

INTO THE WOODS: LESSONS LEARNED FROM GIRL SCOUTING

by Julia Calagiovanni

In the end, we conserve only what we love. We love only what we understand. We understand only what we are taught.

—Baba Dioum, Senegalese conservationist

Fifty girls circle a flagpole. It is a summer morning, and we squint against the sun. An honor guard hoists an American flag onto the flagpole, followed by a smaller flag with the Girl Scout trefoil. We recite the Girl Scout Promise and Law in a sing-song round.

*Use resources wisely,
make the world a better place...*

For the past nine summers, I have boarded a bus and traveled to Camp Hoover, a Girl Scout camp in Upstate New York. It has everything you'd expect at a summer camp: kickball, swimming, macramé. But I found something else there, amid the tents and canoes and fire circles, that I didn't expect. It was the place where I first understood that the environment is fragile.

At Camp Hoover, Girl Scouts spend much of their time boating on and swimming in Song Lake.



I had left suburbia, where my grandmother and I had to walk farther and farther to pick wildflowers because new housing developments were crowding out the wild spaces. Camp was just a 30-minute bus ride away, but it was another world: a place where nature was enjoyed and preserved.

An Environmental Conscience

Most girls who attend Camp Hoover come from suburban neighborhoods. Suburban living places us at a comfortable distance from environmental issues; we are insulated from the damaging effects our lifestyle has on the environment. Too many children grow up dependent on technology and its comforts but unaware of the environmental costs. Gasoline is a magical substance that flows freely from a pump, apples are always shiny and bug-free, and trash disappears weekly. They learn, later, that many conveniences have environmental costs, but they're not sure how to live without them.

Camp is a kind of "outside" they've never seen before. Some are surprised to learn that you can swim in a lake or roast marshmallows over a fire. They aren't used to tramping over dirt paths in the woods or using latrines.

In this new environment, they needed to learn different rules. As a program aide, or junior counselor, I had to set an example for the campers. I was careful not to step on vegetation or pick absentmindedly at the grass. I tried to explain my actions, but I too had some learning to do. How could I communicate what I knew about preserving the environment to eight-year-olds who were experiencing it for the first time?

The trick was to teach as the opportunities arose. One day, one of our lifeguards pointed out a water snake in the lake we swim in. She ordered everyone out of the water and explained that we were disturbing "Salvador's" home, that we needed to respect his right to swim through the water. That simple example helped

the girls understand that they share their world with other creatures.

The examples accumulate, and even the youngest scouts understand why they should “take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints.” They know that food is banned at the waterfront because wrappings and packages could be blown into the lake. They realize that they cannot pick all the flowers if they would like some to be left the next day. A group that went hiking for the first time on Monday will, by Friday, compete to see who can find the most pieces of litter. They discover that their experiences depend on the camp’s grounds being treated with respect—and that they need to maintain their surroundings to be able to enjoy them.

I’d always thought of myself as an environmentally conscious person. I turned off lights when I left the room; I recycled my soda cans and magazines. But working at camp forced me to examine my own behaviors and habits more closely. As the summer continued, I tried to eliminate wasteful things from my life, like long, hot showers and unnecessary travel by car. When I see the contrast between my neighborhood and Camp Hoover, I am reminded that something needs to change.

Like mine, the girls’ newfound environmental conscience lasts longer than a week of summer camp. I’ve often seen a stretch of road that has been “adopted” by a troop who patrols for litter and plants flowers. Other groups cultivate gardens at nursing homes. They also cultivate something far more lasting: a lifelong awareness of environmental issues.

What’s Old is New

Boy and Girl Scouting have changed since their founding in 1910 and 1912, respectively. Orienteering activities use GPS devices in addition to traditional compasses, and computer literacy is stressed across the scouting experience. But ecological awareness has always been and remains a guiding principle. Boys and girls are encouraged to explore and maintain their environments and to enjoy camping trips with minimal impact. They learn to respect, preserve, and enrich their surroundings. Younger groups participate in simple adult-directed activities; teenage scouts are expected to implement and carry out their own projects, but the lessons learned remain consistent. Someone who participated in a “litter hunt” at age six may propose a community recycling program at age sixteen.

I hope to earn my Gold Award as a culminating experience in Girl Scouting. Like the Eagle Scout in Boy Scouting, the Gold Award challenges teens at the highest levels of Scouting to draw upon everything they have learned from the program. By consulting local experts and using their own creativity, scouts create and implement a solution to a problem facing their community. It is a demanding task, requiring many months of research, networking, and well planned action.

Like many teens, I doubted whether I could make a real change: maybe I was too young or too inexperienced to make an impact in my community. But my camp experience changed that mindset. I saw situations from a refreshingly simple point of view. The girls allowed me to focus more clearly on the real purpose of any kind of activism: to find a problem and implement a solution. I have a long way to go before I pin the Gold Award emblem on my Senior Girl Scout vest. But whether I decide to tackle energy waste, recycling, or proper disposal of hazardous materials, I’ll remember the simple lessons learned and taught at camp.

Somehow, the idea that we should take care of our surroundings has become fodder for politicians and pundits, which only distances people more from the problems. But Scouting presents environmentalism for what it should be: a well intentioned and informed plan to improve the world around you. I learned this at Camp Hoover.

I can carry these lessons with me, long after I forget the lyrics to a camp song. But I will remember that we gathered every morning to promise that we would make good use of the resources around us and improve the world in some way. We follow in the footsteps of countless scouts before us. I made a promise, and I will keep it. So, I hope, will the millions of scouts across the country and world. ❧



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Julia enjoys reading, writing, knitting, and spending time with friends.

