

“Becoming an Outdoors Woman” Success Stories in the Southeast

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Abstract: Women have typically been underrepresented in the numbers of hunters and anglers. A 1990 workshop, “Breaking Down the Barriers to Participation of Women in Angling and Hunting,” held at the College of Natural Resources at the University of Wisconsin Stevens Point, identified 21 reasons for their low participation in these activities. These barriers, ranging from childhood conditioning to ill-fitting equipment and clothing, have kept women from enjoying outdoor activities as fully as do men. Fourteen barriers related to lack of information. To address that problem, Dr. Christine Thomas of UW-Stevens Point developed “Becoming an Outdoors Woman” (BOW), a skills workshop focusing on outdoor skills usually associated with hunting and fishing, but including other activities as well. The weekend clinics provide education in a non-threatening, supportive atmosphere. A research project sponsored by national sports/conservation organizations surveyed the first 800 participants. The research found that workshop attendees increased participation in activities learned at the clinics; became more favorable in their attitudes toward hunting, fishing, and other outdoor activities; and purchased outdoor equipment and clothing. A control group surveyed reported significantly less activity and less favorable attitudes than participants. Workshop success, as evidenced by participant responses, is one step toward breaking down barriers and welcoming women outdoors. By the end of 1995, more than 8,000 women will have been reached across the country by BOW workshops in 34 states and 2 Canadian provinces. The southeastern region of the United States is among the strongest components in BOW, with solid agency support and tremendous participant response. The program has been endorsed by the Executive Committee of the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Management Agencies, and has broad national advocacy.

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There are some people who haven't heard about the “Becoming an Outdoors Woman” (BOW) program. But nearly 5,000 women this year across the United States and Canada, have benefited from this unique program—a workshop that teaches outdoor skills to adult women. Many of these women are here in the Southeast.

I'm going to give you some background on why the program was developed and how the workshops are structured. I'll share results of research that looked at change in activities and attitudes of workshop participants. And, you'll hear about the future plans for BOW.

Background—Breaking Down the Barriers

Women are over half of our population. But, women are not 50% of hunters, and women are not 50% of anglers. Why is that so? That was the very question asked by Dr. Christine Thomas, professor in the College of Natural Resources, University of Wisconsin Stevens Point. What keeps women from hunting and fishing?

In 1990, a workshop was held at UW-Stevens Point, investigating the barriers to participation by women in hunting and angling. It was attended by state agency staff, university personnel, and members of conservation clubs. Attendees broke out into small groups and brainstormed lists of barriers that might keep women from outdoor activities. Compiled, we had a list of 21 barriers.

One of the earliest barriers identified is the way boys and girls are traditionally reared. The boys are believed go along hunting and fishing with father or brother or uncle; girls rarely do. There is a lack of role models. Women like Fran Hammerstrom, world renowned wildlife biologist, are few and far between. There is the perceived intimidation factor—this comes into play with an all-male hunting group, or all-male sales staff at a sporting goods store. Expense and availability of equipment and clothing is a considerable barrier. Manufacturers believe that 90% of their market is male. Still, that leaves women with men's hand-me-downs, searching through goodwill bins, and coming up with clothing that gives a whole new meaning to the term chest waders.

The barriers conference identified 21 reasons why women might not participate in hunting and angling. Of these, more than half were barriers related to education. Where do I start? How can I learn to shoot? Where do I go to fish? How can I shop for equipment when I don't even know the terms?

Program Format

The BOW workshops were designed to address the educational barriers, and they do touch on many others, such as perceived intimidation and lack of role models. The workshops teach introductory skills in a comfortable, non-threatening atmosphere. Classes are taught by patient, enthusiastic instructors—not only women teachers, but the best teachers for women.

BOW workshop programming is divided into one-third hunting and shooting, one-third fishing-related, and one-third non-harvest but related activities such as camping or canoeing.

The shooting courses include a mandatory firearm safety for those who haven't had hunter education. Then attendees move to the rifle range, where

they can shoot 22s and larger caliber rifles, handguns, and black powder. We've found in the southeast, as in most areas, that nearly 75% of our women are complete novices—some who have never touched a firearm. We've been gratified to watch some of these women go from fear to delight in their success.

The fishing component includes basic fishing, and sometimes on-lake fishing. Here in the southeast, there is the opportunity to also include saltwater fishing—something we didn't include when the program began in Wisconsin. Fly fishing and fly tying round out the fishing courses. This is a very popular sport for women, and not a traditional sport for them.

We have one-third non-harvest outdoor activities. These classes serve several purposes. First, many are popular sports in their own right. Next, they enhance hunting and fishing skills, like orienteering does. They also bring groups of different minded individuals together—non-hunting and hunters—one of the very important side benefits of the program.

Evening programs bring the whole group together and enhance camaraderie. They might include a wild game dinner, prepared by agency personnel and instructors. Workshops nearly always include an outdoor fashion show. Remember one of the barriers for women is properly fitting clothing. We highlight manufacturers, many of whom are women, who design specifically for women. Wanda Lott is a name that most Southeast Coordinators and their participants will recognize. Lucky Lady, based in Georgia, and Dame-o-flage clothing, have been present at many workshops.

In 5 years, the BOW program has expanded. In 1991, the first workshop was held in Wisconsin. From there, it spread to Nebraska, a workshop where other states' personnel were trained. We now have 34 states plus the provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan offering workshops in 1995.

Participants

In the Southeast, as elsewhere in the country, we have a wide diversity of participants. They range in age from about 18 to 80. There is only about 4–7% minority participants, and perhaps 10% single parents. This is an agency priority that needs special targeting. The courses are introductory, but some more experienced women come just to enjoy other women who have the same interests. On Friday, the first day of the workshop, there is a kind of feeling of “nervous novices.” But by Sunday there are no more “strangers in the woods” and we see new friendships solidified. In the words of a Mississippi participant, “One by one, they open up minds and hearts.”

Sponsors

Each BOW workshop is self-sustaining, with registrations covering the facility and instructor costs. The program does, however, have national sponsors. Their funding keeps the agency training sessions going, provides the coordina-

tor newsletter, and supported a research project. We've seen tremendous agency support throughout the Southeast. And, in most states, local conservation clubs have helped out with sponsorship, scholarships, and door prizes or raffle items.

Research

A recent research project investigated changes in attitudes and activities of BOW workshop participants. Participants of the first 8 BOW workshops from Wisconsin, Nebraska, Oregon/Washington, Texas, and Arkansas were surveyed 1 year after they attended a workshop. A control group of women on our mailing lists who had not attended was also surveyed.

Three main areas were investigated. Had the participants increased or decreased their use of skills that they learned in the year following the workshop? (The control group was just asked to answer about the increase or decrease in the past year.) They were asked about their attitudes toward hunting, fishing, and other outdoor activities—were they more positive or more negative a year after the workshop? And, with some of our supporters interested in the retail side of outdoor skills, we asked each group what they had purchased or obtained for themselves during the past year.

Starting with the last item first, we were astounded at the numbers of women who obtained equipment or outdoor clothing. Eighty-seven percent of the participants and 83% of the control group said they bought something. This shows that manufacturers would do well to tap into the women's market.

Looking at participation in outdoor activities in the year following a workshop, we found some interesting results. On the survey questionnaire, I listed 20 activities related to classes at a BOW workshop. As hypothesized, participants did increase their level of activities more than the control group did. In particular, they increased activities that were very specifically taught at the workshop such as shotgun, orienteering, and fly fishing—activities that women would not tend to pick up on their own. And, 61% of the respondents said the workshop was important or essential in increasing their participation.

A finding that is useful to agencies is regarding decrease in participation over the past year. The control group lessened its activities an average of 8%, with decreases as high as 15% and 17% in fishing and camping. Participants showed <2% decline in any activity listed.

Attitude changes were surveyed by indicating how strongly the respondent agreed or disagreed with a statement. For example, "I feel more positive toward fishing." Again, participants indicated they felt more positive about shooting sports, fishing, and camping activities since they attended the workshop, significantly more than the control group.

We hypothesized that learning outdoor skills would also open women's eyes to the need for conservation. We were gratified that 76% of participants said they were more interested in environmental protection now. The control group had a 51% positive response to this question. And one of the southeastern sur-

veys confirmed this, saying their participants understood resource management concepts such as biodiversity and the value of wetlands.

Future

The positive aspects of Becoming an Outdoors Woman are widely recognized. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has committed funding for the next 2 years toward future goals. One of the future goals of this project is to make the program available to the last few states, and any Canadian provinces that are not currently involved, by offering state agency training sessions. The southeast has been involved in a great deal of the agency training programs. We've used coordinators from Arkansas, Mississippi, Texas, and Tennessee as agency trainers, and used workshops in Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, and Georgia as training examples.

We also provide a quarterly newsletter for coordinators and others interested in the project. The purpose of the newsletter is to stimulate communication among the states and between sponsors and the states.

I know that you are interested in how the success of the BOW program affects your agency. I'm sure you can see several ways. Your agency will get valuable, positive publicity. We've never had to pay for advertising—feature articles have done this for us. And your agency outdoor magazines have done a fantastic job of highlighting the program. For examples, see Mississippi's beautiful photo spread and Tennessee's creative Letter to Linda.

Those states who have had several workshops have seen a significant return rate. Most of those people bring a new friend or two. But agencies need to help organize other opportunities. The Becoming an Outdoors Woman workshop cannot and should not be the only outdoor activity for these women. Some states, notably Kentucky, are working on these next phase ventures.

Women are a viable constituency. Women are anxious to participate in hunting and angling, and in camping and canoeing. By offering the Becoming an Outdoors Woman program and removing some of the barriers to participation, we are building a new base of users of parks, buyers of hunting and fishing licenses, and purchasers of equipment.

The BOW workshops increase participation and keep women interested. But the workshop is just the first step. Agencies can help with the next level of activities. To build on the newly-ignited interest in outdoor activities and to pass along that interest to the next generation. Let me end with a quote from a Kentucky participant: "What you have started here will have a far greater impact than you can imagine. I will be the teacher for the younger ones in my family in the basics of hunting, fishing and outdoors. This program means a more caring and educated generation to come."