“In overstepping our limitations, in touching the extreme boundaries of man’s world, we have come to know something of its true splendor. In my worst moments of anguish, I seemed to discover the deep significance of existence which till then I had been unaware”

(Herzog, 1997, p. 12).

What are extreme sports?

In the 1950s and 1960s rock climbers sought refuge from the constrictive culture of the mainstream at Yosemite and took up residence at Camp 4. This camp and park became home and inspiration for groundbreaking climbers who would also become groundbreaking entrepreneurs: Yvonne Choinard and Tom Frost (Patagonia) and Royal Robbins (Royal Robbins). These businesses espoused the values of environmentalism, responsible use, and recreation—a combination of the American spirit & entrepreneurship.

Extreme sports started in the counterculture of the 1950s and 1960s and were codified in 1995 with the advent of the first XGames. Extreme sports include counterculture sports (like skateboarding), and lifestyle sports (like mountaineering), inherent in an extreme sport is risk or danger. They differ from traditional sports because they occur in an uncontrolled environment. While football and soccer happen on a field, basketball and tennis happen on a court, extreme sports like kayaking, mountaineering, snowboarding, and surfing happen in the natural world. Skateboarding, motocross, and mountain biking all bridge this gap between controlled setting and natural world—these are sports that happen in both constructed spaces as well as in natural settings. To borrow Chris Crowe’s framework (2001), extreme sports have seeped into mainstream American culture through fashion (North Face & Patagonia) and media (Extreme Sports Channel & XGames). Extreme sport participants exist on all ends of the skill spectrum (casual climber or boater to the professional) and are represented in local clubs/groups to create communities with shared vocabulary and culture.

Why extreme sports?

Adolescence is a period of time that is often associated with pushing boundaries: “Risky behaviors remain very real factors in the daily lives of 21st century teens,” (Cart, 2010, p. 32) and a time when students are negotiating their own sense of identity while also expanding their knowledge of the world. Gary Paulsen describes this desire for risk as common among boys: “Some men climb Everest. Others pee on an electric fence” (Blasingame, J. & Paulsen, G. 2004, p. 270). Extreme sports embrace risk while also embracing reasoned decision-making and action offering students the opportunity to explore the nature of risk and human response to it. Extreme sport athletes and characters find themselves in unpredictable situations with knowledge & skills to inform how they
react and respond. Students can explore questions like: What is the relationship between risk and fear? Is something risky if lots of people do it? In what ways does knowledge mediate risk and in what ways does it not? What’s the difference between taking a risk and seeking a thrill—are these the same?

Because extreme sports rely on interaction with nature, these sports take place away from urban centers; thus, they have the potential to reflect rurality and the experiences of students who do not find themselves at home on a basketball court or football field. Finally, in their interaction with nature, extreme sports offer students the opportunity to consider the human relationship with the natural world. The literature is rife with references to natural resources, the relationship of use to waste, implications of climate change, and the balance (or lack of it) between human interaction and the well-being of the earth. Because of the varied contexts, students are also provided an opportunity to study the science behind the sports: How is erosion and rock structure related to climate change? What are the impacts of noxious weeds/invasive species to ocean and river life? How do ocean levels relate to surf zones? What creates a wave? How did glaciers formed?

Extreme sports often reflect an outsider status but embrace collaboration; extreme sports are individual in nature but team oriented for support and access. Expeditionary behaviors mean the action of one directly affects the lives and actions of others. The ‘team’ becomes vital in rescue situations. Risk of one is the risk of all. What are responsible behaviors when you are part of a group expedition? Under what conditions is okay to put others at risk? What are the essential qualities of group leaders? Group members?

Extreme athletes describe their experiences in words like “being in the zone” or “the Zen moment” which implies a kind of altered state of consciousness where the athlete steps outside of himself or herself. Watson (2005) describes this as stepping into the ‘sublime’ where the athlete is simultaneously in awe of the natural world, as if they are apart from it, as well as actively working with the natural world in the name of sport. Climbers describe this as ‘working the problem’ while surfers describe this as ‘being one’ with a wave. It is a kind of awakening. These books are coming of age texts that center on the trials and tribulations characters face as they pursue some search for the ‘extreme’ or the ‘sublime’—oftentimes experiencing both. What is learned from extreme experiences? When are people able to transcend themselves for the sake of something greater? How do extreme interactions with nature leave us/in what ways are we changed?

“I have to be there, have to get my hands dirty, my bones broken, my face dragged through the snow, my head whacked with the beam of a sailboat to really savor the experience. It would be easier if I found my adventures in the pages of a book, but I’m a slower learner, I guess, and I’m out there findings out things for myself,” Gary Paulsen (p. 271).
## RESOURCES

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### Snowboarding

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_Snowboard Showdown_  
_Snowboard Maverick_  
_By Matt Christopher_  

**The Edge**  
_By Ben Ho_  

**Girl Overboard**  
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### Whitewater

**Orca Current Series**  
_Camp Wild_  
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**Take it to the Xtreme Series**  
_Raging River_  
_By Pam Withers_  

_Wild River_  
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_Downriver_  
_River Thunder_  
_Take Me to the River_  
_By Will Hobbs_  

_Uglies (Series)_  
_By Scott Westerfeld_  
_(dystopian)_  

**Going Vertical: The life of an extreme kayaker**  
_By Tao Berman & Pam Withers_  

**The Emerald Mile: The Epic Story of the Fastest Ride in History Through the Heart of the Grand Canyon**  
_By Kevin Fedarko_  

**Down the Great Unknown: John Wesley Powell's 1869 Journey of Discovery and Tragedy Through the Grand Canyon**  
_By Edward Dolnick_  

**Down the Grand Canyon**  
_(2014)_  

**Into the Tsangpo Gorge**  
_(2009)_  

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### Surfing

**Drenaline Surf Series**  
_Chasing Forever Down_  
_Rough Waters_  
_Always Summer_  
_By Nikki Godwin_  

_Kook_  
_By Chris Vick_  

**Ghost Wave: The Discovery of Cortes Bank and the Biggest Wave on Earth**  
_By Chris Dixon_  

**The History of Surfing**  
_By Matt Warshaw_  

**Surf Science: An Introduction**  

**Step into Liquid**  
_(2005)_  

**Riding Giants**  
_(2005)_  

**Waverider**  
_(2013)_  

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References:


