

Some Advice on Starting a Naturist Group

Nicky Hoffman Lee, Administrative Director, The Naturist Society

ORGANIZING A NATURIST group is a real responsibility. To get a group of people cooperating around the common principle of a clothing-optional lifestyle requires confidence, organization, writing and record keeping skills, not to mention courage and dedication. Once begun, a group needs to be stabilized. This requires inspiration, commitment and the ability to delegate.

Who Starts a Group?

Normally it is a group of men and women who realize the need to organize to enlarge our clothing-optional opportunities.

Threats to our major nude beaches have led to the formation of some leading naturist groups. Problems and opportunities at Wreck Beach in Vancouver, Mazo Beach in Wisconsin, Playalinda Beach and Haulover Beach in Florida, or San Onofre Beach in southern California encouraged groups to become organized.

In the beginning, people on the beach would recognize each other and informally share food and conversation. When the beaches became threatened these bonds of friendship became stronger and the need to organize and work together was realized.

But few people want to carry on hostilities with public servants while on holiday.- We seek to recapture peace of mind or relax from the daily grind. We want to see clearly the benefit before we sacrifice our vacation time.

Whether responding to threats or quite simply to a desire for sociability and recreation opportunities, organizing for naturism is worth the effort. The friends we make while cooperating to enjoy or save our clothing-optional lifestyle may well be the kind of people we want in our lives.

Nude recreation -- as skinny-dipping -- is a keystone of the heritage of free and natural individuality in America. Newspapers, magazines and commencement speakers, conservatives and liberals, all enjoy evoking the nostalgia of youngsters who ran down to the stream or quarry on a hot day, tore off their clothes, and dunked in soothing water.

As those who start naturist groups soon realize, the wilderness, waterways and beaches are not what they were. Nearly every acre has been mapped, zoned and acquired. What the developers aren't putting condominiums or shopping centers on, the government regulators are posting and taking under control.

It's hard to fully appreciate or realize the common sense of a clothing-optional lifestyle when it has no public space to occupy, no spas, resorts, free beaches, or fitness clubs. Indeed, groups tend now to form chiefly to find or create more and fresher settings for naturist activity. Perhaps more recent groups are not as ready they have been in the past to orient themselves to battle for the existing beaches when a substitute -- yacht, sailing craft, hot tub, or a nudist resort -- is available without much responsibility or hassle.

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Making Contacts & Getting Organized

So now -- who will organize the group which many seem to need and want? Who will volunteer?

In your group you should be able to identify that member who will be able to pull together the most information, talk with people (visitors as well as land management officials), see that the site stays clean and that people get included and have fun. There's the base for your leadership. But don't just settle everything on one person! That person eventually will feel overwhelmed, become discouraged and quit. Establish a shared responsibility base and keep it light and purposeful.

People who might function well as contacts are often reluctant to do so. They lack confidence in themselves. That is why we suggest that people already functioning in the role of information seeker, communicator, the real go-getter, become the contact in touch with The Naturist Society (TNS) headquarters in Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

TNS too had to organize, out of an experience of hastily pulling together a beach defense group at Cape Cod National Seashore in Massachusetts in the mid-1970s. We had to face all the problems: collecting names, addresses, and phone numbers, bringing people together, overcoming suspicions, fear and sheer lethargy, talking and negotiating with public officials, relating to legal defense, and organizing the large demonstrations and petition drives that proved beyond doubt that a public desire for clothing-optional space and rights does exist.

Today TNS is an organization established to educate society in body acceptance and to promote the clothing-optional lifestyle and recreational and living sites. TNS is made up of individuals, couples and families who take out supporting memberships. Our Naturist Network is composed of participating organizations which include TNS members and share TNS' values and goals. We work with our groups in informal, non-coercive and mutually helpful ways.

Benefits of a Relationship with The Naturist Society

While TNS will not furnish its membership names to contact groups, we will mail an introductory letter composed by your group to our members in your area.

We will print the group name, address, phone and e-mail /Web contact in the Naturist Network section of every issue of *Nude & Natural*.

In our nationwide public relations and publicity work for body acceptance and nude recreation, TNS will refer area media and press to nearby groups like yours.

Nude & Natural will serve as a forum for the discussion of problems and activities of Network participating groups.

Special Interest Groups (SIGS) fostered by TNS often inspire parallel SIGs within participating groups; and the area and national SIGs cooperate.

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Individual member benefits include a TNS membership card, also recognized by many landed nudist clubs which generally grant a discount on admittance; regional Gatherings; information on where to go for public or private nude recreation; subscription to our quarterly publication, *Nude & Natural*; legal and lobbying efforts, and discounts on items sold at the TNS Skinny-Dipper Shop, including the best-selling *World Guide to Nude Beaches and Resorts*.

Obligations of Naturist Network Groups

TNS can provide you with access to many possible members and a framework of ideas, values and experiences to help your group increase in size. In return, we believe it is reasonable to expect the participating group to help in the growth of the national organization its educational and legal purposes. There is no cost to be part of the Naturist Network. TNS asks this of participating groups:

- * Substantial effort to encourage the group's members to also join TNS. (For each membership sold and processed by the group, the group retains a portion of the membership fee.)
- * Regular contact with TNS staff with updates on group status, activities, changes of address or leadership, etc. (You'll also want to include TNS on your group mailing list.)
- * Sale to members and non-members of the *World Guide to Nude Beaches and Resorts* and *N*.
- * Checking possible nude recreation sites for listing in naturist publications as well as for the group's newsletter.
- * Substantial support for the Naturist Action Committee and other naturist groups and the naturist objectives (for example, letter writing or legal defense funding).

To start out with the ready help of an established national organization, with a genuinely international scope of information and activities, can do a lot to lift your local competence and confidence.

When first contacting us by mail, do share a sense of your background, your work, and your clothing-optional experiences and contacts to date.

Organizational Structure

Group name. Pick a name that has some descriptive power and wit. "Naturist" in the group name is, of course, desirable but not necessary.

Contact information. A post office box is nearly always preferred, because it will be a permanent home, while your officers may change. It also shields you from cranks. A dedicated Web site and e-mail address for your group are indispensable ways of promoting your group and communicating with members, and can be had for little cost.

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Legal status. It is not necessary to form a corporation to have a group. Your group can decide on a treasurer and checking account privileges. You can decide later whether it's feasible to incorporate if and when your group grows to a substantial size.

Leadership. Strong leadership of your group is far more important than legal organization. For a group to grow it needs a single person, or a focused steering committee, to stay on top of the problems and opportunities with frequent decision making. Leaders should be skilled at motivating volunteers and delegating activities.

Your spokesperson should have no problem becoming widely known as a naturist. If there appears to be reluctance and a resort to first names only, the press and media will immediately write you off as engaged in something shameful (why else would you conceal your identity?). As people tend to relate more readily to women as spokespersons, it is imperative that female leadership be utilized-not as a token, but as a full-fledged, integral part of the group.

Membership. We recommend household, not individual memberships. An individual will pay the same as a couple or family at a single address. TNS issues a card which includes the participating group name and both names in a couple, if applicable.

Committees. Whatever you call them, specific task forces for each major concern and responsibility must be formed. Publicity, newsletter, activities planning, member services, legal concerns, all need specific tender loving care.

Treasury. One person should have responsibility for the money and should keep timely and accurate accounts. Establish a separate bank account; don't combine the group funds with your personal accounts. You don't need problems over money handling.

Newsletter. Your newsletter is your reliable link to your members. Write to other naturist groups and ask to be included in their mailing list; borrow their ideas. Involve somebody with your newsletter who has computer competence and production experience. Make your newsletter informative and attractive, but don't obsess over visual perfection; the key is to make it simple, readable and informative. Include your events calendar, list of officers, and contact info in each issue. Solicit help from members (you may not get it, but it's worth asking). Set mailing dates and meet them.

Paraphernalia. T-shirts, membership cards, bumper stickers, are all perceived as desirable by membership. They lend a tangible presence to the organization.

History keeping. From the very first meeting begin compiling a written and photographic history of your group. Include reports and photos in your newsletter, or send them to TNS for inclusion in *Nude & Natural*.

Don't be intimidated by these organizational aspects of forming a group. Just see that somebody is doing whatever needs to be done, then clarify it with descriptive titles and lines of interaction and occasional discussions of what is happening, so all members are informed and able to contribute their thoughts.

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Group Standards & Etiquette

Before you proceed to calling meetings, get some policies established for your naturist group. They should include:

Nude is not lewd. Explicit sexual contacts have no place in organized naturist events.

Drugs have no place in a naturist group context. Neither does intoxication or other irresponsible use of alcohol.

Litter -- clean it up! Leadership etiquette demands that your group members set the performance standard, removing more trash than they create. Nowadays at beach clean-ups, officials comment that our nude beaches rarely need much cleaning up-it has already been taken care of. Naturists respect the environment.

Photography is only with consent. Photography is legal in any place on public land or visible from public land, regardless of whether subjects are dressed or nude, or whether they choose to consent. In practice, however, group etiquette should always seek consent and respect refusals. (If you plan to publish the photos in your newsletter or on your Web site, or will submit them to *Nude & Natural* for publication, be sure your photo subjects know and consent to this.)

Newsletters, flyers, and publications should avoid giving offense to members or the public through inclusion, in any form, of sleaze or pornography. Readers should be left in no doubt that your promotion of naturism provides an alternative to conventional ideas of nudity or sexuality.

Clothing is optional. Nudity is not mandated, being guided by appropriate response to the circumstances.

Openness means that members should be forthright about their names, addresses and livelihoods. In the past American nudism failed to defend itself against repressive legislation, and to grow and become the role setter of dress rationality, in large part because of the secretiveness of its membership and even of its leaders. This attitude is intolerable today. It is not necessary for all members to be recognized, but those with pride in naturism should be good ambassadors of our lifestyle.

The more the public is unaware of the standards of appropriate naturist behavior, the more your group members should attempt to set and voice standards in all situations. The problem is to separate the fear of lewdness from situations of mere social nudity. Many times we can demonstrate this awareness in clothed situations, conveying the etiquette of nude recreation to persons who might never go into a situation to learn about it.

First Participants in the Group

Starting the group isn't as rough as you might think, considering that its first members will probably be the friends you've already known from nude recreation. A relationship based on trust

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has formed, which other people joining will sense. You will understand everyone's strengths and weaknesses. Build with these in mind.

If you're an individual who has decided to reach out to like-minded people, several approaches are readily available. Ask TNS to assist by sending a letter to others in your area. Reach out over the Internet, with a Web site dedicated to your group's ideals and activities. Ask other naturist groups and parks in the region to announce your group on their bulletin boards and in their newsletters. Place ads in local newspapers, and post notices where other social groups are advertised -- bookstores, libraries, universities.

Then, if you have a site get your people together. As a last recourse if an appropriate site is not available, hold house parties -- probably clothes required at first, then clothing-optional after you've gotten to know one another. From the very first involve others to host functions in their homes or at a favorite site. It builds cooperation and confidence that will not happen if you try to do everything yourself.

You may also find early partners at a landed nudist club or resort. We've found that some of the boldest, most cheerful and confident activists have been landed club members. On the other hand, some expectations are built into nudist park and resort attendance that may not be helpful to the rather different opportunities facing a naturist group. Don't borrow only from what's worked for nudists. Naturism is different.

Outreach: Flyers and Brochures

We suggest that you develop a simple, informative, attractive flyer, which gives basic information about the best established nude sites in your region, legal status, etiquette, a sample list of your group activities and how to join your group. This should be separate from your newsletter, which is a member service and includes information (such as member names or directions to activities) that you may not want to widely distribute.

Your contact piece should be readable by editors, reporters and recreation officials, as well as ordinary folks you'd like to introduce to the clothing-optional lifestyle or whom you'd like to involve more fully in your activities.

A distinctive logo should be built into everything your group puts out. A brochure, your newsletter, bumper stickers, t-shirts.

A cover letter should often be sent along with your contact piece. Whether the letter is personalized or generic depends on your capabilities and the size of your list. You could include in your list the local recreation and parks officials who have already been contacted, college activities centers, recreation program directors at military bases, newspapers and media editors, prospective members you've met at beaches and so on. Hand distribution at the beach or other gathering is often appropriate.

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Outreach: The Internet

It is essential that your group establish an online presence for itself by establishing a Web site and e-mail address. You will likely find, as many naturist groups have, that the Internet is your most vital mode of communication with your members, as well as an indispensable source for getting general information out to new members. The options available for Internet service providers, Web development tools and hosting services are vast, and can range from simple and practically free to complex and somewhat costly. The options you choose will depend a great deal upon your group's budget and your level of computer/Internet literacy.

Your e-mail address ideally will incorporate the name of the group or at least its initials in some way, and it should be one that is transferable (unless you plan to be responsible for e-mail communications for the life of the group). Whoever is responsible for e-mail communications should plan to read and respond to e-mail questions at least several times per week. Your Web site, as noted earlier, can be as simple or as complex as your skills and budget will allow; but it should include, at the very least, the following: your group's name and contact info, a link to the group e-mail address, a mission statement and/or description of your group, group etiquette, membership requirements, and a calendar of upcoming group events. Some groups use their Web site to display photos and reports from past group events, naturist-related news that is of regional relevance, the group newsletter, links to The Naturist Society and other national or regional naturist organizations, and much more. Remember, your site doesn't need to be slick and graphics-intensive to be effective. Strive for substance over style.

Outreach: Mailings and Advertising

The cost of promotional mailings may seem to be an impossible burden. But a well-conceived outreach effort will draw donations or dues that will cover costs and more. If you won't invest you don't receive.

Nothing recruits new members faster than word of mouth. Having a great time at a naturist destination requiring travel, a spa, sports complex or your own local beach will be talked about.

Word of mouth will also flow to the officials and administrators you want to work with you. Talk with rangers, police officers, recreation officials and local government representatives, in a spirit of harmony. Express your ecological concerns and your desire to avoid offending anyone. Cultivate good field relationships, and when it comes time for you to send a letter to any of them, it will be well received.

Word of mouth is hard to plan. It's something your core group should simply be aware of doing. Aloofness to the public, or dismissal of every first-timer as a "gawker" or a threat, is snobbish and counterproductive. The average person is willing to check out a nude social situation with any degree of encouragement. The actions and conversation of your group is more important than any formal invitation you might draw up.

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Consider offering a three-hour introductory course at a local university annex or alternative school. Or rent a function room at a library or hotel for the purpose. Not only should you attract new members, but also you will be able to educate them while attracting them!

For outreach try classified ads. Stay out of the sleaze, sex-address sections. It would bring far more problems than benefits. If your area has an alternative paper such as the New York *Village Voice* or San Francisco Bay *Guardian*, you're in luck.

As far as what to say in your ad: "Nude group forming" may be rejected as a headline, while "Skinny-dippers Unite!" might be judged just fine. An acceptable, inquiry-pulling headline is a must. Phrasing that avoids "nudist" as a term will get away from stereotypes. Request that a large stamped self-addressed envelope (SASE) be included with requests. Give the group name, Web site or e-mail, phone and post office box address. You can code your classified ad return address to learn the source of each inquiry.

Follow up on the inquiries your promotions generate. Be prepared to pick up the group mail twice weekly at least, more often if possible. Send replies within 48 hours (within 24 hours for e-mail). First contact response must be a special piece, factually describing the situation in your area and the benefits of joining your group.

Outreach: Publicity in Newspapers and Media

Strange but true: many reporters, photographers, and editors of newspapers will skinny-dip, yet when they hear about a "nudist" group their initial reaction is shock. They may think of cartoonish caricatures, not of themselves naked. This gap is often overcome by taking the initiative.

Counteracting the stereotype is best done with a personal visit to the media or newspaper you would like to treat you fairly. Develop a conversation as you hand in your press packet. Invite the media to attend your next outdoors event, clothing-optional, of course.

Combine national naturist literature -- the *World Guide, Nude & Natural*, Naturist Society membership & information brochures, perhaps Naturist Action Committee newsletters and brochures-with your own fact sheets, etiquette guidelines, brochures and perhaps a newsletter, as an effective first approach. (The Naturist Society will provide membership and information flyers and our catalog at no charge to your group or club, and other publications at a discount.)

Activities: The Reason for Being & the Key to Growth

Early in your group's existence, survey the members. You'll gain vital information on who's joining and therefore determine what members want. Be responsive.

Activities make the group happen and keep happening. Creating a lively schedule of activities is one of the most important tasks for any group.

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The focus of your group, whether primarily social or political, will dictate what kind of events you will want to organize. You probably already have some ideas for activities that inspired you to start a group in the first place.

If your friends are active, interesting people, then they will have many things they enjoy doing. Be open to their feedback and suggestions, but be wary of trying to please everyone in the group or you will be doomed to frustration. Establishing early on the focus and goals of the group will help avoid this problem. Also, spreading activities planning responsibilities between several members ensures variety and avoids stagnation and burnout.

Create events that people will want to join, even if your event is simply an unusual activity at your usual beach site: A Buns & Weenies Roast, for example, or Jungle Volleyball Tournament. Watch how many regulars make an effort to be at that place at that time.

In the winter months when many groups can't enjoy the outdoors, try some activities that the Naturist SIGs have already explored. You can locate local talent for photography, massage, nutrition, art, theater, music, sports and other interests. You might contact one of the SIGs from the Naturist Network and ask for suggestions, or check past Naturist Gathering schedules or issues of *Nude & Natural* for ideas.

GOOD LUCK and good nuding, with good organizing! If The Naturist Society can be of further assistance as you begin forming your group, please call on us for help and referrals.

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