

Developing outdoor yoga programs to increase practitioners' connection to nature

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Abstract

Modernization continues to broaden the gap between people's understanding of the natural world, leading to lifestyles that may have negative consequences on the natural environment. How an individual personally experiences nature can have a huge influence in providing this awareness. The focus of this project is to create outdoor yoga programs where participants can reconnect to nature. Yoga has been proven to foster behavioral change, making this the first step in determining if yoga can be used as a tool in conservation.

Introduction

As the world continues to modernize, separation between people and the natural environment may negatively affect individual's ecological actions, ethics, and the way they think and feel about nature (Vining, Merrick, & Price, 2008). To preserve the world we live in, there is a necessity to increase awareness of the environment in order to stimulate a cultural shift towards more environmentally responsible behaviors (Ernst & Theimer, 2011). In addition to culture, how an individual personally experiences nature plays a large part in their awareness of the world around them (Schultz, Shriver, Tabanico, & Khazian, 2004). Pooley and O'Connor (2000) reason that ecological attitudes can stem from an emotional foundation, as well as cognitive and behavioral sources of information. That is, what people feel while in nature can be as important as our understanding of it. Practicing yoga outdoors may be a tool in creating a healthy foundation (Graham, 2013).

Yoga practitioners often claim many benefits to practicing yoga. These include increased physical fitness, improved blood circulation, decreased respiratory rate, a stronger immune system, and increased ability to manage stress (Ross & Thomas, 2010), just to name a few. Despite whether an individual's original motivation is to practice yoga for improvement in the physical or spiritual realm, it is predicted that a committed yoga practitioner will subconsciously experience benefits in both areas (Graham, 2013). With such great potential for self-improvement through yoga, it is auspicious to investigate other potential benefits. Studies have found that creating a sense of connection with the world around us helps foster a moral and ethical need to preserve our dwindling resources (Perkins, 2010). This project begins to explore yoga's potential as a tool to create a more personal connection to the natural world within practitioners, thereby paving the way for environmentally conscious behaviors.

There is currently little research focused on determining if there is a correlation between an individual's yoga practice and his or her relationship to nature. In order to determine if yoga is an effective method of instilling an appreciation for nature and more sustainable behaviors, it is necessary to first determine if yoga increases practitioners' connectedness to nature. If it can be shown that yoga increases one's appreciation for

nature, then existing programs can be augmented or new programs may be developed to encourage pro-environmental behaviors.

The most immediate goal of the project is to begin answering these questions by introducing new yoga programs, particularly in areas where they are not yet offered. These programs will introduce yoga as a tool in conservation, which may prove to be particularly beneficial in communities with access to few resources. There are many aspects to yoga (e.g. meditation, physical practice, breathing), but all practitioners need are themselves and basic knowledge or guidance, making this a very accessible tool to any community. Lastly, this program will provide an opportunity for the yoga and conservation communities to network and better determine how yoga can effectively be used as a tool in conservation.

Project Details

Location & Partner Organizations

Two new outdoor yoga programs have been created through this project. The first takes place during the *Sugar House Farmers Market* (SHFM) in Salt Lake City, UT. This market occurs every Wednesday evening, June through October, at Fairmont Park (Image 1). Fairmont Park is a 30 acre city park with both man-made and natural features. Natural features include a pond and a stream, attracting a variety of bird species throughout the year. While very green, much of the landscape is maintained and there are many man made features, such as athletic courts, pavilions, and playgrounds. Although this is a weekly market, the yoga studio hosting the event has agreed to host the classes the first week of every month. The class will be taught by a certified yoga instructor employed by the local studio, *We Are Yoga*, and provided free of charge.



Image 1: The stream in Fairmont Park where yoga classes will take place near during the *Sugar House Farmer's Market*.



Image 2: The pier extending into the Swaner Preserve wetland where yoga classes will take place.

The second will take place at *Swaner Preserve and EcoCenter* (Swaner) in Park City, UT beginning summer 2017 on a biweekly schedule until weather permits. If popular, there is a potential to continue offering the classes indoors with views of the preserve. As both a Swaner employee and a certified yoga instructor, I will be teaching a majority of classes. If I am unavailable to teach, another certified yoga teacher will fill in. Classes will take place outside on a wooden pier that extends into a protected wetland ecosystem (Image 2). Classes will be offered at a recommended minimum donation of \$10, which will go directly to funding education and conservation programs at Swaner.

Marketing

In order to promote these programs, partner organizations have agreed to share information on their own social media pages (*Facebook, Instagram, Twitter*, etc.). For the yoga classes at Swaner, flyers will be distributed throughout Park City, UT in business with community boards.

Evaluation

A short survey was given to each participant after they completed a yoga class (Appendix A). Participants were asked, 1) Why did you choose to attend this class 2) Was this your first time practicing yoga outside, and 3) Would you attend this class again? The purpose of this survey was to determine if participants took into consideration the outdoor aspect of the class when deciding to attend and if there is enough demand to continue providing these programs. I also recorded the number of participants at each class to evaluate popularity and growth of the program.

Reflection & Conclusion



Image 3: Yogis practicing during the second outdoor yoga class to take place at Fairmont Park during the Sugar House Farmer's Market.

The average number of yoga practitioners at each class was 10 students, the largest turnout being 14 on the last week. Popularity of the program definitely increased between each week, signifying to me that the class was enjoyable and there was demand. The most popular response to the survey question addressing why they chose to attend the class was that it was free, and therefore affordable. Only a few participants mentioned their reason for coming being that it was outdoors, but everyone agreed they would attend the class again. A few made additional notes highlighting they enjoyed the opportunity to practice outdoors. Ultimately, I believe this signifies the need for affordable yoga classes in my community. Offering these classes outdoors, where there is typically no charge to use the space, may be the perfect outlet to do so.

Originally I felt my initial ideas for this project may not be a big enough undertaking for this course, especially when finding out that the yoga program at Swaner could not be implemented until the following summer. After hearing my community's excitement for

such a simple project, I was no longer concerned. Positive reactions towards the future yoga classes at Swaner, combined the successful turn out each week in the park this summer, assured me that there was a strong desire for affordable, guided, outdoor yoga practices in the community. This project is the first step of hopefully a long journey in determining yoga's ability as a tool in conservation. I have learned that this small step is most certainly enough, that my ideas are worthwhile, and that I still have a lot of learning left to do to answer my own questions. So far my passion alone has been a strong driving force to gain support in this project and to be considered a leader in the specialized field of combining conservation with yoga.

Next Steps

With this increase in understanding, the data can immediately be implemented in the newly developed programs, and eventually shared with interested yoga teachers and organizations to develop effective conservation-based yoga programs throughout the world. We protect what we value (Gosling & Williams, 2010; Vining et al, 2008) and with yoga being a tool in instilling this value, it may help show how important the environment is to our survival.

The most immediate step is to utilize this research in order to bring yoga to communities throughout the country where there is a lack of appreciation for the environment. Partnering with studios near these target communities will enable the program to broaden its reach and will serve as a great opportunity to get feedback and understanding of what techniques work in various conservation circumstances and types of communities.

The ultimate goal is to reach less accessible communities where yoga is novel and conservation education is more crucial, such as developing nations and high poverty areas. In order to do so, I plan to start a nonprofit that will raise money by hosting fundraiser classes with partner yoga programs in more privileged communities, such as the ones already networked with and developed through the initial steps of this project. This money will be used to train yoga teachers interested in working with this program as well as send

them to areas in need. While in these regions, their job will be to teach locals how to continue their yoga practice independently. In the early stages, it may be beneficial to partner with conservation organizations in the regions for support and to build better relationships with the local community.

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Appendix A

Survey questions:

1. Why did you choose to attend this class?
2. Was this your first time practicing yoga outside?
3. Would you attend this class again?