



## ALDO LEOPOLD WILDERNESS RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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### EVALUATING A WILDERNESS EDUCATION PROGRAM FOR CHILDREN: THE IMPACT MONSTER

**Keywords:** low-impact, recreation, public education, children, school programs. Leave No Trace



photo by Pam Hamp

**Background & Management Issues:** Since its development in the late 1970s, a wilderness education skit entitled *The Impact Monster* has been used as a wilderness education tool for children in grades K-8 by federal land management agencies. During the skit, an “Impact Monster” demonstrates inappropriate behavior in a wilderness area, and a “good guy” corrects the behavior. Despite its widespread use by wilderness educators, the Impact Monster program had not been comprehensively evaluated for content effectiveness or grade level appropriateness.

#### **Project Objectives:**

**PHASE A:** To systematically evaluate the perceived effectiveness of the Impact Monster program and its content by wilderness educators.

**PHASE B:** To examine the effectiveness of different persuasive communication sources and messages, as well as the effects of student grade levels, on low-impact camping short-term behavioral intentions.

#### **Project Description:**

**PHASE A:** Fifty-five educators who had used the Impact Monster program as a wilderness education tool completed a detailed questionnaire to determine their perceptions of the program’s effectiveness and content, the appropriate age groups for the program, problems with the program, how they modified the program (in terms of content, presentation, student participation and length), and how the

program could be improved.

**PHASE B:** A quasi-experimental design employing pre- and post-tests was conducted with 574 elementary school students to examine the effect of (1) grade level (first vs. third vs. sixth), (2) wilderness ranger vs. wilderness hiker as the “good guy”, (3) “cool” Impact Monster dressed in brightly colored clothing vs. Impact Monster dressed as a traditional wilderness hiker, and (4) asserting behaviors (i.e., telling students what is appropriate) vs. questioning behaviors (i.e., asking students what they think is appropriate) as the predominant persuasive teaching method. Two versions of the skit were presented. Short-term behavioral intentions were measured prior to and following presentation of the skits by having each student view a wilderness setting illustration depicting appropriate and inappropriate low-impact camping behaviors. Students were asked to circle those activities they would do the next time they went camping in a wilderness setting.

#### **Results:**

##### **PHASE A**

The Impact Monster Program was rated good to excellent by most educators.

Fourth-grade children were considered the most appropriate audience for the program, followed by fifth-, third-, and sixth-grade children.

Most educators considered an Impact Monster clothed in bright colors an important program element.

Problems experienced with the program included children fearing the gun used in the skit, wilderness educators tiring of presenting the program, and older students identifying too strongly with the Impact Monster.

- ✓ The most frequent suggestions to improve the program were: avoid stereotypes, be sensitive to cultural differences, facilitate acquisition of props, emphasize positive behavior, maintain program flexibility, and develop evaluation methods.
- ✓ Overall, the program content should be linked more directly to ecosystem management concepts and Leave No Trace principles.

#### PHASE B

- ✓ Pre-test and post-test scores differed significantly in the short-term behavioral intentions of students following exposure to the Impact Monster program regardless of which version of the skit the students

watched.

- ✓ Third and sixth graders' scores were significantly higher than first graders' scores, indicating the Impact Monster program may be inappropriate for first grade students.
- ✓ A wilderness hiker was more effective than a wilderness ranger as a positive message source.
- ✓ A "cool" Impact Monster dressed in brightly colored clothing was not much more effective as a negative message source than an Impact Monster dressed as a traditional wilderness hiker.
- ✓ Asserting behaviors was more effective than questioning behaviors in persuading students to adopt low-impact behaviors.

#### Management Implications:

- ❖ The Impact Monster program is a useful tool for promoting appropriate wilderness behavior because it may influence short-term behavioral intentions.

#### Publications / Products:

- ❖ Hendricks, W. W.; Watson, A. E. 1999. Wilderness educators' evaluation of the Impact Monster program. Res. Pap. RMRS-RP-15. Fort Collins, CO: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station. 12 p. **Leopold Publication Number 356.** [Read it here!](#)
- ❖ Hendricks, W. W. 1999. Persuasive communication and grade level effects on behavioral intentions within a wilderness education program. International Journal of Wilderness. 5(2): 21-25. **Leopold Publication Number 367.** [Read the abstract here.](#)
- ❖ Recipient: Chief's Excellence in Wilderness Research Award, 1999 (USDA Forest Service)

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