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PARTICIPANTS IN THE YOUTH CONSERVATION CORPS: CASE STUDY OF THE BALD EAGLE CAMP

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ABSTRACT

The 1971-74 participants in Youth Conservation Corp (YCC) program conducted at Minnesota's Bald Eagle Camp were surveyed in 1975. The information gathered by the survey included: background of participants (e.g., age, sex, education); influence of YCC program on career choice; and participant suggestions for improving YCC programs.

The Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) was established by Congress in 1971 with three major objectives:

- to provide gainful summer employment for America's youth;
- to develop in youth a greater understanding and appreciation of the nation's natural environment and heritage; and,
- to further the development and maintenance of the natural resources of the country.

Each summer young people ages 15 through 18 from a variety of social, economic, racial and ethnic backgrounds are employed at YCC camps throughout the nation. The camps are situated in national and state parks, forests, and wildlife refuges, and on other public lands. Minnesota has three YCC camps on federal lands, one of which is the Bald Eagle Youth Conservation Corps Camp. The camp is located on the Chippewa National Forest and is administered by the Forest Service, U. S. Department of Agriculture. Approximately 100 young people participate in one of two four-week sessions offered each year.

Objectives and Procedures of Survey

Participants in the 1971-74 Bald Eagle Camp programs were contacted in 1975 to determine:

- background of participants (e.g., age, sex, education);
- influence of YCC programs on participant career choices; and
- participants attitudes towards and suggestions for improving selected portions of the YCC program.

Of the 385 persons that participated in the program during 1971-74, 112 were requested to complete a mailed questionnaire. These persons were selected from alphabetical rosters by a random-start, systematic selection method. Eighty-two questionnaires (73 percent) were returned -- a sample of 21 percent of the 385 participants.

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STUDY RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The average age of participants in the Bald Eagle YCC programs of 1971 through 1974 was 16.5 years. Sixty-five percent of the participants were 16 or 17 years old. Slightly over half of those surveyed (52.4 percent) were male. The residences of the participants were as follows: 29 percent in cities having less than 25,000 persons, 26 percent in rural areas, 11 percent in small cities (25,000-100,000 population), 23 percent in cities of 100,000 to 500,000 or in suburbs of cities comprised of more than 100,000 people; 11 percent in cities with populations greater than 500,000.

The majority of the participants at the time of the survey were enrolled in school: 19.5 percent in high school, 58.5 percent in college, and 7.3 percent in vocational-technical school. Approximately 12 percent were out of school working, including two percent in military service. Of the group sampled, one participant returned to YCC as a second year enrollee and one continued in the program as a YCC leader.

Program Influence on Career Choice

Does the Youth Conservation Corps program influence a participant's career choice? To answer this question participants were asked: Are you planning a career in natural resources management or a related field? If so, in what field? Did participation in YCC influence your career choice? How was your choice influenced?

Thirty-nine percent of those sampled stated a preference for a career choice that focuses on natural resources management, i.e., forestry, wildlife, fisheries, outdoor recreation, or a related biological field (Table 1). Of these participants, 38 percent indicated an interest in a related biological field such as botany, zoology, and ecology. The 61 percent of the participants specifying career fields other than natural resources management identified medicine, law, business, agriculture, social sciences, and teaching. Medically related fields (e.g., human and veterinary medicine, nursing, and health care technology) were the most frequently specified "other career field".

More than 60 percent of the participants in the Bald Eagle YCC program indicated that the program had influenced their career choice (Table 2). A sizeable proportion (37.8 percent) stated the program strengthened and reinforced interest in a career field previously considered. A like proportion expressed the opinion that the program did not influence career plans. Seventeen percent were of the opinion that the program did not have an influence on career selection directly, yet it did reinforce their self-confidence, make them better able to work with people, and exposed them to a variety of career areas from which they could later select.

Most Significant Gain from YCC Experiences

The participants studied were asked to identify the YCC experience they considered most significant. The major experiences from which they could select included: environmental education, out-of-doors work program, social activities such as making new friends and acquaintances, and involvement with a natural-resources management agency (i.e., U.S. Forest Service). Working with and learning about a natural resources management agency was most significant for 43 percent of the participants. Twenty percent felt that making new friends and acquaintances was most significant.

Views on the Work Program

One key objective of the YCC program is to further the development and maintenance of the nation's natural resources. To meet this objective, YCC enrollees work on a variety of work projects such as building nature trails, planting trees and improving wildlife habitat.

All participants sampled stated that work projects were, in general, worthwhile. Eighty-seven percent stated that projects were worthwhile because they had a definite purpose or use (e.g., nature trail for visitors); they were not "make work" affairs. Two-thirds of the participants favored the work projects because they provided opportunity to be in a forest situation doing enjoyable work. To some, work projects were worthwhile because of the experience gained in working with people.

Views on the Environmental Education Program

Helping youth develop a greater understanding and appreciation of natural environments is another key YCC objective. The Bald Eagle environmental education program involved discussions and field exercises on: the purpose of work projects in relation to the environment (...effect of water bars on soil erosion), the nature of forest ecosystems (...the role of fire in ecosystems), skills needed for working in field conditions (...compass traversing and map reading), and the needs of wildlife (...animal habitat requirements). Most participants indicated that the amount of time devoted to discussing work projects and forest ecology was "about right" (Table 3). However, nearly seventy percent indicated that too little time was taken to learn skills needed for working in field conditions, and over 80 percent felt that too little time was devoted to learning about wildlife. Stressing in the questionnaire that environmental education is only one objective of YCC, participants sampled were asked to identify who items that would most improve the education program. Fifty-eight percent stated that more time should be spent working in the field with professionals such as foresters, hydrologists, and wildlife biologists. Forty-four percent felt there should be more field trips. Other suggestions for improvement included: more guest speakers knowledgeable in an environmental field, greater opportunity to learn about wildlife and plants and greater use of films.

Staffing of YCC Program

Participants in the Bald Eagle YCC program were asked to identify two characteristics important to being a successful member of the YCC program staff. Listed in order of decreasing preference, the characteristics are: skill in working with people; well-versed in skills needed to work in field situations; friendly personality; self-confidence; knowledgeable about forest trees, plants and wildlife; and skill in camping, hiking and canoeing.

Table 1. Career Choice Specified by Participants of Bald Eagle YCC Programs of 1971-74.

Career Field	Percent
Natural Resources Management	39
-forestry	23.8 percent
-wildlife	21.4 percent
-fisheries	2.4 percent
-outdoor recreation	14.3 percent
-related biological field	38.1 percent
Other Career Field	<u>61</u>
	100

Table 2. YCC influence on career choice of participants of Bald Eagle YCC programs of 1971-74.

Influence on Career Choice	Percent
Program strengthened and reinforced interest in field already considered	37.8
Program gave a new interest in a field not previously considered	3.7
Program led to a decision not to enter field previously chosen	3.7
Program had other influence on career choice	17.0
Program did not influence career choice	37.8
	<u>100.0</u>

Table 3. Reaction of Bald Eagle YCC participants to time allotted to the environmental education program.

Program Area	Too Little	About Right	Too Much
	(percent)		
Discussion of purpose of work projects	17.2	83.5	3.8
Learning about forest ecosystems	32.9	62.0	5.1
Learning woods skills	69.9	28.8	1.3
Learning about wildlife	81.4	18.5	0.0