

HIGH BRIDGE CREEK ¹

A visit to an intern working with an outfitter on the Outer Banks in North Carolina reinforced the role of recreation in resource protection and the need provide both a recreational experience while protecting the integrity of the resource. Assembled on the bank next to the outfitter's store was a group of ten adults and five children. They were on vacation on the Outer Banks in North Carolina and paid upwards of twenty-seven dollars for a two hour experience in the backcountry. The parents were there to experience nature, to lay back and enjoy the natural rhythms, to have some fun and to provide an experience for their children. It was a group which did not have high expectations. An egret, heron, or perhaps a snake lounging on a tree limb five feet from their boat was enough to satisfy this group. In no way does this denigrate this group and their expectations. It is only to say that in comparison to a wilderness or more seasoned backcountry traveler, it took a lot less to make this group happy. In a pleasant way, this was refreshing.

A brief talk up by the trip guide included a couple of strokes and some safety procedures. Kayaks and equipment were provided to them. Simple two seater kayaks and a couple of single seat touring kayak. People paddled with open cockpits; no spray skirts were necessary. After some instruction on several basic kayak strokes, They got into their kayaks and the group was off.

In total, the trip into the backcountry was no more than a mile and one half total. A paddle under the bridge which carried the main road. Then it was past some large houses on the left until just before the creek opened into the bay. A turn around and a backtrack back to the bridge. Back underneath the bridge and down a creek toward the covered bridge. For about half of the trip, there were houses on the right. On the left was the Kitty Hawk Preserve. At the covered bridge, the group turned around and headed back from whence they came.

As we paddled, I enjoyed talking with the people in the group. It is always sobering to find out where they were in terms of the experience they want. One parent was simply happy to lean back in the seat of his kayak and relax. For another parent, the trip was a simple pleasure, an alternative to hustle and bustle of their vacation. The son in the bow of the one boat had stated to his parent prior to the trip who was now sitting in the stern of their kayak that he was going to provide all the motive power on the trip today. He sat their kind of stoically as his father did most of the paddling. Although he didn't look bored, his facial expression suggested that he might not be into the trip. Along with an egret and heron, he did see a brown snake resting on a branch five feet in front of him and he did see a water moccasin swimming in the water twenty feet from the boat. It was a real experience where no one contrived these animals to appear on cue. They are snapshots in the photo album of his mind which he will remember later in his life.

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On the other hand, an older couple, a husband and wife team were happy to be simply left alone.

Each person sought a somewhat similar but different experience. It provided them a chance to lay back and contemplate. It provided me a chance to lay back and contemplate too. The trip reinforced three major point for me. First, preservation results from people experiencing the backcountry. People result in preservation. Stephen Mather, the first director of the National Park Service had it right. People experiencing the backcountry develop an appreciation for the need to preserve that experience for others. Their appreciation leads to political support for the protection and management of the natural resource.

Second, our trip traversed along the side of Kitty Hawk Wildlife Preserve where it would have minimal impact on the preserve. Our trip didn't penetrate into the heart of the preserve. In terms of management, our group had at best minimal impact on the wildlife preserve. This was a win/win situation where our group was provided with a valuable experience and the wildlife received minimum disruption. Conversely, we didn't penetrate the interior of the wildlife preserve where we would disturb the natural rhythms of the wildlife. And for this group, it would have only been a marginally better experience for the group.

Like the other boaters on the trip, I sat back in the seat of my boat and contemplated. My thoughts turned to my last lesson since from a management perspective, this trip reminded me of Shark Valley. Whether they were aware of their collective actions or not, the State and the outfitter were managing the experience to provide the public with a valuable experience while maintaining the integrity of the resource. It is the basic formula revisited. It is people. It is resource protection. The two are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is largely a management issue.