

Nature makes a comeback In a techno world, traditional camps flourish

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By Jenna Russell, Globe Staff | July 7, 2007

BELGRADE LAKES, Maine -- At Pine Island Camp, a narrow ribbon of green in a picturesque Maine lake, boys ages 9 to 15 live in tents with no electricity. They leap into the chilly lake first thing every morning, and fall asleep at night to the eerie call of loons. There are no TVs, video games, or computers, and counselors keep the only cellphone on the island hidden away for emergencies.

Six weeks of this might sound like punishment for the average boy today, who lives with his iPod in his ear and talks to his friends in text messages.

Yet this year, for the first time in recent memory, Pine Island sold out for the season six months before it opened. It is one of a number of rustic wilderness camps in New England that are seeing a surge in their popularity, at a time when parents and educators are increasingly concerned that children do not spend enough time in the natural world.

For the 86 boys on Pine Island, there is no escape from nature, and no choice but to learn to entertain themselves. Every night of the summer, campers and counselors dance, sing, and role-play for an hour at the evening campfire. One recent evening, as sparks crackled and flames shot into the pink twilight, they sang a song about a "crazy moose" who "drank a lot of juice," cheered wildly as campers and counselors danced the limbo under a wooden oar on the beach, and laughed at a skit in which one shaggy-haired counselor with a fake Australian accent imitated the late wildlife expert Steve Irwin.

Finally, everyone stood and gathered close around the fire, their faces orange in the light, to sing a last song quietly, together.

"We entertain ourselves every night, and it becomes more amazing all the time, because people don't know how to entertain themselves anymore," said Ben Swan, the camp's director, whose father and grandfather ran the camp before him.

Traditional summer camps in the woods became popular a century ago, in response to concerns about urbanization and the effects of city life on children. They thrived in the 1920s, offering youngsters from cities and suburbs a chance to experience nature and develop wilderness skills: building a fire; reading a compass; paddling a canoe. But beginning in the 1970s, the rise of technology, more protective parenting, and other societal changes threatened traditional camps. When Swan took over as director in 1989, enrollment at Pine Island had dwindled from 85 to 45 boys.

The proliferation of specialized camps, where children hone their skills in soccer or computer programming, also pulled campers away from the woods. To compete, older camps have adopted cutting-edge recruitment techniques. Swan has hired a full-time assistant director to criss-cross the country, stirring up interest. He also established a new group of parents and alumni, known as the Gateleaders, to cultivate friends and neighbors.

At the same time, camps have made allowances for changing times. Pine Island campers are allowed to listen to their iPods at night in their bunks. At nearby Camp Runoia, a 100-year-old girls' camp, where enrollments have doubled since 1990, parents are allowed to send e-mails, which are printed out by staff and delivered with the campers' other mail, director Pam Cobb said. At Flying Moose Lodge, another traditional boys camp in East Orland, Maine, director Christopher Price split the summer into two sessions for the first time last year to appease those scared by the thought of seven weeks in the woods.

Traditional camps may be acquiring a new appeal, as an antidote to the trend described two years ago by writer Richard Louv in his book "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder." The book linked the move to indoor play to other problems, such as childhood obesity and

attention deficit disorder, and set off a national movement to reconnect children with nature, known as the "No Child Left Inside" campaign.

The American Camp Association, which accredits and promotes camps, recently announced plans to use Louv's message for recruitment, said Bette Bussel, director of the camp association's New England office in Lexington, Mass.

Parents who send their children to traditional camps say they instill something vital but hard to find elsewhere.

"If you live in an air-conditioned world, going from house to car to mall, you have no understanding of nature, so why do you need to care about the environment?" said Andrea Raisfeld of Bedford, N.Y., who sends her two boys to Pine Island. "When they go to camp and see moose, eagles, and osprey, it's teaching them about the glory of nature."

Nature and its glories do not come cheap. A summer at Pine Island, Camp Runoia, or Flying Moose Lodge costs between \$5,800 and \$6,500 per child.

And face to face with nature, a few campers wrestle with homesickness or confusion. On a recent morning, after a night of noisy loon calls, one new Pine Island camper asked his counselor if wolves live on the island.

At Pine Island, an acre of land in the middle of Great Pond, about 55 boys stay on the island at on time. The other 30 boys fan out across New England on hiking and boating trips that include climbs up Mount Katahdin in Maine and Mount Washington in New Hampshire.

On the island, campers are awakened just after 7 a.m. and are encouraged to take a morning plunge into the lake. (Those who plunge daily make it into the "100 Percent Club.")

After a hearty breakfast of scrambled eggs and blueberry muffins one recent morning, boys choose their own daily activities from a list that includes sailing, kayaking, canoeing, archery, riflery, and woodworking. Those who clear tables at breakfast get to choose first.

After breakfast, the boys make their beds, sweep their tents, and tidy their trunks. Then they assemble in Honk Hall, where a moose head hangs above a stone fireplace, for a short inspirational speech.

One recent morning, counselor David Lombardo leaned over a tree-stump podium and told of his own transformation at camp from a boy who avoided the water to a confident swimmer who "loved the feeling of weightlessness in the glowing green space of Great Pond."

In interviews, other former campers also described how Pine Island changed them. Matt Bradley, a counselor, recalled attending another camp one summer where boys spent hours indoors playing video games. "I was like, 'Xbox? Are you serious? You should be outside,'" he said. "It seemed so weird. It wasn't summery."

As the temperature crept past 90 degrees late last month, boys lined up at an old-fashioned metal hand pump to fill water bottles. There are no showers at camp, and boys bathe in the lake using organic soap.

During the quiet rest hour after lunch, two barefoot boys played "Battleship" in the camp library, as a steady breeze rustled the leaves of birch trees outside.

Down by the dock, camper Eddie Stewart sat by the lake with a notebook in his lap. He said he was writing a book "about what might happen to the world if we keep going like we are now."

Stewart, 13, of Washington, D.C., said he doesn't miss TV at camp, "because nothing good is on in the summer anyway," and he only misses the Internet when he wants to research something.

"It's too much fun here, and you're too busy, or too tired, to miss those things," he said.

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