

A 30-minute lesson can connect young people to nature, preserve for others

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A study conducted at Outdoor School, a residential program run by Penn State's Shaver's Creek Environmental Center, shows that a 30-minute educational lesson about the importance of leaving what you find during outdoor experiences helps young people feel more connected to nature and results in children being less likely to take natural items home as souvenirs. Credit: Penn State

A 30-minute educational lesson about the importance of leaving what you find during outdoor experiences helps young people feel more connected to nature and results in children being less likely to take natural items home as souvenirs, according to a study conducted at Outdoor School, a residential program run by Penn State's Shaver's Creek Environmental Center.

The study, conducted by Penn State researchers and the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics, supports the notion that [young people](#) who undergo basic education about the importance of leaving natural settings as they found them for others to enjoy and to preserve natural habitats can lead to behavior changes.

"This study was the first of its kind, partnering with Shaver's Creek Outdoor School and the Leave No Trace Center, to empirically examine environmentally-related behaviors with youth, following a simple educational treatment," said Derrick Taff, assistant professor of recreation, park and tourism management at Penn State. "This study was unique because we were able to advance beyond self-reported attitudes and behaviors, and actually observe how youth engage with nature and natural objects. The ramifications of this research are exciting because they inform future educational strategies, Outdoor School's programming and future research examining youth and nature engagement."

The Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics developed the Promoting Environmental Awareness in Kids (PEAK) educational [program](#) to teach children about the environment and how to recreate responsibly in the outdoors. The 30-minute lesson, "Unlocking the Past," focuses on the "Leave What You Find" principle, part of the Leave No Trace PEAK program. It teaches the importance of leaving artifacts and other natural objects behind for future visitors to enjoy. It also stresses leaving places in their natural state to preserve the ecological, cultural

and historical value of the place.

Researchers conducted a study during the Shaver's Creek Outdoor School program to better understand the effect of one of the 30-minute lessons from PEAK on attitudes and behaviors.

What researchers found is that participants who completed the PEAK educational lesson reported positive attitude changes above and beyond participants who did not complete the program, and left found objects in nature more often than those in the control group. Specifically, the group that completed the PEAK lesson was 11 percent more likely to leave objects they found during an outdoor experience.

Ben Lawhon, education director at Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics, said 11 percent may not seem substantial, but when you consider that an estimated 14 million children participate in camps each year in America, that could potentially translate to more than 1.4 million young people leaving natural settings intact if they participated in the PEAK program.

"That means 11 percent is significant," Lawhon said.

Additionally, the findings provide science-based evidence to support a principle the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics promotes to youth, which is to "leave what you find" in nature. Some critics have previously speculated that the principle could have an unintended effect, discouraging youth interaction with nature.

"This study suggests that the educational information promoted through the Center is not a barrier in terms of connectedness to the outdoors; if anything we help facilitate the connection," Lawhon said. "If we can get kids to stop and think about their actions they are far more likely to make a more environmentally minded decision."

Researchers conducted the study at the Outdoor School program at Shaver's Creek Environmental Center for fifth and sixth grade students. The school is a four-day, three-night residential environmental education program that uses nature-based experimental learning techniques to teach about the interrelatedness of humans and the natural environment.

Parents gave permission for their children to participate in the study.

Data for this study was collected during the six-week spring 2016 Outdoor School season. A typical day involves a combination of outdoor lessons, free time activities, cabin time, meals and campfire activities. Much of the curriculum is built around environmental and nature-based themes prior to the study, but it did not include any explicit discussion of Leave No Trace, which created a baseline control condition.

Researchers said their findings will help shape how youth, nationwide, are educated about the importance of enjoying the outdoors responsibly.

The findings appeared in the January edition of *Applied Environmental Education & Communication*.

More information: Forrest Schwartz et al. Will they leave what they find? The efficacy of a Leave No Trace education program for youth, *Applied Environmental Education & Communication* (2018). [DOI: 10.1080/1533015X.2017.1411217](https://doi.org/10.1080/1533015X.2017.1411217)

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