feel closer to him...to be able to get out and have these experiences in nature...you fall back in love and realize that this is the husband you wanted in life.” In some form, all participants remarked about how leaving daily stressors, disconnecting from technology, and going to the wilderness together led to them experiencing a deeper relational connection. One participant summed this up by saying, “to remain stable as a couple, we need to disconnect from everything else so that we can connect with each other...free up all those neurons and simply spend time together.” Another participant offered this

detailed explanation on how his personal transformation in nature positively impacted his relationship.

I feel more free on these trips, like an unfettered person. Free of the things that weigh me down the most. My job, my email addiction, the stress of raising kids, obligations with our home, and my other commitments. It gives us a chance to be removed and separate from those things. And, because of that, it makes us more available to each other. I feel more available to you when we are camping [silence]. And I notice that you are the person you want to be [Melissa laughs]. And together...I think that we get a chance to fall back in love. Those are the experiences that I yearn for...the things that I consider our best moments together (*Josh*).

Josh's wife Melissa echoed many of the above sentiments by saying "I love who we become when we go camping. Those moments mean the world to me." She went on to say that their trips to state parks provide the break they need to continue connecting as a couple.

**Conversation.** Connection for many participants took the form of conversation. Some participants described their communication during wilderness trips as "uninhibited" and "broader than normal". Conversations were able to go longer and be more in-depth than those that took place in everyday contexts. A freedom from technological distractions was often cited as a key factor contributing to longer conversations. Conversations were also improved because partners felt "more reflective" and "more fully present with each other." Participants commented on how wilderness experiences seemed to enable heightened communication abilities in their partners. "It's

as if he can hear me better...or understand me better while we are camping.” “We’re not simply rehashing our days with each other” one participant remarked. “Instead, we set down our gadgets, we zoom out from little details and talk about things on a much wider scope. And I know that she is really listening.” Another participant said that wilderness trips gave both of them a chance to step back and evaluate how their relationship was going. This reflective and evaluative experience led to meaningful conversations and bonding opportunities. With plenty of time to connect and reconnect, many participants believed that “deep relational connections come quickly while in nature.”

**Play.** Relational connection also took the form of play during shared wilderness experiences. Many participants remarked about how they witnessed their partner being “playful”, “goofy”, and even “childlike” while in the wilderness together. When asked about this, participants often responded by saying that their playful side came out when they were given the chance to disconnect from everyday stressors. Instead of “carrying my daily burdens”, one participant felt liberated to “simply be a kid again.” Jamie observed this behavior in her partner, Robert, while hiking in Wisconsin.

He’s always the adventurer...not risks...but he’s pushing boundaries when we are out. He always brings the laughter and humor, which reminds me to stay lighthearted...which I really appreciate. He’s really just a kid at heart [laughs]. You can still see the curiosity inside of him, which is fun because I always tend to be the cautious one. But when we get into the woods and he stops carrying all of his work stress, he lightens up...it seems like he’s playing all the time. And Robert’s lightheartedness helps me to relax and be present with him (*Jamie*).

Interestingly, her partner Robert had the following remark to the above comment.

I think Jamie explores and plays more than she gives herself credit for. She's right that I tend to push more boundaries, but we're great at being big kids together.

Our eyes were wide open on this last trip in the winter. Who knew that winter in the North woods was so beautiful? We were taking all kinds of crazy pictures together, throwing snowballs, jumping in drifts of powder and making snow angels...all while laughing together. It's so good for us to have these types of trips. They're essential to our stability and sanity as a couple (*Robert*).

In each story, shared wilderness experiences were described as unique opportunities for spending time together as a couple. When both partners have a shared appreciation of nature, these trips have the potential to develop deep connections between partners, to be monumentally positive, and to sustain relationships. The connections formed in couples were seen as unique and distinct from those available during daily routines. This was especially the case for couples who had memorable or unexpected moments while in wilderness together. "After our canoe flipped, we needed each other to stay afloat and to keep track of all our gear. It was an opportunity to develop trust and respect for one another." Another participant, Cindy, detailed her experience by saying, "I remember how beautiful Holden Lake looked, how perfect the breeze felt, and how pretty the wildflowers were. It helped open me up to pay more attention to Daniel. It's exactly what we were looking for." She went on to say that this remarkable wilderness setting helped her to "appreciate and understand how lucky I am to have Daniel in my life...what a gift." Her husband, Daniel, echoed this sentiment by saying "Our connection is the most solid when we're in the woods together...it's as simple as that." Overall,

shared wilderness experiences presented themselves as opportunities for couples to form lasting relational connections.

### **Rest and rejuvenation benefits relationships**

Shared wilderness trips were found to be experienced as opportunities for rest and rejuvenation. Beginning with the previous theme focused on disconnecting from daily stressors, participants went on to explain that wilderness trips also provided them with a “unique experience of relaxation”, “a calming sanctuary to recharge in”, and “opportunities for rest and rejuvenation”. “It’s not simply about having distance from my everyday baggage”, one participant explained, “it’s about getting time with my husband in an environment that breeds peace and rejuvenation in us.” Time away from normal stressors combined with the restorative qualities of natural environments led participants to see their shared wilderness experiences as beneficial individually and relationally. “There is something about time, perspective, retreat, sanctuary...to experience calm amidst everyday chaos...to be personally restored by nature’s beauty...and to have that directly affect me and my husband (*Sarah*).” In thinking about how wilderness trips recharge his relationship, Carl believed his capacities to give and receive love are even impacted.

It’s good for me and good for us. I get a lot of rejuvenation, which makes me a better partner and really just a better person to be around. It even works this way on trips that don’t go as planned. When I can get a break from the stress from my daily life, I’m better because of it. Beyond that, the natural environment brings out a side of me that I enjoy. I’m more reflective and thoughtful. I’m more easily

loveable. And I'm more loving. It ends up being really good for us...especially when we go together. And then we go home happier because of it. (*Carl*)

Carl's partner Cathy reiterated these ideas by saying:

It's true that he is much better off when we are away from civilization. It's like he can finally catch his breath. And it means that he's nicer to me, and he's nicer to himself. These restful moments are what give us the energy we need in our daily lives (*Cathy*).

As shown in Cathy's statement above, couples talked about the capacity of shared wilderness experiences to leave them "feeling rejuvenated" in a way that empowered them to "return home and confront the daily grind with a newfound vigor." One participant explained how these trips help provide the restoration needed to return to challenging situations in her daily life.

But going into this trip there was a lot of stress. I had just lost my job...and my mom's recent cancer diagnosis wasn't too fun. So it was nice to go out, relax, and just sit there for a few days and physically rest. We sleep a ton when we backpack. Our times backpacking are hands down my favorite times together. All of those experiences are the things that I most look forward to and look back on most fondly...and if I am thinking about wishing I had a break, I'll think about these wilderness trips to give me solace and help me through. There have been many points in my life where things were so challenging that we had to go backpacking...it was the only way that I could make it...it provides that burst of energy to rejuvenate life for another year or so. And then after the trip is over I have the strength to return to my daily crap (*Cindy*).

In each story, shared wilderness trips were described as unique opportunities for resting and rejuvenating together as a couple. In addition to distancing themselves from their normal stressors, participants commented about how natural areas also had the capacity to bring zest and light back into their lives. Environmental elements that evoked this response included: lakes, rivers, sunsets, mountain tops, wildflowers, wildlife, and waterfalls. Stories of shared wilderness experiences led to unique experiences of relaxation, spurred personal reflection, allowed partners to feel even more at ease with their loved one, and rejuvenated couples to return to their daily responsibilities at home.

### **Challenge leads to partner support**

Shared wilderness trips for these couples were experienced as opportunities for expressing and experiencing partner support. As understood by participants, partner support was conceptualized as “trusting that we are in this together”, “showing respect and patience towards each other when it was hard”, and “knowing she is there to help if things go badly.” Many of the stories told for this research focused on a trip that happened early on in relationships. As such, storytellers often explained that “taking this trip together felt like a really big deal.”

**Vulnerability.** Hesitations about bad weather, wild animals, and a lack of physical grooming opportunities led partners towards “feeling very vulnerable and exposed while camping together.” Fortunately, participants also explained that these feelings of vulnerability often resulted in expressions of partner support, which then led to unexpected bonding opportunities. Mira explained how her partner’s supportive presence impacts their shared wilderness experiences.

On our bigger trips, when I have had moments of stress and anxiety, Alex has been a calming and reassuring presence. He's been able to play the role of the calm one. And I feel like in those times when I've been stressed out by things like bears...he is very competent and thoughtful. It's the way he does all of life. Alex does our money because he is competent and thoughtful and not overwhelmed easily. It's the same thing in the woods. But I end up appreciating it more because I am tired...or cold...or cranky [laughs]. And somehow my neediness lets him do his thing...and ends up bringing us even closer together (*Mira*).

Mira's husband Alex commented on this by saying:

Mira does get pretty worked up sometimes when we are out in the woods. It's like there is something about the unknown that lets her imagination run wild.

Fortunately, she is also pretty receptive to my attempts to comfort her and calm her down. I think we end up balancing each other really well (*Alex*).

Another participant told a story about her partner's supportive presence while she was feeling defeated. She explained that she was crying because the trip had become unexpectedly challenging. As things continued to fall apart, she recounted a "cherished memory" of her partner.

While we were trudging up that damn snowfield, it was awful. My pack felt so heavy. And I was just hating it, hating everything. But then James starting singing this song really softly. The song was about flying... about walking...about dancing in the air. It was some Celtic spiritual. I don't even really know what it was about. But it sounded so beautiful. I was so thankful for him...and for a little while I wasn't as miserable. And he kept singing really softly as I sat there

bawling. It was so embarrassing. So I thought to myself ‘I’m really glad that I am here with James right now – because things just wouldn’t be as much fun or as easy without him.’ I still love the sound of that song...even though I still don’t know what it’s about [laughs] (*Heidi*).

Heidi’s boyfriend James responded to this story by saying:

I don’t even really know where that song came from. It wasn’t some deep conscious choice to start singing it. It was the song that my mom would sing when I would wake up after having bad dreams. I think it was supposed to help me get back to sleep. Anyways, I was thinking about how much she was hurting and it just started coming out. And then it seemed like Heidi really appreciated it, so I kept singing. I was trying my best to keep her happy, especially because I have so much more mountaineering experience than she does (*James*).

**Level of difficulty.** As one may have expected, participants tended to have differing views regarding the amount of physical and mental challenge they seek in shared wilderness experiences. People with significant amounts of previous wilderness experience often sought out arduous or challenging trips. These experiences took place in mountainous or backcountry settings far removed from resources or modern conveniences. One participant believed this type of challenge to be an essential component of shared wilderness experiences.

The hiking here was really hard. We had to do a lot of scrambling to get to the lake since the trail was full of brush and down trees. We were both pretty tired and grumpy and scraped up from the journey...it was hard. But part of the adventure is the journey. And even though that part wasn’t particularly fun, it

didn't negatively affect the rest of our time. It should be expected to have that type of challenge or hardship while in nature. It's not supposed to be easy. But I think there is a lot of value in experiencing and navigating the challenges together (*Sarah*).

Couples that planned difficult trips had several overlapping explanations for the value they ascribed to the challenges. Some people said that "easy trips just aren't as satisfying" and that "trips that are too casual can be really disappointing." "When you share a common struggle, especially in an unknown environment, it brings you closer together...that's the point." One participant described the value of challenging wilderness trips by saying, "the most important part of hard wilderness experiences is that we really do have to rely on each other. If we can't do that, we're in trouble." Another participant, after rehashing a minor injury that took place while cooking dinner in the mountains, explained that challenges make shared wilderness experiences memorable. "Anytime we work through a struggle or a challenge or an injury or something that we are at odds about...but still have each other to rely on. Its relationship building and its memorable (*Jenna*)." John, Jenna's husband, agreed by saying, "Life takes work and love takes work. Things that are memorable and important are worth the extra effort they require."

**Caregiving.** In several of the stories shared for this research, the more experienced partner cared for their less experienced partner during challenging situations. Experienced partners commonly offered physical types of support to their partner. Care took the form of cooking, fire building, route finding, carrying more weight, and completing more of the chores required at camp. Participants with less experience often

commented on the admiration and respect they felt when seeing how competent their partner was in the wilderness.

My respect for you grew going out in the woods because you knew what to do and you had all the stuff. You'd done it so much, so it was really fun to see you in action...in your element...and be a part of it with you (*Cara*).

Cara's husband Sean responded to the above quote by saying:

It's just sweet to be out in creation with you, out in the wildness of the Earth together. It was truly a pleasure to share this adventure with Cara, to take care of her, and to see her thrive in an environment that has come to mean so much (*Sean*).

Partners with more previous wilderness experience also reflected on the value of introducing their partner to something they love. Those with lots of previous experience often referenced how important it was to participate in shared wilderness trips with their partner, to teach them the necessary skills, and hopefully to help them develop a level of appreciation for trips into nature. One participant summed this up in the midst of his story about a recent hiking trip.

But since the experience was hard and also enjoyable...there's the subconscious knowing that we shared in that type of experience with each other...and how important it was for me to share it with Sarah. I loved getting to teach Sarah how to problem solve the broken stove and how to light a fire with wet wood. And the outdoors are a really big part of me. So if you don't know the outdoors side of me, you really don't know all of me. The construct of being outside and sharing these experiences is really impactful for us. It makes me feel like she knows me better.

And at some point I'm hoping that she begins to enjoy them in a way that makes sense for her (*Mark*).

His partner responded to this description by explaining her perspective of partner support during challenges in wilderness.

Mark is very loving in these situations...since he wants me to love the outdoors as much as he does. So he's always willing to do anything I'm up for. And we end up getting to spend a lot of time together dealing with hard stuff in the woods. But I always feel safe with Mark, which is important for me when we are sleeping in weird places. I kind of like it when he takes care of me [laughs] (*Sarah*).

Some couples picked trips that were beyond both of their comfort zones. When recounting their experience climbing in Utah, one couples described their situation as “collectively dealing with massive limitations in skill.” After getting lost, they ran out of food and water while day hiking and ended up scrambling down steep rock faces to make it back to the trailhead. The experience was both terrifying and exhilarating. “There is something humbling about having to totally and completely rely on your spouse. The wilderness doesn't just let you say that you trust them, it makes you prove it.”

Other participants looked for a wilderness experience that was “simple, straightforward, and relaxing.” These experiences took place in parks and nature preserves that were easily accessible from urban areas. Although these trips appeared to differ drastically from wilderness-based experiences, participants said that they can be equally as challenging “if you don't have any previous experience outdoors.” Partner support on these trips took the form of “cuddling by the campfire”, “opportunities to practice staying calm in weird situations”, “deep conversations about hard stuff”, and

“her willingness to simply sit in silence with me.” This type of emotional caregiving differed from the primarily physical types of support offered during strenuous experiences. One participant explained how she felt cared for during simple car-camping trips with her husband.

When we are in the woods, it’s like he’s really listening to me. And since the trip isn’t very hard, he lets me complain about the things that are hard at home. And, for me, getting a chance to vent that stuff while relaxing in the woods is one of the main reasons that I am still married...and employed [laughs] (*Cindy*).

Cindy’s husband Daniel echoed the above sentiments by saying,

She thinks that I’m a better listener while camping, which is really great, because I think the same thing about her. There is something about Cindy that changes when we get to the woods. Something that makes her calmer and happier. Something that also helps her to be kinder and more supportive of me [laughs] (*Daniel*).

**Common goals.** Challenges during shared wilderness experiences also united couples by providing achievable common goals. “Common goals bring you closer...they are the glue in an otherwise disjointed world...they really help us stay focused as a couple.” One participant remarked on the importance of challenges by saying that there is immense value in learning and figuring out new things together. This participant went on to explain that taking risks, being uncomfortable, and feeling vulnerable were some of the key aspects of challenges that helped him rely more on his partner. Another participant explained that challenges “allow us to work together on things we enjoy.” Challenges were viewed as an opportunity to demonstrate strength and optimism amidst adversity,

aspects that several participants believed were “necessary for the long-term survival of our relationship.” “The bonding that comes from enduring and overcoming hardship in the woods is indescribable...it qualitatively impacts the way we love each other...it makes us a better couple.” Another participant described her experience of goals and partner support in this way:

I don't know if these traits in Robert that I appreciate so much wouldn't be true if we didn't go camping, but it gives us extra time and space to practice. And, since we are often faced with challenges that we have to figure out together, it ends up always being a good context to remember how to care for each other (*Jamie*).

Jamie's husband Robert responded to the above statement by saying:

I do think that we are different as a couple because we seek out these experiences. They teach us how to be gentle, to problem solve as a team, how to laugh and have fun, and how to keep life simple. They also help us find meaning in the small things. Each of these lessons carries over with us when we go back home, helping us to be better together as a couple (*Robert*).

**Lessons for home.** The experience of navigating challenges in wilderness often translated to increases in partner support during challenges at home. Several participants commented on the lasting implications of shared wilderness experiences by saying “we are stronger because of these trips.” One partner summed his experience up by saying, “One of the advantages of marrying a therapist is her ability to do post-mortem analyses. It lets us use negative experiences to move our relationship forward.” After their failed summit attempt at Mount Rainier, another participant said, “If we can do this, then we can do anything.” They went on to say that lessons from their wilderness adventures help

them to be more patient, loving, and supportive during everyday life. “These hard trips, even the failures, help me to be the boyfriend I think I should be.” A different participant referenced the importance of partner support as part of her reflection on their recent backpacking trip.

Life is hard and marriage is hard. When I look back on this trip, it was a few hours that were very very hard. But I think looking back on the way we handled it can give us confidence that we still had a good time even though things were hard. The way we treated each other at our lowest point...we still treated each other well. Josh was concerned about me and I was concerned about him. We treated each other well. And that is an important lesson to continue living in our day-to-day lives (*Melissa*).

Melissa’s husband Josh then chimed in by saying:

Tough camping and hiking trips help remind me how important it is to pay attention to Melissa’s needs. She comes across as so competent, so put together, that I sometimes forget to look for ways that I can help her. But trips like these teach me how important it is to always be looking out for her. I think that starting to do this behavior in the woods helps it become an easier habit to develop when we go home. It means I have real and concrete ways to express my love for her, which is something I never really focused on before (*Josh*).

Another couple harnessed powerful memories of their time together in the Boundary Waters to navigate labor and delivery challenges the following year. They each explained how this memory of partner support while camping together helped them to escape some of the difficulties that accompanied their child’s birth.

I was pregnant while we were canoeing, so the crazy bad weather felt even scarier than it normally would have. When we saw the storm coming, we gobbled up our food super fast, then got the bear back hung just in time to rush back into our tent. It was lightening all around us. And as the storm kept building and building, we decided to play cards to take our minds off of it. We called the card game ‘rummy under the thunderdome’. Later, when [child’s name] was being born, I had preeclampsia and it was a shitty and scary experience. And so we were in the hospital, playing a lot of rummy in the hospital, playing it ‘under the thunderdome’. We were waiting to get induced and it took forever. It was really painful, really scary, super boring. Just like when we were camping. And I had all these hopes of having a medication-free child birth, which wasn’t going to happen. But it was nice to have Alex there when [child’s name] was born. He was so calm and present, just like when we were in the Boundary Waters. I love that he can have fun in shitty situations (*Mira*).

Mira’s husband, Alex, agreed with the above statements by saying,

It is cool that we can have fun together, that we can care for each other, and that we can make sweet memories when we’re canoeing. It’s also really cool that these experiences can motivate and empower us when life gets hard back at home. She’s right in saying that our time at the hospital was rough. But she’s also right in saying that the lessons learning in the Boundary Waters helped to lighten the load (*Alex*).

Cara also commented on the impact of partner support during shared wilderness experiences on childbirth. She said that her memories of the beautiful beach in Hawaii

they hiked to on their honeymoon “is all I could picture when I was having birth complications.” She went on to describe the memory as “my understanding of paradise...exactly where I needed to see myself...so that I didn’t focus too much on the negative and the pain I was experiencing.” During her longer than expected labor, Cara asked her partner, Sean, to retell stories and share photos from this trip in order to alleviate stress and anxiety. After safely delivering her child, she vowed to return to the beach with her entire family “once our little boy is old enough that he will understand how important places like that can be.”

Overall, challenges were commonly seen as positive aspects of wilderness experiences because of their ability to stimulate partner support. Challenging shared wilderness experiences helped to teach couples problem solving skills and coping mechanisms while improving their sense of confidence once they have returned home. Although the level of severity and strenuousness fluctuated greatly between stories, all participants commented on the importance of having their partner present during times of need, having an appropriate degree of difficulty, caregiving for each other, and uniting behind a common goal. These moments helped to affirm the relationship, improve their perception of collective efficacy, deepen a sense of trust and respect, and prepare the couple for future hardships.

### **Beauty and spirituality leads to relational connection**

Many participants in this study referenced the aesthetic qualities of nature. In fact, textual analysis revealed that every participant used either “beauty” or “beautiful” to describe a natural environment at least once while retelling their shared wilderness experience. Nature’s beauty was seen as unique, wonderful, and awesome. Participants

talked about importance of seeing and experiencing beautiful places, saying that time in these areas provided them with both inspiration and a sense of pleasure. Preserved natural areas were seen as places that “instantly elicit a sense of reverence simply because they are so breathtaking.” “The wonder of what is right in front of you is all that we need to be focused on...so being able to do that together is important.”

In addition to their aesthetic value, natural areas were also seen as beautiful because they were rare, untouched, and undisturbed by people. Stories shared for this research often focused on the value that remoteness and solitude added to their time in wilderness. “Since they are places that few get to see, it is easy to have a unique experience of beauty while enjoying them.” The opportunity to experience preserved natural areas often had profound impacts on the trip participants. “It spurs reflection and creativity and humility and honesty all at once.” Stories focused on how an awareness of nature’s beauty led to a sense of appreciation for wild places. One participant also explained how wilderness areas tend to be centering and grounding, reminding him of his place in the world.

The places we like to go to are beautiful with low population density, somewhat secluded, and not super far away. They are gorgeous places. It gives us a feeling of space while being out in nature...so we feel like we are participating...a larger sense of participation in the world. So that you can realize...if you stay in your house all day, you forget not only what the stars look like at night, but also that there is a lot going on in the world that doesn’t involve humans [laughs]. This is an important reminder for me to hang on to. It also helps me to remember that the

stressful things in my life are actually really small in the larger scope. The beauty of nature is my most effective source for centering myself (*Carl*).

Carl's wife, Cathy, chimed in by saying:

When Carl and I put on our backpacks and disappear into the woods, it is like a weight is lifted off of each of us and we are finally able to see how beautiful the world is. This revelation is startling and inspiring. It catches me off guard every time – the world is just that beautiful! It is really important for me to experience these emotions with Carl, it bonds us together in powerful ways (*Cathy*).

Another participant described her experience of nature as being both beautiful and humbling. She went on to explain that preserved natural areas provide her with a sense of wonder and inspiration that carries over into her relationship.

The mountains of Western Washington are just inspiring. They are rugged and remote. They have these snowy tops with beautiful little alpine lakes all over the valleys. They are so steep and rocky and seemingly impenetrable. But then there's this little trail that you can walk that slowly opens them up to you. It's at once inspiring since the whole world feels open to you...and it's also humbling since you feel so small in the midst of everything. When I'm in those mountains, I can actually feel their beauty. I feel it here [points to chest]. It is calming and inspiring. It gets me to relax and work hard at the same time. And it ends up positively impacting our relationship – since I am less of a nutcase when we are out there [laughs]. The beauty of nature is what does it for me. It's a big part of what sustains us, what keeps us together (*Cindy*).

Cindy's husband Daniel nodded and smiled throughout this conversation. When asked what he was thinking, Daniel simply said, "She's right. Everything Cindy just said is spot on."

When talking about nature's beauty, many partners went on to explain that preserved wilderness areas often elicited spiritual and/or religious thoughts and feelings. "The beauty of creation is unmatched...which makes it easy to appreciate God more in the mountains." Participants talked about the importance of "being in creation", "being at one with creation", and "being immersed in God's beautiful world." All of these comments focused on the spiritual value of preserved wilderness landscapes. Participants commented on spiritual experiences most often while viewing mountains, lakes, rivers, and wildlife. One participant said that "rugged natural areas have a distinctly spiritual element to them...they are like rejuvenation for my soul." Another participant, while retelling the story of his backpacking trip in Montana, explained that his religious faith actually peaks while in the wilderness.

Faith is a huge part of my life. At least I want it to be all of the time...and work sometimes gets in the way [laughs]. But when we are hiking or camping, faith just seems to come easier. It's like I can see God more clearly...or focus more on my part in faith when we are in a beautiful chunk of woods. And the mountains are just inspiring. When we are in the mountains, we feel close to God and close to his creation. It's just what works best for me. And maybe that's why it's also when we work best together. I can't wait until we can go back out together [laughs]

*(John).*

John's wife Jenna jumped in by saying,

I can really notice a difference in John's faith when we are in wilderness areas. He is more attentive to the ways that God is moving in the world. He's more open to talking about faith with me. And I think it is just a different level of realness for him – that God is somehow more visible in nature. It's definitely one part of why our relationship is strongest when in nature (*Jenna*).

The spiritual implications of wilderness areas were often understood to be larger than any one particular religious tradition. “Although I'm Christian, I don't think of the wilderness as simply being a place where Christian's experience beauty. It is much more all-inclusive.” One partner said that “time in nature induces an experience of enlightenment regardless of religious affiliation.” Stories that mentioned spirituality or religion tended to explain the experience by saying that nature elicits their spiritual side. “There is just something so compelling about nature's beauty that you can't help but think deeply and wax poetically. Nature makes people spiritual beings...and spiritual beings are better lovers (*Sarah*).” Another participant described her experience of beauty and spirituality in nature by explaining that the qualities she experiences in wilderness areas are powerful enough to be universal.

Being in the woods of Northern Minnesota, it is that ‘bigger than yourself’ feeling. You could go somewhere beautiful, like go to Miami and sit on a beach surrounded by hotels...and you could think that is really beautiful. But realizing that where we went was untouched by humans...it feels so much bigger and more beautiful. It's reassuring that there are places that haven't been impacted too much by people. I think I would tell people that this experience of beauty is universal. That's right, universal! [laughs] Yes, there is subjectivity to it. But how

can you not see that our campsite by the river is beautiful? Being at one with creation and being part of the Earth...that's part of my experience of faith. As opposed to just being on the Earth, being in it is different. Tactile, sensory, intimate. That's my definition of a spiritual experience (*Laura*).

Laura's boyfriend, David, agree with the above statements, adding,

There is something uniquely magical and spiritual and beautiful about nature.

There's no way around that. It's like the beauty overflows into us, making our relationship stronger or more beautiful [laughs].

Overall, participants explained that natural settings were inspiring and stress-relieving. The beauty of preserved natural areas spurred reflection and encouraged conversation between partners. Nature's beauty was also linked to spiritual and religious experiences for a number of participants. Focusing on solitary experiences in areas unchanged by humans, these stories consistently led to participants expressing appreciation for nature, deepened relational connections, and excitement about future wilderness trips.

### **Experience of authentic self leads to intimacy**

Shared wilderness trips were found to be experienced as opportunities for personal and relational growth. As understood by participants, time in nature enabled partners to act in ways that were more authentic than some of their typical daily behaviors. Several stories mentioned that everyday behavior is influenced by stressors that require a variety of unhealthy coping mechanisms. One example of this was told by a participant who explained that his work stress leads him to watch television as a coping behavior, which then influences his interest in connecting with his partner. "It's like I just

don't have the attention span to really listen to her." Since wilderness experiences remove both the daily stressors and the daily coping mechanisms, many participants said that these trips were opportunities to get more in touch with their real self. "Being in nature allows me to be me...with no pretense, no attitude, no fancy clothes or make-up, and no agenda forcing my mind to be somewhere else." Other participants explained that they felt most connected with themselves while on wilderness trips. "It's as if I understand myself better when we are out backpacking. I don't know why. I just feel more real...and more in tune with myself."

Wilderness experiences encouraged participants to "be a better person", "be a better partner", and "be who you are supposed to be." One partner explained that she feels a sense of freedom from living into this true identity. Another partner explained that the opportunity to feel a sense of mastery or accomplishment while on these trips enabled him to feel proud and confident, feelings not often experienced at home.

It's nice to be able to be really good at something. The world we live in doesn't always allow you to be great at anything...but when I'm in the woods I feel like 'yeah, I can do this'. And it changes me (*Alex*).

Alex's wife, Mira, remarked on this by saying,

It's true, I do notice a difference in Alex's confidence when we go camping or canoeing. He holds himself prouder or stronger or something. Whatever it is, it definitely makes him more attractive [laughs] (*Mira*).

Overall, this newfound sense of self in wilderness was viewed as a positive experience for participants. One participant summed it up by saying, "It's good for me as an individual and that's a great place to start in life."

**Childlikeness.** Part of the individual self that commonly arose in stories was a sense of childlikeness. Participants talked about the freedom they had to “just be a kid” while participating in shared wilderness trips. This freedom was facilitated by opportunities for exploring and discovery. As previously mentioned, trips were disconnected from the stressors and busyness associated with everyday life. Participants were also influenced by natural settings that inspired “awe and creativity.” As such, many stories explained how “laughter comes more easily and smiles come cheaper when in the woods.”

When I am out there camping, I get the chance to be goofy. I create funny characters...not sure where they come from, but it seems like my imagination runs in overdrive. So I’m being goofy and it leads me to be more open-minded about exploring and having adventures. And I make up the funniest things in the woods...not sure what it is, but something about being there just makes it easier to laugh and be open and honest. It lets me feel like a kid again (*David*).

David’s girlfriend, Laura, commented on this by saying:

David does get really silly when we go camping. He makes up games, creates adventures, builds things out of driftwood. He just seems to be happier. And whatever the change is, he laughs so much more – which means the world to me (*Laura*).

**Authenticity.** Similar to the first theme that referenced how disconnecting from technology and daily stress led to relational connection, participants also described how an awareness of their authentic self resulted to positive relational changes.

When I am in my right mind, I see things more clearly. And it lets me be more confident to know who I am in that way. And all of this stuff then carries over to my ability to love my wife well (*Mark*).

Mark elaborated on how a connection to his authentic self in the wilderness helped him to “side-step all of life’s negative and distracting crap” and be a husband that he was proud of being. Another participant explained how her sense identity on wilderness trips impacted her relationship in positive ways.

It is good for me as a human being. It brings me to Josh better when I spend time in the woods. It feeds my soul in a profound enough way that I think it makes me a better partner. It helps me remember my smallness in the grand scheme of things. The things that feel so big and stressful and anxiety provoking in daily life...I can put them into perspective and take deep breaths...put one foot in front of the other in a very concrete way and notice things that are beautiful. I think the woods make me feel more energized and present and passionate and interested...and interesting [laughs]. It makes me feel like this is who I am supposed to be. I feel like the person I’m supposed to be all the time is who I am in the woods. I’m supposed to be that girl (*Melissa*).

Melissa’s husband, Josh, smiled during this conversation, then leaned over and put his hand on her shoulder. When asked what he was thinking, Josh simply looked at Melissa and said, “I love you so much.” He then turned to me and said, “I couldn’t have said it better. Everything Melissa just told you...that’s the reason we choose to go camping.”

**Attraction.** Many participants explained how the experience of their authentic identity during wilderness trips resulted in feelings of attraction and experiences of

intimacy with their significant other. Partners described this by saying that having a “more confident, more fun, and more authentic lover makes it easier to be in love.” Interestingly, seventeen of the twenty stories analyzed for this study commented at least once on feelings of attraction and intimacy due to a change in their partner’s persona. These opportunities for intimacy appeared to transcend activity, location, and previous level of experience. “There’s just something about being out there that helps to make things better. It makes me better...and it makes us better.” “Whatever we’re doing, just being in nature is a way of sustaining the spark in our relationship.” Another participant explained her experience of attraction and intimacy in wilderness this way:

Mark just looks so great when we are out in the woods. He’s handsome and charming, he helps me when I need it and entertains himself when we both want space. And he’s so manly [laughs]. I guess it’s the environment that lets him act that way, since he is out chopping wood or starting a fire. Or I just see him differently because I’m different. Or realistically both of us are each probably a bit different. But regardless, the end result is that we end up having fantastic sex in the woods on nearly every trip. It is always a great time. Its super bonding. And now it is something that we both look forward to on future trips (*Sarah*).

Mark immediately chimed in by saying, “let’s go camping right now [laughs].”

**Relational Growth.** Participants also remarked on other forms of relational growth that took places during shared wilderness experiences. Many partners explained how these trips facilitate transformations toward authenticity by allowing them to have a healthier perspective on other troubles in life. This new perspective was the result of the simplified lifestyle that accompanies trips in nature along with the impressive scope and

grandeur associated with natural areas. Others explained that the experience of their authentic self facilitated unique opportunities to dream and envision their future while in wilderness settings. Participants also talked at length about the importance of experiencing new things together as an open-minded couple. These types of new experiences, which tended to be quite common during shared wilderness trips, “lead to connections, shared memories, to growth, and even maturity as a couple.” “Trips in nature open our eyes and allow us to practice living life together. We are both at our best...and it ends up being a really bonding experience.”

New experiences in wilderness settings were also seen as a great way to get to know your partner. This was particularly true for couples who sought out shared wilderness experiences early on in their relationship. Trips were an opportunity “to get to know the real person you are with, not just the image of themselves that they like to portray at home.” Other participants described this same phenomenon by saying “wilderness trips make you honest”, “wilderness is a way to get to know each other”, and “camping experiences are good opportunities to see what life could be like together when you are both being real.” One participant explained the impact that shared wilderness excursions had early on in her relationship by saying this:

Trips in nature help to solidify and confirm relationships, they sure did with ours. When we went backpacking early on...it was like ‘wow, I guess this is the real you’. We’d only known each other for four months. And most of our previous encounters were dates where we both spent time getting ready for the other person. You know, it gave me a chance to really meet him without his nice clothes. He wasn’t able to shave for a week [laughs], so it gave me a sense of

what he really looks like...and how comfortable he is in his own skin. This honesty really helped me trust him and it really brought us together in a way that normal city life didn't. We came back from this trip a much stronger couple. And we're still together today [laughs] (*Cara*).

Cara's husband, Sean, commented on this idea by saying,

I totally agree. These trips let me get to know the real Cara. Not the one that is really studious, or really articulate, or a really successful professional. The one who likes to cuddle by the campfire and who laughs really loud...and the one who is willing to trust me in foreign situations. That's where I see the value in sharing trips outdoors (*Sean*).

Overall, every participant explained how shared wilderness experiences manifest uniquely positive changes in their own personal identity that led to unique types of personal and relational growth. These changes involved improvements to their sense of childlikeness, authenticity, reflectiveness, and overall satisfaction with life. Seventeen of the twenty participants then went on to say that these personal changes during wilderness trips resulted in increases to attraction and intimacy with their partner. This relational connection continued to positively affect couples long after wilderness trips had ended.

### **Memories of shared wilderness**

Interestingly, participants in this study consistently remarked about the positive feelings they experienced while reliving their shared wilderness experiences during our interviews. Memories were seen as "doubly valuable" because they were shared between partners. Participants explained that there is immense value in creating and reliving unique and private memories as a couple. These memories helped to bond the partners

together as a unit. Participants also explained that there “is a lot of value in having stories to tell together...it gives us an oral tradition.” These stories helped to shape the identity of each partner while also providing a framework for the couple to communicate their values and goals. Some participants used their story as a way to describe a collective sense of morality. Other participants focused on their hopes for the world or a vision for the future of their relationship. Couples recounting wilderness experiences with unexpected challenges or struggles laughed often during the telling of their story. It was as if these challenges were seen as badges of honor; even seemingly negative experiences were not viewed as bad or unhelpful. “Despite what happened, we remember this trip fondly and think that it was a positive experience for our relationship. Plus it’s a fun story to tell [laughs].” One participant reflected on the experience of telling his story for this research by saying,

This was surprisingly cathartic. Thanks for your willingness to ask questions and listen to the details of our trip. I didn’t expect this experience to feel so satisfying...but it has been (*David*).

Another participant had this to say about the impact that telling her shared wilderness experience,

Although I know this is my story and there wasn’t anything new that I said today, I still feel like this interview was incredibly rewarding. There is a piece of me that is so grateful that Robert and I can have these types of adventures together. And since my family isn’t really ‘naturey’, it means that we don’t get to relive our wilderness experiences too often. But this [interview] was good. I’m glad we decided to meet with a stranger to talk about camping [laughs] (*Jamie*).

Robert smiled and nodded. Jamie then went on to explain that the positive impacts from her shared wilderness trips continue to be felt for years after the adventure as long as she has regular opportunities to relive the memories. Since her family is not interested in hearing details from the trip, she and her partner regularly solicit other couples with similar experiences. These like-minded friends provide them with an interested audience for retelling and remembering their adventures, which allows the couple to retain the trips positive effects.

### **Logistics of shared wilderness**

Near the end of our interview, I asked participating couples what type of logistical variables are important for them during wilderness trips. The hope was to have a clearer sense of unifying themes or details between the range of stories told. As with most complex phenomena, partners responded with a variety of opinions that did not allow me to form clear generalizations across the lived experiences of all participants. The details provided below help to demonstrate the diversity of opinions regarding shared wilderness experiences gathered for this study.

- 1) *Solitude*. Most participants began by describing ‘successful’ wilderness experiences as those that allowed the couple to have time alone in nature without many disruptions from other people. The degree of solitude varied considerably between stories. Despite this, many participants explained that having focused time together was one of the best benefits of shared wilderness experiences.
- 2) *Scope*. Most participants looked for wilderness areas that were large enough in size that they had the freedom to adventure, explore, and relax. The actual

size that participants sought out varied from small county parks to extremely large federal wilderness areas. This discrepancy was mainly attributable to previous experience levels, personal preferences, and the amount of time available.

- 3) *Attendees.* All participants commented on the impact additional guests have on shared wilderness experiences. Although many partners described the potential value of wilderness trips involving friends or family members, trips where only the couple was present were often viewed as ideal.
- 4) *Activities.* All participants also commented on the importance of choosing shared wilderness activities that fit with their interests, skill level, and time frame. Activities that worked best were: within the confidence level of the couple, meshed well with the couple's interests, and required a level of time commitment that fit well with the couple's itinerary. The amount of rigor or challenge included in these activities varied greatly between participants. Some sought out arduous and lengthy mountain climbs while others selected peaceful camping weekends. Regardless, participants explained that the best shared wilderness activity was something that got them both excited.

Since the whole premise of this research was to gather and analyze stories of positive shared wilderness experiences, I thought it necessary to ask about conflicting reports in order to better understand why couples' distinguished their original experiences as positive. To do this, I questioned participants what general factors would make the difference between a trip that was bonding and beneficial versus one that had the opposite effect. Responses about trips that would be less beneficial included comments about bad

weather, personal injuries, inappropriate selection of locations or activities, and being unprepared for the experience. That said, many participants also explained that “it is hard to think of a wilderness adventure that is non-bonding or non-beneficial to us.” “Even if everything went wrong, it would still be a memorable experience...and we might even remember it more fondly because it was a nightmare [laughs].” In an attempt to concretely answer the question, one participant gave this response:

I’m trying, but I can’t think of any trip that wouldn’t have a positive impact on us. Even the ones that don’t go well teach us lessons, help us to learn new things, and help us to practice being nice to each other when the shit hits the fan. I guess the only thing that I can think of for a bad trip is if one of us were to die [James laughs]. Everything else seems helpful for our relationship (*Heidi*).

Since these answers were from people with previous shared wilderness experiences, I then asked participants to share advice about taking wilderness trips for couples with no experience. Every participant remarked on the importance of choosing an environment and an activity that was appropriate for wilderness novices. “I wouldn’t tell them to go backpacking cause they would hate it [laughs].” Cindy explained that the degree of difficulty and the level of risk associated with some wilderness activities simply is not appropriate for beginners. A different participant elaborated on this idea by explaining that experiences in nature can just as easily elicit negative emotions if you are not properly prepared.

Being in nature still has the capacity to create the emotions that we don’t like: stress, anxiety...we are both prone to anxiety more than anything else. If we were in an environment that was anxiety provoking, it probably wouldn’t be very fun.

But even on our trip in Montana, where we know the woods well enough, Sarah still experienced enough anxiety that she needed my help to calm down and enjoy the trip. Wilderness can have the effect of being simultaneously relaxing and intensely stimulating. That is what is most intriguing about it. Since you are so engaged with the people you are with and also so engaged with your surroundings, you need to make sure that you took your trip to the right place with the right people (*Mark*).

Cathy explained that beginners should only engage in wilderness adventures with their partner if “both members of the couple see the benefit of time away in a beautiful setting.” If both members are not interested in some type of nature-based excursion, the general consensus of study participants was that shared wilderness experiences could easily be a poor choice. “Stick with what you want to do...trust your gut...and talk about it first with your partner. Don’t just go and try to climb Everest together [laughs] (*Jenna*).”

## **Chapter V: Discussion and Conclusion**

What is the story of shared wilderness experience? Perceptions of shared wilderness experiences were a common source of personal and relational growth for couples in this study, confirming findings of previous researchers working at the individual level (Berman et al., 2008; Bowler et al., 2010; Focht, 2009; Hansmann et al., 2007; Hartig et al., 2003; Hartig, 1993; Hartig et al., 1991; Herzog, Maguire, & Nebel, 2003; Mackay et al., 2010; Morita et al., 2007; Pretty et al., 2007; Pretty et al., 2005). Although the above five themes are distinct in many ways, they also have a number of overlapping edges (something that is true in most exploratory studies). The main unifying

essence from these interviews is that positive shared wilderness experiences lead to connection in relationships. Shared wilderness experiences provided an opportunity for unique challenges, caregiving responsibilities, and opportunities for shared meaning making, confirming both Gottman's Sound House Theory (1999, 2007) and Mason's relational hypotheses (1987). Participants in this study also described wilderness environments as places that promote stress reduction and relaxation while increasing feelings of authenticity and spirituality.

### **Overall Relational implications**

Although participants often began telling their shared wilderness experience by focusing on individual-level variables, narratives quickly evolved to entertain numerous relational-level concepts. Couples commented on the importance of connection, joint problem-solving, caregiving, shared memories, collective rejuvenation, attraction, authenticity, and spirituality during these nature-based experiences. Some partners explained that wilderness trips provide "powerful experiences of trust and reliance that are unique from everyday life." Wilderness trips offered couples opportunities to develop a sense of accomplishment "by doing something that not many people had done before." Wilderness trips also provided a forum for couples to bond and connect together in new and powerful ways. These connections routinely led to an acknowledgement of the importance of natural areas, a sense of appreciation for their partner, and a desire for future shared wilderness experiences.

Interviews began with participants looking at and speaking directly to the researcher. After rehashing the logistics of previous shared wilderness experiences, I then asked several probing questions about one participant's perception of his or her partner

during the trip (e.g. “What was he like on this trip?”, “How do you experience her during your wilderness adventures together?”). Interestingly, these relationally-focused questions often led to participants shifting their gaze away from the researcher and towards their partner. Couples then engaged in extended eye-contact, physical contact (hand holding, hand on knee, hand on shoulder), smiling, and laughing while providing answers. These expressions of affection during our interviews resulted in relational benefits that were in addition to the original benefits encountered on the actual trip. Couples confirmed this finding and reiterated the importance of having both shared memories and shared experiences that they were proud of. It was an immense privilege to be invited into participants’ homes, to witness these interactions, and to hear couples retell stories of shared wilderness experiences that have been profoundly positive for their relationship.

## **Study Implications**

### **Implications for Research**

Despite many researchers speculating about the importance of wilderness experiences in the fields of experiential education, leisure studies, public health, and psychotherapy (e.g. Barton, Griffin, & Pretty, 2011; Coon, Boddy, Stein, Whear, Barton, & Depledge, 2011; Bowler, Buyung-Ali, Knight, & Pullin, 2010; Focht, 2009; Harper & Russell, 2008; Hartig, 2003; Pretty et al., 2005; Ulrich, Simmons, Losito, & Fiorito, 1991; Warburton, Nicol, & Bredin, 2006), family science research has only just begun empirically validating the concept of shared wilderness experiences for couples. While this study has contributed insight into shared wilderness experience by describing couples perceptions of lived experience during and after this phenomenon, more questions need

to be addressed. Future research should focus on gathering sample participants that are more diverse in race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status.

Researchers would be also served by targeting couples that have different meanings, values, or memories of shared wilderness experiences associated with their political, cultural, or social background. Although this field is not yet developed enough to introduce quasi-experimental or experimental design, a more diverse sample in these areas would allow the findings from shared wilderness research to be transferrable to larger audiences.

Even though a broad understanding of shared wilderness experiences for couples has begun to emerge from this work, researchers would be served by further categorizing the various essences of the phenomenon to promote additional levels of understanding. In addition, there are a number of large questions that remain unanswered. What kind of couples are drawn to shared wilderness experiences? What types of wilderness experiences are most beneficial to different types of couples? Is there a way to predict a particular wilderness experience that would be most conducive to relational health given certain couple attributes? And how might clinicians, wellness programmers, or public policy officials utilize this knowledge to the benefit of couples and families across the United States? Beyond these questions, researchers would also be wise to consider alternative research methodologies that may prompt additional discoveries and further the edge of knowledge on shared wilderness experiences for couples.

### **Implications for Clinical Practice**

Regardless of duration, intensity, or activity type, wilderness experiences have been shown to act as a vital resource for health (Pretty et al., 2007), a finding that was

confirmed by participants in the current study. Improvements to physical, emotional, attentional, and psychological well-being speak volumes about the helpfulness of wilderness-based experiences in a world where “lifestyles are becoming increasingly characterized by sedentary behaviors, obese statures, stressed states, mental ill-health and a growing disconnection from nature” (Barton et al., 2009, p. 261). These findings suggest that wilderness experiences may merit a clinical role in the treatment of mental illness. Further, positive shifts in satisfaction, anxiety, stress, and authenticity have significant interpersonal ramifications. Although rarely mentioned in previous research, the current study demonstrated how these types of physical, psychological, and relational growth resulting from wilderness experiences have the ability to become vital protective factors for relationships. Since green exercise is already being used clinically to improve individual health in a variety of international contexts (e.g., public health initiatives in England, Ministry of Forest Therapy in Japan, ‘Green Prescription’ program in New Zealand), knowledge of the relational health implications of shared wilderness experiences could be valuable for mental health professionals in the United States.

**Couples therapy.** Rooted in Gottman’s Sound House Theory (1999), many clinical interventions for couples strategically interject opportunities for connection, conversation, and shared meaning making. The uniqueness of wilderness experiences allows them to possibly be an ideal scenario for developing these relationship-strengthening attributes. Since specific clinical interventions using wilderness experiences with couples have yet to be determined, licensed clinicians (e.g., LMFT, LICSW, LPC, LP) should carefully consider the systemic and relational impacts of shared wilderness experiences while providing mental health services to couples.

Although it is important that therapists do not assume uniform and universal positive responses, the above research presents a persuasive argument for including some type of shared wilderness experience amidst the treatment of mental, behavioral, or relational concerns. In addition to promoting improvements in relational satisfaction, communication, conflict resolution skills, attraction, intimacy, spirituality, authenticity, and collective efficacy, shared wilderness experiences could potentially be advocated as a “parallel intervention to traditional drug therapy in the treatment of mental illness to enhance both acute and chronic improvements in mood” (Barton et al., 2011, p. 6).

There are a number of clinical questions that have arisen from this early exploratory stage of research. How are shared wilderness experiences best introduced to couples? Are these types of experiences appropriate for couples presenting with moderate to severe levels of distress? What about for couples with no previous experience? And do clinicians need to personally know the value of shared wilderness experiences in order to convince clients to participate? Although couples in this study presented a number of provocative ideas regarding the relational value of shared wilderness experiences, basing clinical interventions on these findings alone seems premature. Amidst consideration of barriers to successful participation, therapists are encouraged to engage in conversations with clients to consider the value that shared wilderness experiences might have for their specific situation.

### **Implications for Public Health Initiatives**

Since there are a variety of public health initiatives aimed at encouraging nature-based recreation around the world, it is important for family scientists to have a systemic understanding of how those experiences affect couples before implementing them in the

United States. Findings from this study provide the first glimpse into the relational affects of shared wilderness experiences. These findings have direct implications for wellness-focused public health initiatives.

**Wellness programming.** Although some people may have limited previous experience in nature, lack the energy or interest needed to exercise in green spaces, or not describe themselves as ‘nature people’, the theories and literature incorporated into this study suggest that the benefits of shared wilderness experiences are available to all couples. That said, couples participating in this study said that specific care should be used when deciding on an activity and a location to ensure that it is compatible with the interests of the participants, particularly those currently unfamiliar with green exercise. Shared wilderness activities that are severely outside of the comfort zones or interests of couples may actually diminish the individual and relational benefits and not positively predict participation in future shared wilderness experiences. As such, wellness programmers and land managers would be advised to provide caution and guidance as part of any promotion of shared wilderness experiences.

### **Limitations of the Study**

It is important to consider the limitations of this study when evaluating the included findings. An initial limitation comes from the sample. Inclusion criteria have been set around the sample, specifically that sample participants: are in a committed relationship, have participated in shared wilderness experience(s) together, deem their shared experience to be positive, and are willing to talk about the relational implications of those experiences. In addition, both *couple* and *wilderness* are defined broadly so as to be inclusive of participants and their varied experiences. Although twenty stories of

shared wilderness from ten couples is not small for a phenomenological study, sample participants were homogenous in several ways. Race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and previous wilderness experience were all relatively similar among participating couples. It is possible that these limited demographics may have impacted the possible perspectives on shared wilderness experiences. Future research would be well served by intentionally sampling participants with more diverse backgrounds in these areas.

Another limitation of the current work deals with phenomenological transcendence. Despite aspiring for transparency with my personal expectations, biases, and intentions in this study, it is quite possible that I was unable to achieve the fullness of transcendence advocated for in phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994). Strict adherence to a methods plan involving both member checking and consultation helped provide multiple perspectives on the findings. That said, many of my initial expectations were indeed realized during this research. While I would like to interpret this result as a testament to my subject matter expertise and sound methodological decisions, it is possible that biases have affected the study in unknown ways. Future studies will help to remove this ambiguity. Future studies would also benefit from researchers utilizing different methodological approaches outside of transcendental phenomenology to provide additional perspectives on the topic. For example, the willingness of hermeneutic approaches to acknowledge the social, cultural, and historical context of this phenomenon may prove beneficial. Researches would also be served by conducting a study that includes follow-up interview data in its analysis or some other type of longitudinal design.

Another limitation is related to the research design decisions made for this study. Dyadic interviews were completed in order to investigate the shared couple perspective of wilderness experiences. Although dyadic interviews are an appropriate way to understand the couple as a relational subsystem, they are also subject to several risks. Among these, dyadic interviews are potentially a place for one partner to dominate the conversation, for participants to avoid disclose in order to hide information from their partner, or for the couple to collectively ‘save face’ by attempting to impress the researcher through embellished or edited accounts of their lived experience. Future researchers may deal with this limitation by incorporating both individual and dyadic interviews into their study.

Another limitation deals with the level of analysis employed with this research. Although textural and structural analysis of dyadic interviews was an appropriate first step in exploring this subject area, there were a number of different types of analysis that could have also been included. The most prominent of these is a meta-level analysis of the interactions that couples shared during interviews. Participating couples vacillated between speaking to me and to their partner. Responses directed towards the researcher appeared to concretely address a specific context or question. Responses directed towards their partner appeared to be more abstract, reflecting on the relationship as a whole, expressing feelings of connection and intimacy, or identifying their overall abilities as a couple. These meta responses also incorporated facial expressions and body postures that may prove interesting in later studies. Including additional levels of analysis will aid future researchers as they work to further conceptualize this phenomenon and uncover the mechanism through which shared wilderness experiences impact partners.

A final limitation is the audit team I chose to help me analyze the interview data. As a young researcher, I could have benefited from additional meetings with my team to provide additional guidance and structure for the study. I could have also benefited from additional sets of eyes looking at the data, particularly professionals that do not have an affinity for wild places. Although the two team members I selected had varying levels of personal experience in nature, both were highly supportive of the ideas and in agreement regarding the inherent value of wilderness experiences.

### **Conclusion**

Shared wilderness experiences were significant enough for study participants to warrant additional studies. Developing a more thorough systemic understanding of the influences that shared wilderness experiences have on couples is an important step for future researchers to take. A better understanding of these affects has cross-disciplinary value, with implications for social, emotional, physical, psychological, spiritual, relational, familial, recreational, and therapeutic development.

Henry David Thoreau is often attributed with the saying, “In wilderness is the preservation of the world.” With modern social scientists consistently citing correlations between wilderness experiences and both personal and relational growth, this researcher is apt to agree with him. Using this study as the first step, more research is needed to develop the clinical interventions and public health initiatives necessary to safeguard the relational wellbeing of couples in our current society. Or, as one participant bluntly stated, “We’ll just keep going camping so we don’t get divorced.”

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## Tables

Table 1 *Participant Characteristics*

Name	Partner	Age	Relationship Status	Relationship Length	Wilderness Experience
Mark	Sarah	29	Married	1 Year	4
Sarah	Mark	26	Married	1 Year	3
John	Jenna	27	Married	4 Years	4
Jenna	John	28	Married	4 Years	2
Alex	Mira	31	Married	9 Years	4
Mira	Alex	29	Married	9 Years	3
Josh	Melissa	36	Married	7 Years	4
Melissa	Josh	35	Married	7 Years	3
Sean	Cara	38	Married	2 Years	4
Cara	Sean	36	Married	2 Years	3
Carl	Cathy	58	Married	34 Years	3
Cathy	Carl	55	Married	34 Years	2
Robert	Jamie	33	Married	10 Years	3
Jamie	Robert	32	Married	10 Years	4
Daniel	Cindy	31	Married	5 Years	4
Cindy	Daniel	29	Married	5 Years	3
David	Laura	42	Dating	4 Years	4
Laura	David	40	Dating	4 Years	2
James	Heidi	35	Dating	2 Years	5
Heidi	James	30	Dating	2 Years	4

*Note.* Pseudonyms were created for privacy protection.

## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A Consent Form**

#### **The Story of Couples and Wilderness – A Phenomenological Investigation**

You are graciously invited to participate in a research study about the relational implications of shared wilderness experiences for couples. You were selected as a possible participant because you have been identified as a couple that has partaken in shared wilderness adventures together. I ask that you read this entire form and ask any questions before agreeing to be in this study.

This study is being conducted by: Matthew C. Miller, University of Minnesota, Family Social Science Doctoral Student

#### **Background Information**

The purpose of this study is to learn more about the phenomenon of shared wilderness experiences by asking couples to describe stories of this experience

Consent to the study and the audiotaping of a ~90 minute interview.

You will both be asked to describe a time when you had a shared wilderness experience together.

Background information will also be asked to gather more details of your story. All information is confidential. No identifying participant information is necessary nor will it be documented.

#### **Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study**

The study has no foreseeable risks for you. Though it is possible that discussing your experiences may elicit negative emotions.

There are also no foreseeable benefits for participating in the study. That said, participants often report positive feelings about contributing to a scientific study and may enjoy sharing the experience with their partners.

#### **Compensation**

Sadly, there is no compensation for participating in this research study

#### **Confidentiality**

All records of this study will be kept private. In any reports or articles drafted for publication, the investigator will not include any information that will make it possible to identify any individual participants. Research records will be securely stored and only researchers will be granted access. The investigator will be the only person with access to video recordings and member checks – both of which will be erased upon completion of the study.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study**

Participation is voluntary for this study. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**Contracts and Questions**

The researcher conducting this study is Matthew C. Miller. You may ask any questions that you have now. If questions arise later, you are **encouraged** to contact the researcher at the University of Minnesota, mill4052@umn.edu, 612-508-1626.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you are **encouraged** to contact the Research Subject's Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455; 612-625-1650.

*You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.*

**Statement of Consent**

I have read the above information. I have asked any questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

### Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

Demographic information that will be collected:

Name, gender, age, relational status, length of relationship, level of previous wilderness experience

1. Can you tell me about a time that you shared a positive wilderness experience together?
2. Potential probing questions:
  - a. Have you told this story before?
  - b. When did this happen?
  - c. Have you been to this location before?
  - d. Have you participated in this type of recreation before?
  - e. What were you thinking, experiencing, feeling, when this happened?
  - f. Can you tell me more about that?
  - g. What did the experience mean to you?
  - h. How did you experience your partner during this event?
  - i. How do you experience your partner after this event?
  - j. Are you considering future shared wilderness experiences? Why or why not?
3. Can you comment on the trustworthiness of this story?
4. Does this story remind you of other times you and your partner shared a wilderness experience together?
  - a. Do you want to share those experiences?

## Appendix C

**Pre-Survey: Couples In Wilderness**

*Please answer these questions on your own and without the influence of your partner. After detailing out a specific wilderness experience, please refrain from talking about your response with your partner.*

Name:

Email:

Phone Number:

Gender:

Age:

Relationship Status

Name of Significant Other:

Length of Relationship:

Level of Previous Wilderness Experience (Answer by **Bolding** the correct number)

1

2

3

4

5

Not at all experienced

Somewhat experienced

Moderately Experienced

Very Experienced

Extremely Experienced

Please detail a time when you and your partner shared a wilderness experience that stands out as being positive. Where were you? What were you doing? What makes this memory stand out?

When you are finished, please save the document as "Survey\_Lastname\_Firstname" and email it to mill4052@umn.edu. If you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to call me.

Thanks much!

Matt Miller

612-508-1626