

**Your Backyard, The Final Frontier:
Considering Adventure Education Through an Indigenous Lens**

Gregory Lowan-Trudeau, PhD

Assistant Professor

Faculty of Education, University of Calgary

2750 University Way NW

Calgary, Alberta Canada, T2N 1N4

gelowan@ucalgary.ca

A dozen teenagers and two middle-aged instructors stand in a circle, straining to hear the soft words of the Elder. Pausing for a second to admire the view, he continues, "This area is very special to my family ... We believe that a spirit inhabits this stretch of the river, keeping watch over us. It's our duty to honor her by protecting the river, keeping it clean ..." The students and instructors nod silently in agreement, shifting nervously as they wait for him to continue ... "I used to fish down here with my grandfather ... We also used the trees in this area for all sorts of purposes ... In a minute I'll show you how to take planks off of a tree without killing it ..."

Due to the recent growth in culturally rooted outdoor and environmental education in North America and around the world, scenes such as this are increasingly common (Lowan, 2009; Sutherland & Swayze, 2013; Wilson, 2008). What setting did you imagine when you first read the passage above? In your mind's eye, did this take place at a remote place in the woods or mountains, far from the bright lights of an urban centre? It may have but, as I will explore further in this case study, it could also have occurred within the limits of most cities and both could be good examples of land-based education initiatives that authentically consider and embody Indigenous knowledge and perspectives. However, before I explain further, please allow me to introduce myself (Absolon and Willet, 2005).

My traditional name is *Dohdohniné* and I am a Canadian of Métis (mixed European and Indigenous) ancestry on both sides of my family. I was born and raised on and have recently returned to the eastern slopes and foothills of the Rocky Mountains in the territory of the Nakoda, Cree, Siksika, and Tsuu T'ina nations. I have lived and

travelled in many areas of Canada and other parts of the world, most recently spending one year in a small urban centre in the unceded sovereign territory of the Lheidli T'enneh in north-central British Columbia. My perspective on and experiences with land-based education are inextricably linked to my identity as a Métis Canadian; someone who lives and works in the “Third” (Bhabha 1998) or “Métis Space” (Richardson, 2004) between Western and Indigenous North American cultures.

I was fortunate to be raised in a family of outdoor and environmental educators and, after many years of participation, began taking on leadership roles in my late teens with various groups. Over the past fifteen years, I have worked with a number of outdoor and environmental education organizations, some big and well known, others small and individually unique. My role in these organizations is often facilitating the integration of Indigenous perspectives into courses and programs for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants. This is always a wonderful opportunity, however, one of the challenges I often face is the tension between seeking adventure in far off places and building relationships with local Indigenous peoples.

As someone who has experienced the sense of self, community, and place (Andrews, 1999) so often discovered through adventure-based programs, I understand the pull to journey far from home to “remote” areas in search of excitement and challenge. However, such an approach may not always be congruent with the goals and intentions of outdoor or environmental education courses or programs intended to foster connection to and understanding of Indigenous practices and perspectives. I often struggle with this, and as such, make a conscious effort to facilitate courses and initiatives right in the “backyard” of wherever I find myself.

For example, my backyard this past year was the traditional territory of the Lheidli T'enneh; their Elders are still willing and available to provide teachings for all students, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike. Over the year, I collaborated with other faculty members, graduate students, and Lheidli Elders to organize a series of public courses and events. These initiatives all involved facilitating culturally based experiences in the forest immediately adjacent to our institution. Rather than seeking excitement in far off places, we actively built intercultural relationships and land-based understanding of local Indigenous cultures, a challenge-filled adventure of another kind.

In the following, I explore the colonial roots of adventure education and discuss the tension that results for culturally based outdoor and environmental educators. I close with questions and considerations for those seriously contemplating the incorporation of Indigenous perspectives into their pedagogical praxis.

Into the Wild: The Final Frontier?

Early European adventures who set out to “discover” and eventually colonize the Americas and other parts of the world were spurred on by a wide variety of motivations ranging from wanderlust to greed and colonial notions of racial superiority. As Brody (1998, p. 48) notes:

The New World was the Outer Space of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe. Travellers set off on terrifying journeys into an unknown that was already peopled, in the popular imagination of the day, with all kinds of fantastic monsters. Some of these adventurers returned with wondrous accounts of the lands and savages they had encountered. These accounts entered political and legal arguments of the day, and played their part in the rationalization by European powers of their various claims to new-found lands.

Western notions of undiscovered wilderness, escapism, and racial superiority informed by philosophical concepts such as *terra nullius* (Huggins, Huggins & Jacobs, 1995) and

vacuum domicilium (Vest, 1987) supported these exploits, leading to the mentality that, even though Indigenous people had been occupying and using their territories for thousands of years and, in most cases, built physically evident structures and social systems, the land remained in a relative state of wilderness because it wasn't being used in ways recognizable to Europeans.

This colonial mindset continues to inform Western-influenced nations and adventurers to the present day (Grimwood, 2011; MacGregor, 2002; Merchant, 2004; Mullins, 2009). As Merchant notes, "wilderness" remains a contested term that carries strong Western, anthropocentric connotations. It implies a mythically forbidding untamed "otherness", threatening to humans, but alluring nonetheless (Merchant; Snyder, 2003). Many Indigenous scholars also challenge the use of "wilderness" to describe areas relatively undisturbed by [Western] humans because, for Indigenous peoples, "the Land", which includes all the physical and metaphysical elements of Creation, is not viewed as wild and forbidding, it was, and continues to be, home (Cajete, 1994; Snow, 1977/ 2005).

The ghosts of colonialism are still evident in contemporary outdoor adventure programs, most of which developed with a view of Nature as an obstacle to be overcome; a useful tool to stimulate personal and group development (Lowan, 2009; Miner & Boldt, 2002). However, it is important to note that a limited, but growing number of Western outdoor and environmental scholars have also recognized such tensions and questioned the neo-colonial nature of contemporary wilderness travel (See Brookes, 2006; Grimwood, 2011; Mullins, 2009; Newberry, 2013). For example, both Grimwood (2011) and Mullins (2009) urge adventure educators to deeply consider the socio-cultural and ecological implications of wilderness travel and note the common disconnect between

predominantly Western, middle-class adventure seekers and the Indigenous inhabitants of the territories through which they travel.

I believe that Grimwood (2011) and Mullin's (2009) line of thought can be extended even further to question the very foundations and intentions of remote wilderness expeditions. If contemporary outdoor and environmental educators are sincere in their desires to participate in the (re)discovery and revitalization of Indigenous communities and traditions, we do ourselves, our neighbours and our students a disservice by leap-frogging over the Indigenous peoples of our home communities in search of connections with more remote and, in some minds, romantic territories.

As someone who has experienced the joy and power of adventure travel throughout my lifetime, I admit that such sentiments are somewhat disconcerting. However, as a Métis I believe that they are important to consider and I do so now in the courses and programs with which I am involved. In my experience, one need not always travel far afield to connect with Indigenous peoples and communities; there are still Elders and knowledge holders in most areas willing to share their locally-rooted wisdom and experience with Indigenous and non-Indigenous students alike.

Therefore, like Orr (2004), I would encourage you to consider fundamental questions such as, what is [adventure] education for? What are the aims/ intentions of your program? Is it merely adventure for adventure's sake with a superficial sprinkling of "beads and feathers" (Amanti, 2005)? Or are you genuinely interested in learning about, from, and with the Indigenous peoples of your area? If so, what is the best approach? Do you have to go far afield? In some cases, this is appropriate, but in others it need not be and staying close to home may, in fact, provide deeper, less costly, and more enduring

relationships and understanding of local places for instructors and students alike (Brookes, 2006; 2007).

If you do travel to more remote areas, remember that they are, in all likelihood, the traditional territory of Indigenous peoples and pause to reflect upon how you might authentically connect with and honour the local people (Grimwood, 2011; Mullins, 2009; Newberry, 2013). In such instances, concepts to consider include:

- Fostering the participation of local Indigenous instructors and Elders
- Learning local languages, place names, stories, and cultural protocols
- Considering traditional forms of transport, shelter, food collection and preparation
- Notifying and seeking permission from Indigenous groups before travelling through their territory
- Engaging with communities along your route, fostering collaboration and sharing
- Facilitating critical discussion of these issues with your students and co-instructors

In my experience, challenging the colonial wilderness adventure mentality and earnestly considering the recommendations above results in much richer experiences for both instructors and students. Whether you decide to develop a program in your own backyard or further afield, I encourage you to recognize and honor the ancient and ongoing relationships that Indigenous groups hold with specific geographical territories. In so doing, you will foster and experience an even stronger and more enduring sense of self, place, and community for yourself and your participants, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike.

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