

Land-Based Healing Through Adventure: Wise Practices from Indigenous Peoples

Simon Priest

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Abstract

Based on 40 years of living and travelling with indigenous populations around the world, the author shares the repeating patterns of common lessons learned about adventure and land-based healing. This article discusses land-based healing in the context of two dozen Indigenous Peoples around the world. It places an emphasis on commonalities in 15 elements: connection with nature, spirituality, ceremonies and rites of passage, discussion circles, journeying, adventures and experiential learning, family and community, food and medicine, knowledge and language, stories and metaphors, integrating outside methods, counseling Elders, Elder leadership, partnering, and the healing process. Key to these 15 common elements, which form the best practices among Indigenous cultures, is the use of adventure.

The word “Indigenous” (rather than aboriginal or native) is used in this article to convey all colonially displaced peoples and highlight their similarities. It is not meant to collectively group them together as one community and deny their unique diversities in language, culture, history, knowledge or practice. The term “land” includes rock, soil, water, air, fire, ancestors, animals, plants, and everything in nature. This writing is in present tense, since many Indigenous cultures tend to blend past, present, and future.

Author Info

Simon Priest, PhD, Coordinator, Canadian Outdoor Therapy Healthcare,
Email: simon_priest@yahoo.com

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Introduction

While not Indigenous by heritage, the author lives and travels for extended periods with Indigenous groups, and advises them on developing adventure programming for their youth and adults. These include the following, listed by country, Indigenous group, and year of collaboration.

- Australia: Djabugay (1984) and Koori (1989)
- Canada: Nootka (1980), Kwakwaka'wakw (1980), Mohawk (1990), and Algonquin (1995)
- Fiji: Melanesian (1984)
- Guatemala: Yucatec Mayan and Itzan (1992)
- India: Kota and Kadava (2012)
- Indonesia: Dayak (1997)
- Kenya/Tanzania: Maasai (2010)
- Malaysia: Penan (1997)
- Mexico: Tarahumaran (2004)
- New Zealand: Maori (1989)
- South Africa: Zulu and Xhosa (1999)
- United States: Makah (2003), Quinalt (2002), Hawaiian (2016), and Tlingit (1992)
- United Arab Emirates: Bedouin (2017)
- Zimbabwe: Tswana and Shona (2007)

Through the ongoing analysis of those experiences, I continue to learn lessons. These repeat as patterns that may prove useful for those conducting land-based healing through adventure in their countries and cultures. I am not suggesting that these patterns should be misappropriated to non-Indigenous programs (Skidmore, 2017).

Land-Based Healing

As a Canadian, I follow the practice of Canadian Indigenous groups and use the term “land-based healing.” Land-based healing takes place in locations of respected significance (Lewis, 2020). This process (on land or over water) is a powerful way to reconnect with the synergy of nature and Indigenous cultural identity, in order to effectively treat health concerns by traditional knowledge and customary practices of wellness (Redvers et al., 2021).

The colonization of Indigenous People moves them away from their natural link with the land, places them in dispossessed living conditions, disrupts their social structures, infects their communities, reinforces unresolved trauma, and exasperates already poor health conditions (Smallwood et al., 2021). As a result, common maladies arise in greater frequency or severity in Indigenous populations than in non-Indigenous populations (Durie, 2003). Mental illness, addiction, violence, suicide, and underlying medical diseases are prevalent among many Indigenous Peoples (Cohen, 1999; United Nations, 2009).

For example, Indigenous People in Canada are twice as likely to become diabetic and five times more likely to develop heart disease when compared with non-Indigenous Canadians (Earle, 2013). First Nations, Inuit, and Métis fall below the average Canadian on most measurable indicators such as mental health, addiction, life expectancy, birth rate, infant mortality, child/maternal health, chronic disease, illness, and injury as well as social health determinants like income, social status, support, employment, access, and education (Hajizadeh et al., 2018; Health Council of Canada, 2005). Suicidal thoughts, preceding suicide attempts, and suicide rates are significantly higher for Indigenous versus non-Indigenous

Canadians with youth being twice as likely as adults to think about or attempt suicide (Statistics Canada, 2012). Given the large number of remotely located Indigenous People who lack access to medical aid or mental health assistance, actual amounts are probably greater than stated.

Over the last decade, land-based healing and the development of resilience through adventure continue to gain widespread global momentum as an accepted treatment modality, especially for afflicted youth (Hatala et al., 2019). An example of this would be the 10 day, 113 km (70 mile) wilderness canoe expedition from French River to the north tip of Manitoulin Island in Ontario made by the Outdoor Adventure Leadership Experience, a group of Indigenous youth from the Wikwemikong First Nation on Lake Huron (Ritchie et al., 2014). Two participants from the 2009 trip describe the positive impact from their engagement

After that trip I became a really independent person. I don't really go out anymore. I like to stay home with my family and play with my little brother and sister. I don't really have much friends anymore. I feel better being with my family though cause a lot of my friends just do drugs and stuff. The only time they wanted to hang out with me was when they wanted to get high or drink. I don't know I just don't enjoy that any more. Just being sober with my family is what I love to do now. When I went back to school I started going downhill in the beginning. Then I realized that I'm not that same person anymore. My average went from 23.5% to 84.5% at the end of the year. I actually made it on the honour roll. Like I was never ever on honour roll my whole life. Just like wow. I did that. My grades improved, my attendance was, got an award like \$95 bucks for perfect attendance at school (Radu, 2018, p. 32).

I found that the more spiritual you are, the happier you are emotionally. I don't want to stereotype or anything, but the more active you are, the happier you are too. It seems like happiness is an emotion, and it lifts your spirits. Once you are happy, you are more active. Once you are active, you are more alert and have a positive outlook on life. That's the best way I could put it (Ritchie et al., 2015, p. 362).

Indigenous Health

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health holistically as the presence of well-being rather than only the absence of disease (World Health Organization Const. para 1). The WHO and the United Nations clarify that Indigenous People also view health in similar ways: as holistic harmony among people, community, and the natural universe (United Nations, 2009). Both also affirm equality of access for Indigenous People to social services like housing, clean water, education, traditional medicines, and culturally appropriate healthcare (United Nations, 2007). In most cases, the health of the people cannot be separated from the health of their families, communities, lands, and all of creation.

However, painful intergenerational histories of oppression toward Indigenous People by colonizing systems (e.g., incarceration, genocide, religious schools, medical experiments, government legislation, and chemical poisonings) drive the distrustful or fearful to rely on their own histories, knowledge, or practices instead (Carson, 2019; Jalata, 2013). Nevertheless, mainstream medical services can still play a vital role in supporting land-based healing by

appropriately examining and screening participants for the program, visiting them for check-ups, administering medications, and by providing follow-ups. Since participants may have underlying physical issues accompanying their other health concerns (Gracey King, 2009), employing Indigenous staff members with medical training can prove useful.

A Deep, Thick, and Rich Connection with Nature

The first and foremost principle of these programs is to nourish a profound relationship with nature and natural forces. The land is sacred and seen as the garden of all life, including some who believe humans are conceived in nature and delivered by women. Aboriginals in Australia believe the spirit of nature is what impregnates, and the newborn is the embodiment of totem and territory in the “dreaming” of the land (Merlan, 1986).

Ancestors return to the land when they pass and so must be a part of nature. From New Zealand, Maori spiritual healers apply a combination of Indigenous medicinal plants and touch massage to cleanse the sick of their genealogical conflicts through spiritual communication with ancestors and reconnection with family on the land (Mark Lyons, 2010). The Tarahumaran (or Raramuri) in Mexico, who dance and sing as a means to heal, give thanks to the land for looking after their relatives and being the source of everything (Salmón, 2000). For both distant cultures, the land is a freshwater spring from which life-affirmation flows: humans, shelter, nurture, food, drink, family, medicine, knowledge, and language.

Natural forces such as storms, lightning, thunder, wind, rain, and snow are seen as gifts from the land symbolizing emotions and sometimes representing participant feelings. For example, African drought due to climate collapse requires Maasai rain-making in Kenya and Tanzania that involves ritual prayer informed by Indigenous knowledge and local religion (Gumo, 2017). Seasonal changes are similarly recognized and dependent on the cycles of plant growth and animal behaviors. While non-Indigenous People typically recognize four seasons, the Bininj and Mungguy in Australia recognize six distinct seasons depending on an abundance of bush tucker (natural plant and animal foods) available throughout the year (Kakadu National Park, n.d.).

The accuracy of Indigenous People’s weather forecasting and seasonal predictions are unmatched. Their abilities stem from the necessity of living off the land with the experience to survive and this knowledge is passed on generationally. These are commanding indicators of the spiritual relationship that exists between Indigenous People and the land. Colonialism has severed this all-important link (King et al., 2009).

Frequently, the natural sources of healing (e.g., land, water, air, plants, and animals) are intimately blessed, prayed to, or spoken about before visiting or utilizing. Ceremonial permission to apply these for healing purposes is commonly requested, and thanks are normally given upon departure. Often these sources are deliberately cultivated over time in preparation for their honoured properties to heal and host the coming participants. Sources, not resources, are seen as partners, and the people are merely their stewards.

Since these stewards have such a strong affinity for nature, some Indigenous People take the commercial devastation and resource exploitation of the land as an attack on both their culture personhood. As guardians of the land, some stewards feel they have failed in their duty to protect it and have thus lost their reason for existing. No wonder many succumb to physical illness and mentally give up living.

In the United States, many displaced Indigenous Peoples can trace their post-traumatic stress disorder to a sense of dis-ease over the treatment of the land and the disruptions of sacred places. Their forced relocation and destruction of nature explain their lower life expectancies (Heart, 1999).

Grounded in Spirituality

Connection to nature is spiritual. Culture is the enabler of spiritual expression, so a link to culture is essential to reach spiritual well-being. In most Indigenous cultures, each natural element has a corresponding spirit. Connecting with the healing power of each spirit requires connecting to its source in nature. Native Hawaiians (or Kanaka Maoli), in what is now the USA, build their conceptualization of health around courageous moral qualities and a balance among biological, psychological, social, or spiritual well-being as unified through the mind, body, soul, and spiritual world (Antonio, 2020).

This spiritual connection is indistinguishable from cognitive, emotional, or kinesthetic connections with nature, since these four are tightly integrated elements of life for most Indigenous People. Hence their concept of health, living, and surviving are all bundled together in one means of existing. A disruption to nature is a disturbance to all the people, their well-being, breathing, and existing. For many programs, healing the land from past resource extraction mirrors healing the participants from their afflictions, and the obvious parallels are clear enough to further ground participants in a spiritual relationship to that injured land. Bush therapy in Australia (akin to nature-based therapy and land-based healing) places a spiritual link to nature at the heart of the therapy experience and as the source of healing (Carpenter Pryor, 2004).

Ceremonies and Rites of Passage

Spiritualism is also practiced in ritual rites of passage, such as welcome feasts, traditional sweat lodges, hot spring cleansings, daily smudgings, songs, dances, and ceremonial celebrations. These rituals help to form identity, develop responsibility, mark important milestones, achievements, or life transitions, and prepare youth for the accountabilities of adulthood (Corr, 2003). The Mayan and Itzan of Yucatan Guatemala conduct ritual animal sacrifices and employ hallucinogenic plants as traditional rites of passage to welcome children into adolescence and youth into adulthood (Carson Eulert, 2007).

Discussion Circles

Small group discussions are conducted in sharing or talking circles according to the sacred rules followed by Elders for centuries. When conducted with cultural focus, these rituals provide a newfound sense of honour to the participants (Ballengee-Morris, 2008). For example, talking circles are used by social workers to discuss wellness with Brazilian Indigenous People (Luna et al., 2020). Circles are frequently used for talking and sharing, because these are natural, like the cyclic seasons, and thus repeat the ongoing theme of connectivity in everything, with everyone looking after one another.

Journeying

One of the most powerful rites of passage in many Indigenous cultures is the journey. By an expedition on land or water through ancestral territory and camping in cultural ways, participants begin to understand their place in the bigger scheme of nature and society, and how they fit into a modern colonial nation. Two participants on a river journey described their ancestral connections:

I think for myself the connection came out of a knowledge of history, our traditions, and our culture. And you know, every time we went around a turn in the river, even though I was anticipating what was coming up, there was a lot of strength knowing this is what we've done for thousands and thousands of years, and you know my ancestors were doing it, and you can feel that (Ritchie et al., 2015, p. 357).

Physically I am stronger from paddling. I have got my muscles back. I feel energized to be out here. Mentally, I just look forward to it, and it makes me think a lot about my ancestors that travelled here so long ago ... It's a great honour. Spiritually, I feel gifted being out here. It's like I am connecting with my inner person. I feel connected with something. It makes me feel really good about being native and paddling. Emotionally, I have my ups and down, but overall I am happy (Ritchie et al., 2015, p. 356).

Although the trip may have a destination, the process of travelling there and dealing with all the adverse challenges along the way is what strengthens their resolve and builds resilience. Tracing genealogy to reconnect with family in “a journey of Indigenous identity” is described by a mental health professional with Australian Aboriginal heritage as an adventurous expedition of a different nature (Watson, 2006).

Depending on the season and location, expeditions take many forms from canoeing and kayaking, through backpacking and horse riding, to skiing and snowshoeing. In the Canadian arctic, seven Cree youth and one Elder travel 1,600 km (1,000 miles) across the wilderness from James Bay to the capital (Ball, 2013). Starting on snowshoes, they finish on foot, arriving on Parliament Hill to hundreds of supporters. The youth build their resilience along the way (Toombs et al., 2016).

Adventures and Experiential Learning

During land-based healing, engaging in a small group adventure involves taking risks (physical, mental, socio-emotional, or spiritual), resolving group conflicts, and incorporating elements of experiential learning. By taking risks and resolving conflicts, participants learn about themselves and how to relate to others in their group. By reflecting on this through public group discussion or private dialogue with an Elder, participants learn to understand who they are and how they fit in.

Project Venture operates in 60 locations across the USA and is an adventurous, experiential program offered by the National Indian Youth Leadership Project (NIYLP). It has been addressing substance abuse and mental health for Indigenous youth over the last 40 years. It develops resilience, a positive self-concept, prosocial skills, problem-solving skills, and service ethics by engaging in outdoor risk-taking activities and immersing in cultural

values (youth.gov, n.d.) Evaluation has shown it to be a model program at reducing suicide ideation and attempts, alcohol and tobacco consumption, and cannabis and drug use (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2002). The Project Venture website describes their model:

NIYLP's Founder, McClellan (Mac) Hall, a former teacher and principal of two tribal schools, describes the focus of NIYLP as Positive Youth Development, based on traditional wisdom and values common to Indigenous People across North America. The core of NIYLP programming is outdoor adventure (hiking, backpacking, ropes course, rappelling, rock climbing, mountain biking, canoeing, kayaking) . . . reconnecting contemporary Indigenous youth with the Natural World. Service Learning is a cornerstone of NIYLP's work, with cultural themes and activities blended throughout. The original camp model has evolved into a year-round program, with both in-school and out of school programming, a curriculum, lesson plans and serious evaluation results, from over 25 years of qualitative and quantitative evaluation. . . . NIYLP's approaches to building Resiliency are guided by the wisdom of Native Elders and the traditional values that Indigenous cultures share. . . . NIYLP programs offer strength-based positive alternatives to deficit approaches, found in many treatment and school-based prevention programs (Project Venture, 2018).

Family and Community Involvement

Extended families fill the crowds, which are present to launch each journey, and equally great numbers show up to welcome their arrival at the destination. Family involvement is critical to the journey. Youth participants are clear that they are not being banished or punished, but their rite of passage has meaning and relevance to their relatives. Families are so important that some programs permit brief visits along the expedition route, while others permit families to join latter segments of the expedition for several days.

The value of family involvement goes beyond youth support; it also provides for their aftercare. In some programs, parents or their surrogates join in the initial assessment of participant readiness for mental, physical, and spiritual hardships. They attend the final sessions emphasizing commitments to the future. In this way, they become partners in their child's short-term investment and ongoing long-term journey.

Land and family, both parts of nature, are the two most important pieces of social order for Indigenous cultures. Therefore, among native Polynesians and Melanesians, family strengthening or family healing processes form the mainstay of Indigenous mental health treatments (McCubbin Marsella, 2009).

Food and Medicine

The tasks traditionally associated with men (fishing, hunting, trapping, and gathering) are not seen as food harvesting, but rather sacred duties for living from the land and for the survival of the community. Daily chores, traditionally associated with women, are viewed as necessary for comfort. They include wood cutting, preserving meats, canning berries, weaving clothing, and making musical instruments. However, in modern times, healing program activities are often shared across genders, unless doing so is considered taboo. The

roles of seeking medicines with healing properties, by gathering plants or hunting animals, continue to be divided by gender in most Indigenous cultures (Radcliffe et al., 2004).

Indigenous medicines are of particular interest in all land-based healing. For example, despite the overshadowing influence of western colonial values, traditional Chinese medicine is the most ancient healing method, yet its herbal and acupuncture practices are now gaining widespread global acceptance (Tang et al., 2008). Wound repair is the most common brief form of cultural healing with dozens of plants available to contribute to healing damaged tissue (Raina et al., 2008). Even in the rocky deserts of the Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula, plants with ethnobotanical utility or pharmacological value are found and employed for healing by the nomadic Bedouin (Friedman et al., 1986; Nawash et al., 2013). Humans have to expect that nature would evolve plants to fill the needs of animals, including ourselves.

Indigenous Knowledge and Language

Harvesting plants or animals and travelling through ancestral territories brings knowledge and language to the forefront. Youth simply cannot avoid learning since they are immersed in the experiences. The information and its communication are necessary to their success in the program and survival in nature. Therefore, language is the means to share knowledge, and both language and knowledge logically flow from the land. Consequently, and not surprisingly, this strengthens the value of relationships among people and between them and the land. As a byproduct, the programs keep Indigenous languages alive. In South Africa, the Sangomas (Indigenous healers) practice treatments experientially, refining their methods over time and sharing knowledge by oral tradition. They create words to describe medicinal applications and develop new knowledge, yet are guided by their ancestors and informed by the spirits (Cumes, 2013).

Stories and Metaphors

An oral history is kept by most civilizations and told for the purposes of teaching important lessons. This sacred legacy is rarely written down and must be memorized by those who pass it on to others. Each story always seems to have a moral (fable) or spiritual (parable) lesson accompanying it. Elders share powerful stories and dreams. Youth receive educationally comparative messages: hunting for sport versus household violence or abuse, sharing without jealousy versus stealing from one another, forgiveness versus damming a river, and harvesting plants for one meal versus clear cutting all the trees.

Transformation stories are invaluable examples for participants learning that they are no longer what they once were. Storytelling enables the reclamation of Indigenous voice and identity, especially when told in traditional language, and ultimately becomes a vital factor in healthy decolonization (Sium Ritskes, 2013). Transformations that include a heroic recovery are especially powerful at bringing people back to health, because the story shows them a path that they have not previously seen, in a way easy to adopt to be their own hero, without even realizing they are learning to change (Mehl-Madrona, 2005). In summary, “people are as healthy and confident as the stories they tell themselves. Sick storytellers

can make their nations sick. And sick nations make for sick storytellers” (Okri as cited in Parkinson, 2009, p. 31).

In addition to stories, the adventure activities also generate powerful metaphors. For example, healing is a voyage, not a destination runs thematically throughout the expeditions. The path to healing has plenty of obstacles. The conflict of storms brings clarity of understanding. Bathing and sweating cleanse all parts of a whole person, just as sharing and declaring (or putting away and letting go) cleanse them of past wrongs. The way of the warrior is strength, resilience, and self-determination. Carrying a heavy load (pack) over a long distance is bearing the painful burden of a hurtful past. These metaphors and stories give meaning to therapeutic practice (Waldram, 2008; Reich Michaels, 2011).

Western or European Methods

Some programs choose to let the experience speak for itself and don’t include any discussion or therapy that might accelerate or clarify learning, change, or growth for participants. Others purposefully structure time each day to debrief participants’ feelings, thinking, and behaviors. The key reason for this difference seems to be whether the program organizers prefer to see both Indigenous and outside knowledge as valuable. In other words, are they able to use a “double lens” or “two-eyed seeing” (Bartlett et al., 2012) to view both as useful contributors?

For example, the Bapedi of Limpopo (and others) in South Africa integrate 154 ancient plant medicines with modern wellness practices, and consultation with deceased ancestors, in order to treat 52 health-related problems (Semenya Potgieter, 2014). Personally known to the author, a Sangoma (a medicine woman) in the Valley of a Thousand Hills, which had the worst AIDS epidemic in Africa at the time, practices the traditional medicine of her ancestors, but then adds the need to wear condoms.

Every Participant has Access to a Counselor or Elder

Nevertheless, even those programs that refuse the introduction of Western or European influence are certain to partner each participant with a mentor. If the mentor is not present on trips or during adventures, then that mentor is always available for a walk and talk, before or after. In this way, participants have the opportunity to process their experience with the guiding wisdom of a counselor or Elder.

Elders keep the knowledge of their Indigenous population and consequently determine its health (Tagalik, 2018). This self-determination is at the heart of reconciliation, where Elders share cultural knowledge that was eradicated by colonial education in order to assimilate today’s survivors. By doing so, Elders support their own healing and help survivors heal by reclaiming cultural identity (Rowe et al., 2019).

In Siberian Russia, following the collapse of the Soviet Empire, the Indigenous People were left without food or employment due to the end of government farming operations. However, they were able to return to sustainable livelihoods through the Indigenous knowledge held by their Elders who found new ways to communicate traditions to community youth and effectively heal their community (Crate, 2006).

Elder Leadership or Approval

The importance of Elder leadership cannot be overstated. They either guide the planning or must sign-off on the final plan. Experts do not design the program; it comes from community input, and everyone of value is consulted for their thoughts. While this planning process takes a long time, it ensures buy-in at all levels of the society. No one is surprised by the program existence or success.

The Uplands of Indonesia are being transformed for agricultural land and their Indigenous Peoples are being displaced. However, because Elders lead the consultation process within their communities, secured lands of choice and reasonable relocations are being accommodated by government (Tsing, 1999). While by no means ideal, this represents a great improvement over the land being taken by force or communities being relocated by coercion to a much less desirable place. This is another example of Elders healing their communities.

Furthermore, Elders are (or know who to appoint as) authorized to conduct certain cultural interventions. They are authorized because of a sanctioned position, collective experience, community recognition, or linkages to ancestors. A program cannot operate culturally without these key human contributors.

Partnering

Alliances are an ongoing value used to achieve success in most Indigenous programs. Not only do they cement partnerships between participants and mentors, join with parents and family members, and see natural sources as colleagues in the healing process, but they also build collaborative arrangements among government service agencies, academic sectors, non-profit organizations, and other allies. Governments provide partial funding, schools are engaged in the support of their young students, universities conduct program evaluations, and non-profits share advice and loan equipment and clothing. Success comes from valuing local expertise and resources and those locals take pride in the final program's triumph.

The Land-Based Healing Process

Finally, the healing process is different. It comes from a perspective of strength, and is founded in a solution-focused therapy. It considers the positive attributes of the participant and builds on these. The person is not perceived as lacking because of their condition, but is assured that accentuating their good qualities will heal them. This approach honours the individuals' strengths and their efforts to heal. It culturally C.A.R.E.S. for the whole person and adheres to Compassion, Acceptance, Respect, Empathy, and Safety (physical, emotional, and spiritual) as operating and unifying principles for all, including the land.

The healing process initially addresses the consciousness, soul, and spirit of the participants. If their psyches are not ready to work toward transformation, then they will fail in their journeys. Some youth resist their cultures and see their communities as the causes of their pain and trauma. They are brought to accept their cultures by mindful and spirit-centred practices, so they can begin to heal with the land.

Beyond these commonalities, the specific sacred elements of the healing process cannot be shared here. These differ for every culture, but are commonly rooted in their understandings

of existing deities (creators or grand spirits) and the human spirit governing heart, mind, and body working together.

The Indigenous citizens of India (7% of a billion people or twice the population of Canada) are spiritually connected to nature and closely bonded as families. Their culture and rituals are animistic, suggesting spirits exist in all objects; even inanimate objects are alive. The role of humans is to link higher spirits (ancestors or gods) with lower spirits (plants or animals). As such, we must care for everything including one another and the land. Healing is ayurvedic (life knowing) and highlights wellness practices such as yoga, massage, meditation, nutritional herbs, music, and dance (Rowkith Bhagwan, 2020).

Conclusion

Land-based healing programs are effective because they impact most of the determinants of good health for Indigenous People. The adventure element targets resiliency, self-efficacy, confidence, and prosocial behaviors. The cultural component positively influences language revitalization, traditional values, and Indigenous knowledge. The land provides nutritious and secure food, bolsters medicinal products and processes, and strengthens spiritual relationships with nature. Together, these three (adventure, culture, and the land) resolve past trauma, and provide the healing salve that Indigenous People are missing due to ongoing colonialism.

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