



About Sacred Rok

Sacred Rok, a small nonprofit organization based in Yosemite National Park, California, was incorporated in 2009 reflecting the vision of Ron Kauk, a world-renowned rock climber who has lived in and around Yosemite for more than 40 years. We are governed by a diverse and committed Board of Directors. Our mission is to support youth in nature, helping youth to learn to respect nature and through that, to respect themselves. We accomplish our mission through taking small groups of young people on day hikes and camping trips in Yosemite and Pinnacles National Parks, through outreach and education about the value of experiencing nature, and through collaboration with other youth-serving agencies. We primarily work in Merced County, one of the poorest counties in California. Merced is called the “Gateway to Yosemite” yet many of its youth have never been outside of Merced.

Since 2009, Ron has led trips to Yosemite for more than 400 young people – primarily incarcerated youth, foster children, and low income young people – to experience the healing ceremony of nature. These trips have been supported by grants and contributions from the A.C. Israel Foundation, Clif Bar Family Foundation, Community Foundation of Merced County, Klean Kanteen, National Park Foundation, Patagonia, REI, The North Face, United Way of Merced County, Yosemite Conservancy, probation departments in Merced and San Benito counties, and individual donors.

Through nature and our small group approach, Sacred Rok transforms the lives of young people, one person at a time, who often feel that society is closing in on them. We strive to help youth, including incarcerated youth, to heal and to become part of a caring and nurturing community that loves and trusts them. Building a community and breaking the cycle of violence and trauma takes time and commitment. This trust cannot be built overnight. We are committed to building long-term relationships with the youth and with mentors acting as facilitators of the ceremony of nature.

Research shows the positive impact on the brain and behavior of being in nature. According to a study conducted by The Sierra Club on California it has been shown that outdoor education programs are of great benefit to youth. For many of these youth this is the first time they've had an experience in a natural setting. Findings also show that participation in an outdoor program was associated with higher ratings of conflict resolution skills and cooperation (longer-term student assessments), and environmental behaviors.

www.sierraclub.org/insidetheoutdoors

Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*, identifies nature deficit disorder, which he describes as "the human costs of alienation from nature, among them: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses." Sacred Rok aims to reduce nature deficit disorder, to help young people come into emotional and mental balance through safe and healing experiences that connect them to nature.

Deepening the sense of connectedness with nature helps to address other forms of alienation in a person's life. Stephen Kaplan and Rachel Kaplan report that participants in wilderness activities experienced a sense of peace and an ability to think more clearly; they also reported that just being in nature was more restorative than physically challenging activities. In other research, they found that office workers with a view of trees or lawns were less frustrated and more enthusiastic about work than office workers without such views of the natural world (Kaplan, R, Kaplan, S, and Ryan, R. *With People in Mind: Design and Management for Everyday Nature*. Island Press, Washington D.C., 1998).

In addition, we recognize that not all youth are equally proficient at "book learning." Howard Gardner, a Harvard University professor of education, developed the theory of multiple intelligences in 1983 to get away from the limited view of book learning measured by standardized intelligence tests. He includes *naturalist intelligence*, "the human ability to recognize plants, animals, and other parts of the natural environment, like clouds and rocks. Sacred Rok fosters the naturalist intelligence, allowing participants to learn through their own experience.

When children are asked to describe a place that is special to them, they often describe a quiet place where they can find solitude and have the opportunity to reflect. Nature experiences provide this opportunity. Well known author Michael Gurian, author of *The Good Son* and *The Wonder of Boys*, says "Our brains are set up for an agrarian, nature-oriented existence that came into focus five thousand years ago... Neurologically, human beings haven't caught up with today's overstimulating environment... The brain is strong and flexible, so 70 to 80 percent of kids adapt fairly well. But the rest don't. Getting kids out in nature can make a difference." In our trips, youth have expressed that they feel different -- "This is the highlight of my life," "I want to get rich so I can live up here." We provide the sanctuary space for youth to reflect on their own aspirations and goals. One of the expressions of the yearning for nature is choosing to make a return trip.

Robin Moore, director of the National Learning Initiative and professor at North Carolina State University, points out that children who have experiences in nature learn about nature through their direct experience. She states, "Children live through their senses. Sensory experiences link the child's exterior world with their interior, hidden, affective world. Since the natural environment is the principal source of sensory stimulation, freedom to explore and play with the outdoor environment through the senses in their own space and time is essential for the development of an interior life...." We find that as participants in Sacred Rok activities pace themselves and are surrounded by the elements of nature -- wind, water, and trees, sun, moon and eagle -- it helps to train their mind and helps them to calm down. They receive strength and calm from the relationship with nature, and with this comes self-confidence and a sense of empowerment.

Besides nature, the other Sacred Rok framework is youth development and resilience. The field of youth development takes the approach of identifying and measuring strengths - looking at the positive, not just the problems and risk factors. This is a departure from traditional work with youth, which examines crime and other dysfunctional behaviors. The Search Institute has

identified 40 *Developmental Assets* for adolescents ages 12-18. These developmental assets reflect factors that help young people be resilient and grow up healthy, caring, and responsible. Search Institute research on 150,000 6th- to 12th-grade youth in communities across the United States in 2003 showed that youth with more assets were less likely to exhibit negative behaviors - they were less likely to use alcohol or illicit drugs, or to engage in violent behavior or sexual activity. Youth with more assets exhibited positive behaviors - they showed leadership, maintained health, valued diversity, and were engaged in school (Search Institute, *The Power of Assets*. <http://www.search-institute.org/research/assets/assetpower>).

Many communities, including Merced, explicitly strive to build youth assets and resiliency. This is particular poignant for at-risk youth who may not have experienced many external assets, perhaps living in a dangerous neighborhood or home environment, and perhaps with no trusted adult they feel really cares about them. In particular, foster youth are often disconnected from supportive adults when they emancipate from foster care, and as a result there are very high rates of welfare, homelessness, and mental illness among former foster youth.

Sacred Rok does not impact all of the asset areas, but we have identified a number of assets that we believe Sacred Rok can impact, including feeling good about themselves, caring about school and trying to do well, dealing with frustration, and having support from adults in their life. Sacred Rok impacts these assets by building relationships in a healthy and safe setting, in nature. The environment of Yosemite allows young people to step away from their day-to-day urban environment and its stresses, and to share with each other and with the trip leaders about the value of nature - learning to respect nature and through that, to respect themselves. Repeated trips allow them to build relationships and respect over time, and develop trusting relationships with the adults.

Sacred Rok builds on developmental assets by providing a healthy and positive long-term adult relationship. We want participants to feel free to come back and visit Ron Kauk after camp, including after they have aged out of the juvenile justice or foster care system, and continue to take hikes or walks or experience nature. Ron is there for the long haul. We believe that these long term relationships are important for the mental health of all youth, including former foster and incarcerated youth. This is supported by an examination of data from 15,197 respondents for the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found a positive impact of natural mentors for former foster youth. (Greeson, J, Usher, L, and Grinstein-Weiss, M. "One adult who is crazy about you: Can natural mentoring relationships increase assets among young adults with and without foster care experience?" *Children and Youth Services Review*, Elsevier, vol. 32(4), pages 565-577, April 2010.)

This spring, Sacred Rok Board member Milbrey McLaughlin published *You Can't Be What You Can't See* (Harvard Education Press), a longitudinal account of the benefits of a quality out-of-school program on the life trajectories of hundreds of poor, African American youth who grew up in Chicago's notorious Cabrini-Green housing project in the 1980s and early '90s. The book documents these youth two decades after they attended a comprehensive after-school program offering tutoring, enrichment, scholarships, summer camps, and more. McLaughlin found that almost all had graduated high school and escaped poverty, and so had their children.

Key to the program's success: mentoring, exposure to activities and resources beyond their neighborhood, and a culture of belonging in which staff committed to "never give up on a kid."

McLaughlin identified two essential sorts of social capital that led to the success of the program. Social capital is a term used to describe human, social, cultural, and interactional assets, recognizing that capital includes more than financial wealth. Social capital is often lacking in low-income neighborhoods and troubled families, where the children do not have access to the cultural and human connections of their more affluent peers. "Bridging capital" is exposure to new experiences. The Cabrini-Green youth were taken on field trips to schools, job sites, and cultural events which exposed them to new ideas and opportunities. "Bonding capital" refers to the strengthening of bonds between the youth and the mentors. These design principles are very much in alignment with the Sacred Rok approach, which exposes young people to new experiences in nature (bridging), as well as building trust with caring adults on repeated trips (bonding).

Sacred Rok primarily provides experiences in Yosemite, where many if not most of the youth have never been although they live in Merced, known as the "Gateway to Yosemite." We want them to feel good about nature and themselves, feel at peace and less stressed, build long-term relationships with trusted adults, and return to their home community empowered to make positive choices at home and school. Our surveys and reflections from the staff/mentors seek to measure these outcomes.

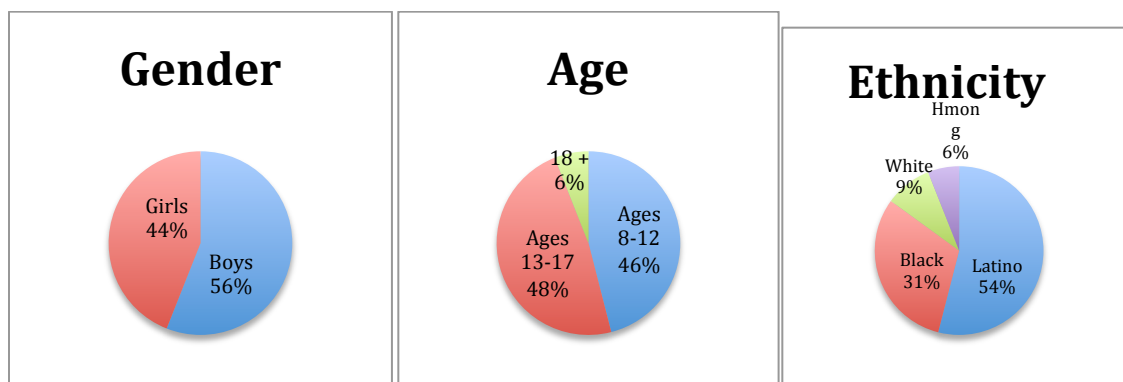
Sacred Rok Outcome Data

Sacred Rok began collecting outcome data for trips funded by the United Way in early 2012. Between February 2012 and March 2018, we received 157 surveys from youth, primarily from the Merced Boys & Girls Club as well as other nonprofit agencies. The surveys represented 47 trips to Yosemite, both daylong trips as well as camping trips. In line with the Sacred Rok model of small groups and repeat trips, there was an average of 4 youth on each trip. It is a duplicated count since some youth went on multiple trips. We also have reports about participant behavior after the trip, from agency staff and mentors.

We also partner with the probation departments in Merced County and in San Benito County to lead incarcerated youth on trips to Yosemite and Pinnacles National Parks. The trip count and survey results presented here do not include incarcerated youth, which represented an additional 47 trips with approximately 200 youth. The results from the incarcerated youth are documented in *Voices from The Inside Out*, our book written with the Merced Probation Department's Iris Garrett Juvenile Justice Complex's Bear Creek Academy program, as well as our recent booklet about San Benito County Probation.

Base on the results of the 157 surveys of the non-incarcerated youth, the demographic breakdown is shown in the pie charts below:

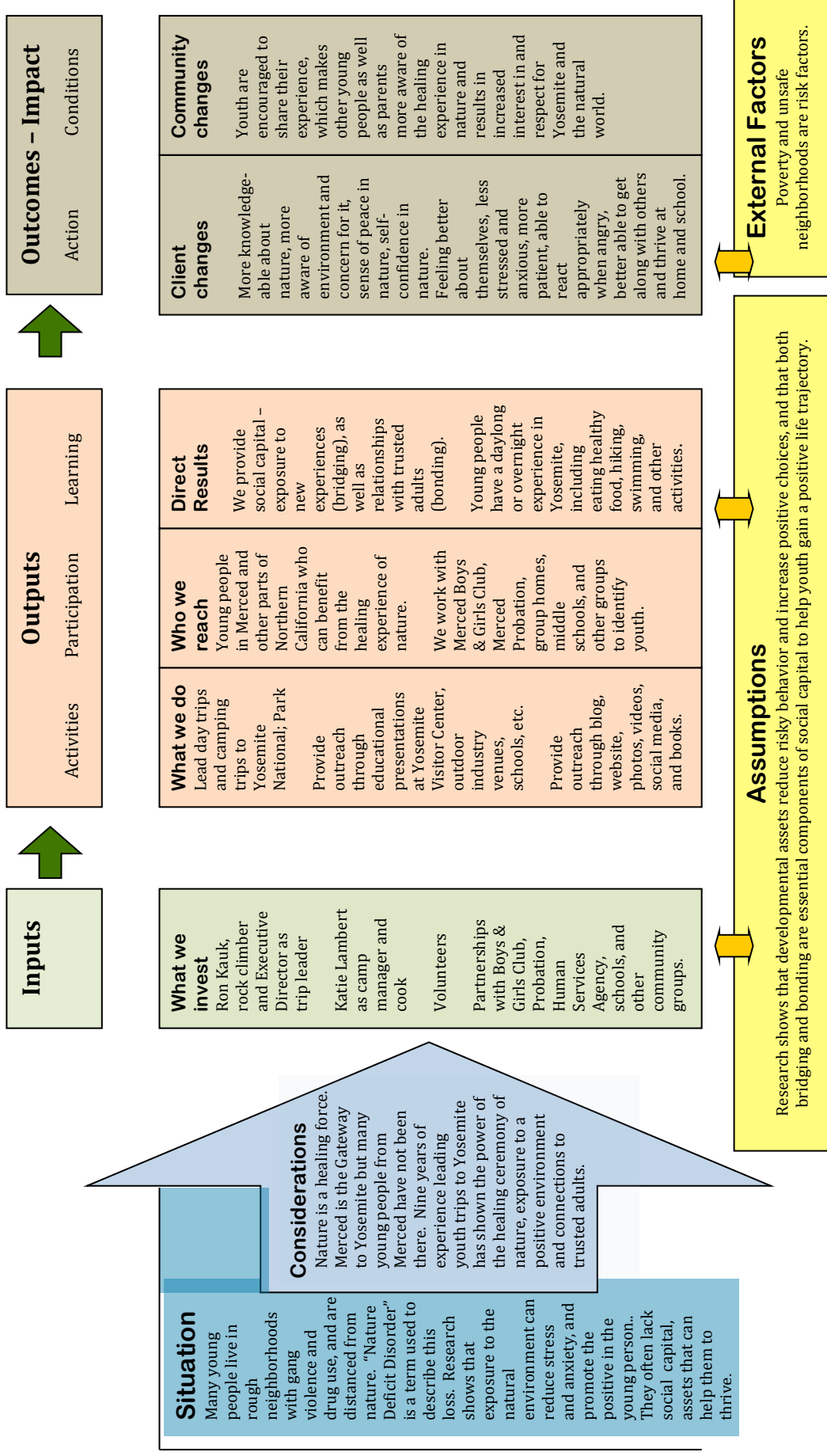
- 56% boys, 44% girls
- 46% were between ages 8 and 12; 48% were between ages 13 and 17, and 6% were 18 or older.
- 54% were Latino, 31% were African-American, 9% were Caucasian, and 6% were Asian Hmong.



The Boys & Girls Club mentor reports, "it's always beneficial when club members get a chance to visit this beautiful place and to return with a positive outlook. Participants have been outstanding at the club and received recognition as "youth of the month." As a result of the trips, these youth demonstrated a more positive attitude, being more respectful and responsible, and earn great grades."

Our logic model links our inputs and activities to our outputs and expected outcomes.

Logic Model: Sacred Rok Yosemite Youth Trips



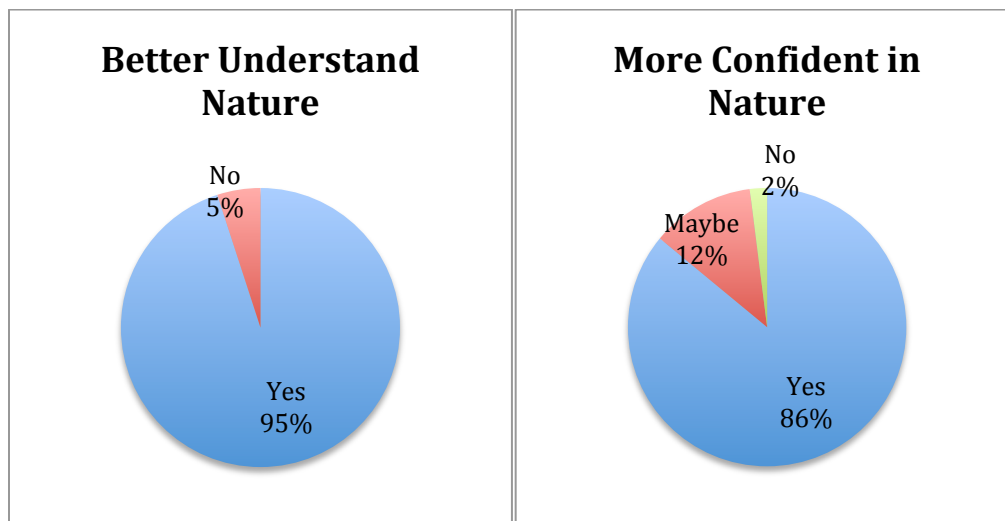
Evaluation

Evaluation is through surveys of non-incarcerated youth trip participants and reports from staff. These surveys are completed by all participants at the end of each trip, and the results are reported in our quarterly benchmark reports to United Way as well as our Annual Report posted on the Sacred Rok website www.SacredRok.org.

Post-trip, youth said they knew more about nature and felt more confident in nature.

We surveyed the youth post-trip. Most of them had never been to Yosemite, and many had never left their own neighborhood. We wanted them to have a positive and supportive experience of nature, and our survey results indicate that we were successful.

One question was whether they knew more about nature after the trip. Based on participant surveys, 95% said they knew more about nature after the trip better and 5% said "Maybe." A related question was whether they now felt more confident in nature. Eighty-six percent said the trip made them feel more confident in nature, 12% said "Maybe," and only 2% said "No."



One participant reflected, "Being around nature brings a whole different way of thinking." They recognized the power of the different environment, with one fifteen year old saying, "I smelled fresh air. Here in Merced you smell weed at the corner of a street, or smoke." One teen said, "I will always remember the smell of the dirt, it is different.*"

During the trips, the youth participants often pick up trash around the Valley floor. The Boys & Girls Club mentor commented that one participant who never cared about the environment was now very eco-friendly, asking to do community cleanup or clean up the parking lot.

* The word cloud on the title page has been created from comments by youth and mentors.

Post-trip, youth said they felt better about themselves, less stressed and anxious.

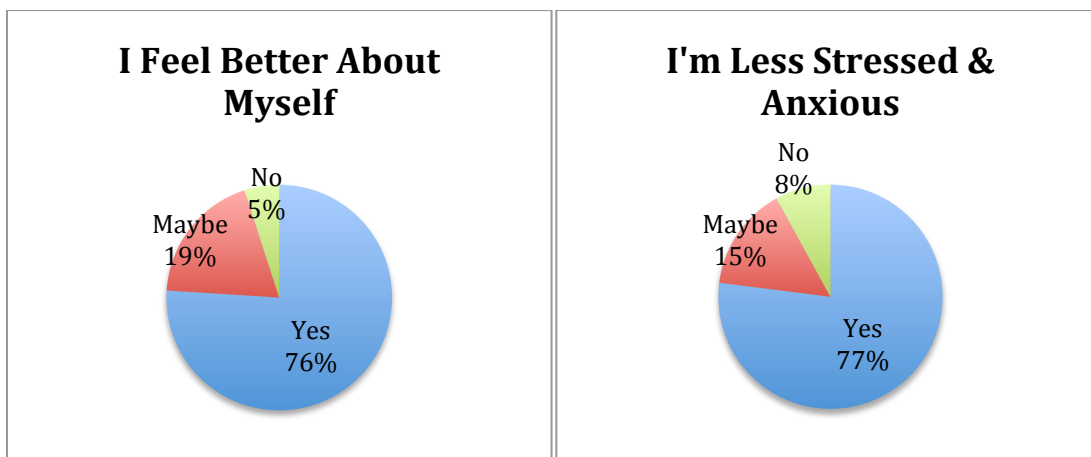
Our theory of change was that the healing ceremony of nature would help the participants relax, reduce stress, and provide them the opportunity for peaceful self-reflection. This was borne out by the survey results and the Boys & Girls Club mentor observations.

Based on participant surveys, 76% said the trip made them feel better about themselves, 19% said "Maybe," and only 5% said "No." One participant reflected, "It allowed us time to be introspective and reflect on our priorities, actions, and thought processes." Another said, "It made me feel more open and to get to know my inner self," and one said, "I feel better because I enjoyed nature and wasn't on my phone." Still another youth participant said, "I just felt closer to myself, more open-minded to how I feel about others' point of views and their struggles. It made me more aware of how to act towards others and myself."

Based on surveys, 77% said the trip made them feel less stressful or anxious, 15% said "Maybe," and only 8% said "No." The Boys & Girls Club mentor gave an example of one participant who had not been self-confident prior to the trip. After the trip, during which he tried things he had never done before and succeeded, he became more self-confident, willing and able to try new things.

Youth reflections included:

- "It made me feel more calm."
- "It makes me feel different because being in nature makes me comfortable."
- "I have learned to respect nature and how to be peaceful with myself and others."
- "I loved how peaceful it was. It made me forget about my problems."
- "It is a calm and soothing environment. It helped me think a lot about life and how I should be taking pictures to remind myself of such beauty in Merced."



Post-trip, youth said they were more patient and better able to handle anger.

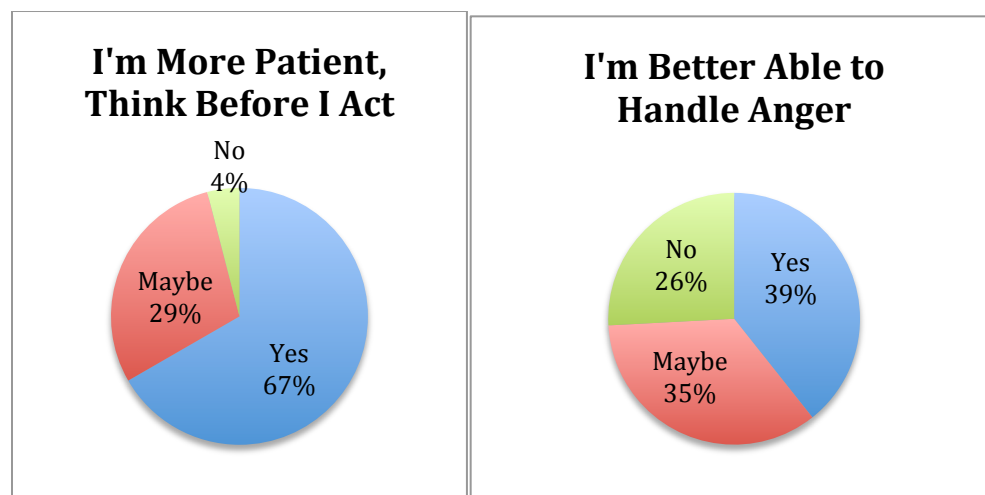
We anticipated that the experience in nature, away from phones and day to day distractions, surrounded by the magnificence and beauty of the natural world, would help participants take a broader view of their own concerns, be more patient, and be better able to handle frustrations and anger. According to self reports, they were much more likely to feel the trip helped them to be more patient, and somewhat more likely to feel they would better respond to anger.

Based on participant surveys, 67% said the trip would help them be more patient and think before they act, 29% said "Maybe," and only 4% said "No." The Boys & Girls Club mentor identified the changes in one young teen, saying, "She used to do everything in a rush, and now she is calmer and more patient."

Thirty-nine percent said that trips like this would help them react better when they got angry; another 35% said "Maybe," while 26% said "No." One said, "When I get angry I might be able to take a walk."

Participants said:

- "Differences between people sort of melt away when you are out in nature enjoying yourself. I liked the feeling of everyone just being people."
- "I'm more peaceful and I can relax to solve any of my problems."
- "This trip has made me see I can enjoy life without being on my phone all the time."
- "It helped me understand why nature is therapy with the clean air and the cold air and that beautiful waterfall."
- "I developed decision-making skills when I decided not to go closer to the waterfall."



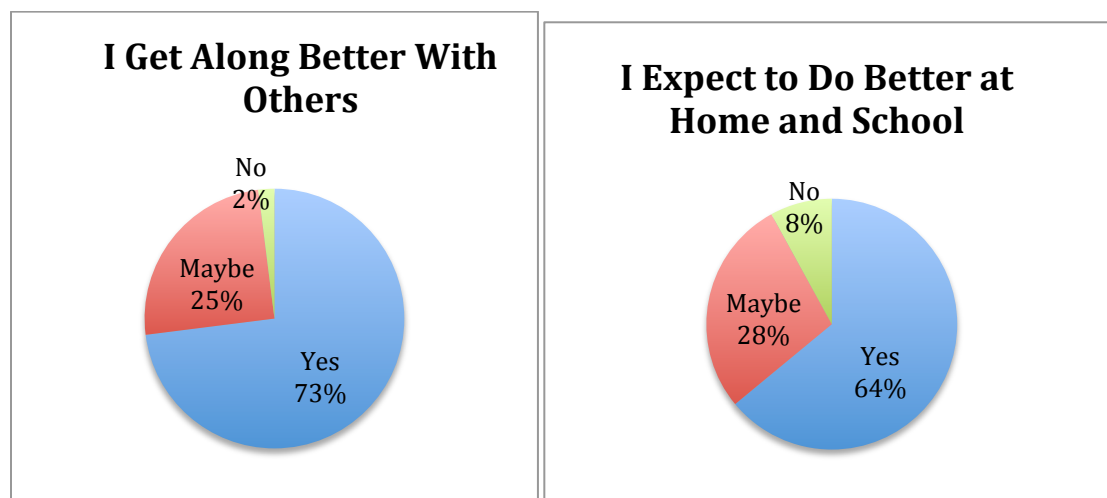
Post-trip, youth said they got along better with others, and expected to do better in home and school.

We hoped that the trips would have a positive impact on their relationships with other adults and peers, as well as their home and school life. According to participants as well as the Boys & Girls Club mentors, this was indeed the case.

Seventy-three percent said the Sacred Rok trips would help them get along better with other people; 25% said "Maybe" and only 2% said "No." One participant said, "This trip made me realize I hold grudges a lot and that I should try to forgive people in order to be happy." One participant said, "I felt more comfortable talking to people while hiking," and another said, "It helps you form stronger bonds with people." We also asked if they thought they would do better in home and in school after their time with Sacred Rok in Yosemite. Sixty-four percent said, "Yes," 28% said "Maybe" and 8% said "No."

Based on observations by the mentors, the participants developed strong positive relationships with trip leader Ron Kauk as well as with the Boys & Girls Club mentors who accompany them on the trips. Their mentor states that Sacred Rok day trips with the Boys & Girls Club have had an astonishing impact on the youth. "These trips seem to never fail to enlighten our youth and provide new experiences. For example, one teen who will be a sophomore in high school always seem to glow after each Yosemite trip, and she just so humble when she's present at the club."

The Boys & Girls Club mentor reports, "You can't explain how close these youth get with their peers and adults. From the bus ride, to the Yosemite experience, it is outstanding. These trips give youth a chance to let their guard down and to be more open to others and most importantly, themselves. Also for adults, it gives them a opportunity to step out of their roles , becoming more approachable and not so authoritative. These trips help build these relationships so much, where youth and adult can look back and reflect on their experience together and talk about the good times."



The Boys & Girls Club mentors shared several observations:

- “Before the trip, one teen would at times speak rudely to Teen Staff at the Club. He was beginning to clash with staff to a point where they had to contact his parents. After the trip, his relationship with Teen Staff improved, based on their bonding experience. He has been involved with the club participating in basketball tournaments, and just recently won the championship in his division. Another teen always wanted to be the center of attention. After the trip, she has really toned herself down. She is more helpful in the kitchen when serving snacks, calmer, and more respectful.”
- “There has never been an incident that I have recalled where they have been rude to any human being here at the club.”
- “One third-grade foster child made dramatic behavioral improvements; at first she was bad-mannered with her group and impolite at times. But after attending this trip, she felt closer to the club and is happy all the time now.”
- “One teen had been struggling with her science class, to a point where she was failing. The trips serve as an outlet, where she could de-stress herself, be sincere, feel harmonious, and to be self-reflective. Since she started the trips, she has been improving, increasing her grade two letters up. She cherishes these trips up to Yosemite, and is always looking forward to them.”
- “The youth who attend understand that it is a privilege to go to Yosemite. Most importantly, being selected for these trips, we look at youth who do their homework and attend school and stay out of trouble. The youth are consistent about completing their schoolwork and some of them are even involved in extracurricular activities such as basketball and cheerleading.”
- “Youth who are given a chance to know more about their peers outside the club are more interactive towards staff. The younger participants enjoy their close relationship with Teen Staff at the Club. They seek to him for enjoyment and entertainment, and enjoy sing-alongs during the bus rides. The youth are really responsive to him at the club also. All the older youth participants have become closer to Teen Staff at BGC as well as to the mentors. They are more open when speaking to them, and less likely to get into trouble.”
- “The youth who took the trip have been really kind and respectful lately here at the club. Their manners have improved when having adult conversations. The youth have become easier to work with and they are more understanding.”

Conclusion

The survey results and observations of the mentors after the trips support the Sacred Rok approach of facilitating the healing ceremony of nature, leading trips with small numbers of youth, and building long-term relationships with adult trip leaders. Helping to build developmental assets through fostering social capital – both bridging capital through exposure to new experiences, and bonding capital by building relationships – has been demonstrated to be a positive approach. Although the Sacred Rok experience is not a panacea for a difficult neighborhood or a challenging home life, we are heartened that participants are learning about nature and the earth, and learning to be human again.

Incarcerated youth are not represented in this report because they were not the survey population, but the partnership with Probation has yielded benefits for them as well. Ron has been taking organic lunch fixings and having lunch with the youth at the Merced juvenile hall after every trip they take to Yosemite. The classroom teacher has built Sacred Rok into the curriculum, and the collaboration resulted in a book co-written with the youth and sharing their reflections on the impact of the trips to Yosemite. The book, *Voices From the Inside Out*, is a testament to the resilience of these young men and women as they make their way through the juvenile justice system. The Probation Department recently gave Sacred Rok a grant to take kids to Yosemite after they exit Juvenile Hall, as a valuable support to help reduce recidivism.

Special thanks to our supporters and partners

A.C. Israel Foundation
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