"I'd Rather Have Shapers": Opening the Box of Outdoor Leaders' Dietary Practices and Preferences

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Outdoor leaders that work on journey-based outdoor education programs may spend extended periods of time in remote wilderness environments leading expeditions that include physical activities such as bushwalking, paddling, cycling and climbing. In addition to the physical requirements of their role, they are also responsible for participant safety and facilitating the development of technical skills and philosophical growth. Sound nutrition is required to support the physical and mental health required for this demanding role. Analyses of program menus have revealed that they provide insufficient energy and nutrients to meet outdoor leaders' estimated requirements, yet catering staff have noted that food is returned uneaten from programs. Repetitive consumption of nutritionally inadequate diets place journey-based outdoor leaders at risk of nutrient deficiencies and resultant poor health and work performance. Careful meal planning can help to minimise this risk, but intakes are also dependent on the dietary practices and preferences of outdoor leaders in the field. This study aimed to identify factors that influence outdoor leaders' dietary practices. Focus groups were held with outdoor leaders from a large Australian outdoor education provider, and findings were corroborated with researcher field observations on two journey-based programs. Inductive thematic analysis identified three major themes influencing the dietary practices of outdoor leaders: physical context, food characteristics and personal and social influences. For this cohort, nutrition could be improved with greater variety within and between menus, a range of starchy foods to minimise carbohydrate fatigue, seasoning kits and more foods that are perceived to be fresh.

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