

A Woman's Place Is in the... Outdoors?

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WHY do fewer women than men participate in outdoors activities like fishing, hunting, shooting, and backpacking? A 1990 workshop at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, "Breaking Down the Barriers to Participation of Women in Angling and Hunting," examined the reasons for this disparity. Focus groups at the workshop identified 21 barriers to participation.

Many of the reasons relate to the fact that women may not have had an opportunity to learn outdoors skills that are necessary to the enjoyment of outdoor activities. Some other obstacles were lack of information, lack of clothing and equipment geared toward women, fear of looking stupid, or social pressure to avoid outdoor sports that are traditionally viewed as men's sports.

The first "Becoming an Outdoors Woman" (BOW) program was begun in 1991 as an experiment to determine whether providing an educational opportunity would be enough to welcome women outdoors. That first workshop filled to capacity and, in fact, could have filled two or three times.

Since 1991, the Becoming an Outdoors Woman program has expanded to 44 states and nine Canadian provinces, with many offering multiple opportunities. The Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries began sponsoring the Becoming an Outdoors Woman program in 1995. The agency now conducts its three-day BOW workshop during the first full weekend of October and March. In addition, a series of one-day events are planned throughout Alabama in the near future.

Women are interested in learning outdoor skills. When the opportunity is offered, they line up for the chance to be involved. Participants of the Alabama BOW events typically include residents of a half dozen surrounding states.

Weekend Workshops

What can a woman expect from a Becoming an Outdoors Woman weekend event? The workshops span a weekend,

beginning at noon on Friday. The weekend is divided into four blocks of instruction lasting about three hours each. An average of 8-10 courses are offered during each instructional period, some of which are repeated due to popular demand. This design enables participants to attend four of the 40 courses offered.

Participants register for their top 10 choices of courses, which are then filled on a first-come, first-served basis. In each instructional period, the menu of course choices covers three topic areas: (1) hunting and sport shooting, (2) angling and boating and, (3) non-harvest wildlife recreation such as backyard wildlife, nature photography, and rock climbing. The teaching is focused on the needs of beginner-level adult learners. All classes are taught in a way that allows participants to learn through hands-on practice.

The three-day BOW weekend workshop is held at the Alabama 4-H Center in Shelby County. The center is a modern conference facility tucked away in a beautifully rustic area along Lay Lake. Participants stay in dormitory style rooms, each equipped with bunk beds and

a bathroom. The center contains all modern basic amenities. Participants give high ratings to the cafeteria-style meals served at the center. The focus for the weekend is learning in a comfortable and non-threatening atmosphere.

The instructors and staff are patient and supportive. The participants share in the success of each group member. This is a non-competitive situation where each individual can learn at her own pace.

The evening activities are filled with fun and camaraderie. There may be story telling, campfire activities, pioneer skills demonstrations, wild game cuisine tasting, outdoors equipment demonstrations, and even an occasional outdoor clothing fashion show. The emphasis is on the enjoyment that goes with the social side of outdoors activities.

BOW Serves Need

Why is the Becoming an Outdoors Woman program important? It is important to the women who attend because they learn skills that allow them to enjoy the outdoor environment, while building self-confidence. It is important to conser-



Basic techniques of cooking in the outdoors is but one skill taught during the weekend.

vation agencies because women who attend the workshops will better understand the role of natural resource management and be more interested in the activities of the agency. It is important to conservation organizations because women who participate in BOW become more positive about wildlife-associated recreation and more interested in resource management and environment protection. It is important to manufacturers and retailers because women represent the fastest growing market for outdoor equipment and clothing. It is important to the tourist industry because women control the majority of family decisions regarding use of leisure and vacation time. It is important to the future of all of us because these women will influence the ideas and activities of the coming generations. The adage is true that, "The arms that rock the cradle, rock the nation."

Society is changing drastically right before our eyes. Gone are many of the traditions and customs that shaped our culture and molded our everyday lives. Unfortunately, it seems that many of the changes are negative ones that make us wish we could go back in time. One of the positive changes is the way women's roles are broadening in the world today. Opportunities for women have increased drastically. They are encouraged to develop their interests,

broaden their horizons and explore new avenues without regard to previous barriers and preconceived notions that society had once determined for them.

Remember the days not long ago when hunting and fishing were strictly "guy" activities? A mention of those outdoor sports conjured up a picture of the guys enjoying the sport together. The Becoming an Outdoors Woman program is helping to change that picture. More and more, women are joining the ranks of outdoor sports enthusiasts, and finding that they enjoy the opportunity to get outdoors and learn about nature. For example, almost 1,000 women have attended the BOW workshop. Many re-turn and bring friends or family members.

Reasons for attending the workshops in Alabama are varied. Participants want to learn outdoor skills, have fun and meet friends with similar interests. Some participants indicate that they want to be able to share these skills with their mates. The instructors, all experts in their fields, offer more than patient instruction; they provide support, encouragement, and sound advice based on their own experiences.

Judging from the participants' comments, the workshops have been tremendously successful. "The weekend was great! I'm leaving relaxed, content and with a sense of achievement," wrote one

of the women on her evaluation sheet.

Another participant gave an enthusiastic account of catching her first fish, "The instructors were great. They made me feel comfortable and confident. I've never been fishing until now, but I caught my first fish—a shell-cracker off the dock. I want to bring my Mom to the next workshop. Many of the women left wanting more. In the words of one: "Best time I've had. I'd like it to last a week!" Years ago, fishing and hunting were traditions in some families handed down through fathers and sons. With the help of Becoming an Outdoors Woman and related programs, the day will come in the not-too-distant future when mothers and daughters taking part in these activities together will be a common occurrence.

For More Information

To get information on the next Becoming an Outdoors Woman workshop, contact the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division's Conservation Education Office, 64 N. Union St., Montgomery, AL. 36130; Phone: 1-800-262-3151; E-mail: jdebin@dcnr.state.al.us. Also, visit the agency website at <http://www.dcnr.state.al.us/agfd/bow.html> to access the workshop registration brochure and other workshop details. 📄



Participants practice their archery skills.

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Beginner and advanced canoeing courses are offered.