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The Phenomenon of Camping and the Outdoor Experience

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The history of camps in Canada spans the past 150 years and camps have for many young people been a traditional portal for their first experiences in the outdoors. Since its beginnings camp has been a context for learning about self, community, and the natural environment. Camp activities emphasized outdoor knowledge and skills through small group living that offered opportunities to develop a variety of social, emotional, and cognitive skills that contribute to the total development of campers regardless of age. These outdoor camp experiences have also been shown to be enduring and can be significant and/or life shaping (Bialeschki et al, 2002; Fine, 2005; Henderson et al., 2007; Thurber et al., 2007).

From a theoretical perspective the outdoor learning that takes place at summer camp can be linked to concepts of experiential learning (Dewey, 1997 [1938]); Kolb, 1984), and contextual learning (Fine, 2005; Liebermann & Hoody, 1999). Whereas experiential learning is widely recognized as “hands on” or “learning by doing,” contextual learning addresses an interdependence that can exist between campers and camp counselors across a spectrum of experiential episodes within physical, personal, social, and spir-

itual domains. Camp offers a variety of teaching and learning opportunities unique to its physical and social setting. Camp is not school, but it does share many aspects with school both socially and educationally. An outdoor setting can provide unique experiences beneficial to a variety of learning modules such as: broad experiential curriculum options, place-based learning, community mindedness, and physical and mental health (Humphreys, 2018).

In reviewing the principles upon which many early camps were founded one can recognize common pedagogical influences which are associated with a child-centred or the progressive approach to educational philosophy (Kilpatrick, 1931). Throughout the late 1800's camping in Ontario was limited to short term summer adventures living in tents and centered primarily in the Lake Simcoe district. These camps were organized by groups such as the Y.M.C.A., Boy's Brigade, Boy Scouts, Big Brothers, Tuxis Boys, and Trail Rangers and generally had social-reconstructionist objectives with programs that focused on religious instruction, character building, health (fresh air, exercise and three meals a day) swimming, canoeing and crafts. These boys'

camps were soon followed by the Girl Guides, Canadian Girls in Training, and the Y.W.C.A. with camps of their own. Co-ed camps were not established until the early 1950s.

In 1900, A.L. Cochrane established Cochrane's Camp in Muskoka as the first private camp in Ontario. It became Camp Temagami in 1903 and is still in operation today. By 1925, the number of private camps in Ontario had increased to only six or seven but agency camps were beginning to appear around the province. The leaders and directors of these camps regularly attended camping conferences in the United States. The Camp Directors Association of America had been formed in 1924 but Ontario directors wanted an organization to address the issues of local camps specifically. The Ontario Camping Association (OCA) was formed in 1933 with Taylor Statten as the first chair. He was subsequently elected first president of the Canadian Camping Association in 1936 and then became president of the American Camping Association (est. 1935) in 1941. He is the only Canadian to have held this position. The first members of the OCA included A.L. Cochrane (Temagami), H.E. Chapman (Kagawong), Mary Edgar (Glen Bernard), Mary Hamilton (Tanamakoon), Fern Halliday (Oconto), and Taylor and Ethel Statten (Ahmek/Wapomeo).

The OCA was not just an organization for private camps but was open to anyone engaged in any aspect of camping. The interests of the OCA encompass the development and maintenance of high standards in the areas of camp activities and programs, health, accommodation and staffing (OCA, 2023). Nationally, the Canadian Camping Association (CCA) was established in 1936 with a mandate to "further the interests and welfare of children, youths and adults through camping as an educative, recreative, and character developing experience" is the international representative of all of the provincial camping associations throughout the country.

There are now over 400 member camps in the Ontario Camping Association with many others representative of other organizing bodies offering a wide range of residential and day programs

such as: traditional, sports specialty, arts and music, special needs camps, family camps, seniors' camps, and adventure therapy programs. The archives of the Ontario Camping Association are maintained at Trent University in Peterborough and contain a considerable amount of information spanning the years.

Outdoor Education and Camping Philosophical Roots

Outdoor education and the kinds of learning that take place in a camp community setting are strongly connected to experiential learning, what is traditionally referred to as 'learning by doing' or currently 'hands-on minds-on' learning. Learning through experience is an all-embracing and life-long process which integrates the domains of the personal, the social and the physical into a cognitive unity. It is the idea that if an individual dynamically engages in an authentic or concrete activity that learning is thereby enhanced by the context and as a result any future associations to the original context will enhance a broader understanding of related issues and possibly through association, with non-related issues. Experiential learning is described by Dewey (1997 [1938], p. 69) as a

complex intellectual operation [that involves] observation of surrounding conditions; knowledge of what has happened in similar situations in the past; and judgment, which puts together what is observed and what is recalled seeing what they signify.

Experiential learning is about using all of our senses in an authentic context to gain a fuller understanding of the world we inhabit through individual action and reflection, co-operation with others and interconnecting with communities beyond our own, including biological communities.

Outdoor education and its connections to informal education and experiential learning can be traced to theories Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). An advocate of sensory learning, Rousseau illustrated his theories through his protégé protagonist Emile (Rousseau, 1967 [1762] p.

54-65). Apart from Rousseau's leanings toward the value of sensory learning in a natural setting there is a particular idea within *Emile* which has proved persistent to outdoor education and organized camping in Canada. This is Rousseau's model of *l'homme naturel*, the natural human or noble savage. Historically, the natural human is an archetypal character whose origins can be traced back to ancient Arcadian cults as portrayed in the writings of Homer, Aeschylus and Virgil (Eisenberg, 1998). Oelschlaeger (1991, p. 111) has noted that,

Rousseau saw the savage life as a virtuous one. Wild nature was idealized as an oasis free from the ills of civilization, a retreat to which the harried and battered, the suppressed or oppressed, might turn for relief. The human animal was naturally good and the good life, accordingly, was the primitive life.

Many early experiments in residential school camps and summer camps reflected this moral attitude towards the corrupting influence of city life. Projects towards fostering children of nature as a method of individual and social development would appeal to a variety of educators well after Rousseau. The noble savage, an ideal now antithetical to camping's current endeavors toward decolonization and First Nations recognition and reconciliation, would nevertheless provide many outdoor educators and camp directors with a role model and complementary social structure for youth camps and organizations that would persist well into the 20th century (Fine, 2016; Fine & McIlwraith, 2018; Ezewski, McIlwraith & Fine, 2021).

Ernest Thompson Seton (1860-1946) came to Canada as a young boy with his parents in 1866 and lived in Toronto from the age of ten. He is best known as a wildlife artist and nature writer, but he also had a profound influence on the development of camps through his "Woodcraft" movement. International Woodcraft associations and camps are still active throughout the world today. In Canada, the advance of organized camping along with the early development of a

camp lore can be attributed to the confluence of two major contributors to the field, Seton and Lord Baden-Powell of the Boy Scout movement. Though Seton and Baden-Powell began as collaborators, their paths soon diverged as each ascribed to a model of organizational structure that was irreconcilable to the other. Seton's preference was towards a contemplative, self-organizing and holistic system that he equated with the teachings of the Indigenous peoples of North America while Baden-Powell's was to the traditional hierarchy and tactical aspects associated to the military with its corresponding overtones towards nationalism (Wadland, 1978).

But it is Seton who began the trend towards the imitation of a so-called Indigenous lifestyle in camps for children. By 1903, there were between 50 and 60 tribes of "Woodcraft Indians" in the United States with associated camps modelled after Seton's ideals based on the concept of pan-Indianism. Seton borrowed what he admired most from the traditions and cultures of many Indigenous tribes from throughout North America and developed these into a code of ethics and behaviour (Wadland, 1978). This was seven years before the first Boy Scout group was formed in North America. Seton's "Indians" became a standard feature of the Canadian camping scene along with his methodology and curriculum for the development of mind, body, spirit and service as prescribed in the Birch Bark Roll of Woodcraft (Seton, 1926). However, this trend has recently reversed in Canada.

Camping as an educative venue was of great interest to progressive educators in the early 20th century. William Heard Kilpatrick (1871-1965) believed camping and traditional schooling could benefit one another and was associated with early research at Taylor Statten's Camp Ahmek, in Ontario. On the educational efficacy of camping Kilpatrick (1931, p. vii) stated:

Opposed to the school, thus variously handicapped by practices left over from its past, stands the summer camp relatively free. So far it is bound by little or no institutionalism. Having a new aim and locat-

ed in remote quarters, it is freer from the traditional outlook of society in general. Apart from the negative demands to allow no harm to their charges there are on the whole few or no insistent demands made on the camp, either by parents or by society, other than the very immediate one of making the youth happy. Not being counted "educative," in the traditional sense, the camp is free if it will be honestly and seriously educative in the true sense.

Kurt Hahn (1886-1974) is perhaps the most influential outdoor educator of the 20th century. Of Jewish descent, Hahn fled Germany to England in 1933. He was the founder of Outward Bound in 1941, as well as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme in 1954 (Richards, 2001, p. 1. 6-7). Originally conceived as a maritime training program for sailors, Outward Bound schools offer a physically challenging, group building, goal oriented, and practical skills development curriculum set in the outdoors. The culmination of the program is a 72 hour solo experience that demands the practical application of skills learned during the program while also allowing an opportunity for reflection and introspection (Smith, 1992). Many schools internationally promote Outward Bound courses as extracurricular programs during the summer and winter breaks. There are currently Outward Bound schools in thirty-six countries with several in the United States, Canada, Britain and Germany. The Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme also has a strong outdoor education and physical activity component combined with community work. It offers a hierarchy of achievement awards with corresponding educational scholarships.

Outdoor and Environmental Education

The history of outdoor education between the 1960's and 1970's has been documented by John Passmore (1972). He was the Supervisor of Camping with the Ontario Department of Education from 1947 to 1948. Later, as a professor at the University of Toronto, he was responsible for the university's program in outdoor education which has since been withdrawn as a field of study.

The golden era for outdoor education in Ontario were the years when William Davis, then Minister of Education under John Robarts, enacted similar legislation in order to provide a more authentic and practical means of delivering natural science education within the curricula. In 1965, amendments to the Ontario School's Administration Act, allowed school boards with more than 10,000 students to buy land and operate natural science centers with residential facilities where students could live and learn about the natural environment (Passmore, 1972).

Throughout the seventies and eighties, the establishment of residential outdoor education centres and environmental education programs thrived within the Ontario school's system. Curricula at both the elementary and secondary levels were extant. When the NDP government under Bob Rae came to power in the early 1990's, issues pertaining to the environment and education were paramount. However, the abrupt rise of the conservative government in Ontario under Premier Mike Harris was the beginning of a systematic dismantling of an outdoor/environmental education curriculum that had been established for over 50 years.

In November 1995, the Ontario Minister of Finance, Ernie Eves announced a 22.7 per cent cut in the annual provincial operating grant to schools within the province. This amounted to approximately \$1 billion dollars. "Eves declared that boards must 'take every reasonable step to cut costs outside the classroom,' which 'now account for at least 30 cents of every education dollar' (Gidney, 1999, p.242). As a direct fiscal outcome, environmental studies as a core curriculum was eliminated and became integrated into science, geography, and social studies curriculum in 2000, teacher training specific to outdoor education and the environment was terminated as of 2001, and school board and Ontario government outdoor centres began to close, and their lands sold off by 2002.

In Ontario, Puk and Behm (2003) have advocated ecological literacy as a new core curricular subject that would serve to promote an attitude to-

wards lifelong learning integrated with concepts of responsibility to self and society within the contexts of the ecosphere and biosphere. To this objective regarding outdoor and experiential education they state that:

...students should spend significant amounts of time in four different natural environments: 1/rivers, ponds, and marshes, 2/ deep woods, 3/ country park, and 4/ urban nature. Ecology needs to be studied firsthand in natural settings where it exists, i.e., outside the classroom (p.7).

Outdoor centers, with a strong focus on ecological education, need to become integral partners with schools, rather than auxiliary services. Students need to study in natural settings, including outdoor ecological centers, as much as possible. Personnel from these outdoor centers need to work within the school setting on a regular basis (p.8).

This unfortunate shortage of teachers who are appropriately trained in the curriculum and delivery of outdoor education persists to this day (Blakey & Fine, 2022).

Tenets of Ecohealth

Ecohealth is defined as an ecosystemic approach to health that encompasses physical, social, psychological, and spiritual domains (Green Analytics, 2020). Research specifically into camp phenomena have demonstrated that benefits within these four domains, which occur for camp populations in nature settings, mirror the tenets inherent to the concept of ecohealth (Fine, 2005; Fine & Tuvshin, 2010).

However, much of westernized society is urban based, sedentary, consumer driven and increasingly withdrawn from physical presence within community life. Throughout Canada and beyond, collective, and individual experiences during the pandemic years have amplified these general features of western society post millennium. Ideals associated with concepts of community often imply the individual and collective

concern for others and for the natural world we all depend on for human existence (Mackay, C. M., et al., 2019). Perhaps the silver lining, post pandemic, is a renewed interest and desire for both kids and young adults to experience the outdoors activities offered by camp.

All camps were particularly hard hit by the pandemic, due predominately to unprecedented governmental restrictions in addition to generalized public fears of socialisation. By their very definition, camps are congregate settings and as such were communities at the highest risk for the spread of COVID-19. Over 30% of camps across the country were identified as not able to endure an extended duration of restrictions (PROOF Strategies, 2020). Tragically, these camps have not survived. The two years of restrictions, particularly for overnight camps, sealed their fate. These invaluable venues for the teaching, learning, and enjoyment of the outdoors are no longer a part of the Canadian landscape.

Conclusion

Camp is a world away from the everyday. It is a world inhabited by youth and the young at heart, sharing space with many species different from our own. It is a world bounded by the openness of water, sky, and meadow along with the closeness of fen, forest, and the penumbra of a campfire circle. It is a world of growth. Growth is all around: cattails, turtles, friendship, understanding, and self knowledge. In a physical, social, psychological, and spiritual sense camp is a world of growth and learning. Let us continue to promote the validity of camp environments as an important component in the education of a healthy society and the development of ecohealth as an imperative for the future.

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