

February 14, 2023

To the Guardian,

We are writing in relation to two recent articles published by the Guardian about abusive practices that have occurred in some wilderness therapy programs in the United States. The programs and practices described in the articles represent a small minority of adventure and nature-based therapy services in the United States, and are not representative of International Adventure Therapy services offered globally.

We offer this response on behalf of the Adventure Therapy International Committee (ATIC), the international body for adventure therapy globally.

We write to both condemn harmful outdoor practices, and to share information on safe and effective practices for discerning readers. A global Position Statement will be posted on our International Adventure Therapy website in the near future, after consultation with ATIC members.

International Adventure Therapy

International adventure therapy (IAT) is different from the abusive US-based wilderness programs described in your recent articles, yet related because IAT services also operate outdoors, in nature.

ATIC has professional members from more than 40 countries worldwide. Our services include outdoor-, adventure- and nature-based therapies that provide tailored physical, mental, social and behavioural benefits for many thousands of people annually.

Internationally, adventure therapy programs carefully combine four therapeutically beneficial sets of practices: 1. experiential physical activities, 2. psychological care, 3. safe social relationships, and 4. time in and with nature. 'How' IAT service providers apply these 4 sets of practices varies greatly across cultures, and even within local jurisdictions.

Ethical adventure therapy programs engage participants voluntarily where possible, and provide options, choices, and safe supported exits where necessary. In ethical services, participants are not coerced or punished; informed consent, voluntary participation and the genuine option of 'choosing to not participate' are cornerstones of ethical IAT practice. 'How' IAT programs apply these principles varies across participant groups and needs.

While ATIC does not yet accredit or regulate practitioners or programs, the ATIC professional community has supported high quality ethical practice for over 25 years via triennial international conferences. Many programs across the globe are accredited or licenced by professional or government entities in their own region.

A necessary role for nature-based therapies

Across the globe, outdoor-, adventure- and nature-based solutions are gaining increased attention for the many physical, psychological and social benefits they can bring to the health of individuals, groups and communities.

Given rising rates of physical and mental ill health, family breakdown and social inequity, there is a clear need for innovative health practices, and a beneficial role for outdoor-, adventure- and nature-based solutions to support the emerging needs of our communities.

Safe ethical adventure therapy practices

ATIC condemns abusive practices categorically. We are also cautious about perpetuating vitriolic public discourse that does not lead to meaningful solutions.

Our reason for engaging in this dialogue is to support clear and constructive public discourse from a global perspective, and to highlight the diverse, innovative, safe and highly effective uses of outdoor-, adventure- and nature-based therapies within communities around the globe.

We appreciate the role that journalism can play in giving voice to abusive, traumatising practices. These practices have no place in mental health practice, and do not reflect the values and ethics of the International Adventure Therapy community.

ATIC supports:

- Respect for the rights and dignity of all humans (and non-human life)
- Understanding of the benefits of adventure therapy to prevent and ameliorate a range of physical, psychological, behavioural and social difficulties
- The importance of rigorous research, evidence-informed practice, and systematic appraisal of effective practices
- The importance of promoting safe and ethical practices through professional dialogue, events, program exchange, training and research.

Understanding culture and context

ATIC, in collaboration with representatives from a range of US stakeholders¹ acknowledge the reality of abusive practices that are described in the articles, and elsewhere.

The US is experiencing a health and mental health crisis, leaving many people desperate. The US health system has a particular history, culture, health and legislative context that appears to allow the 'troubled teen industry' to flourish in ways that are hard to imagine in other places. We understand that abusive practices are not limited to the US context. Ethical IAT practice requires consideration of complex social and ecological contexts, where individuals' rights are sometimes reduced or removed in favour of perceived individual-, family- or community wellbeing.

ATIC also acknowledges that there are governments, service systems, interventions and practices around the world that claim to provide health care, but instead harm individuals; these abuses must also stop.

A way forward

ATIC recognises that systemic responses to these complex issues are required. We acknowledge that on-ground professionals have been working to increase safety and ethical practice for decades in the US and elsewhere. This work will continue by ATIC members, both locally on the ground in the US and internationally.

Our work to support quality practice will be undertaken with care to ensure that our responses do not perpetuate public discourse that accidentally discredits well intentioned, ethical and effective services that are doing great work in our communities.

For more information on International Adventure Therapy and the Adventure Therapy International Committee: <https://internationaladventuretherapy.org/>

Please feel free to get in touch if you have any questions relating to this letter, ATIC or international adventure therapy practices in general.

Kind regards,

ATIC Co-Chairs

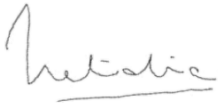
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