Abstract—Paddling the Big Sky began as many expeditions do: out of past trips and in the stories, banter and daydreams of a group of friends. The journey, by canoe, departed from the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, stretched over 2,800 km (1,740 miles), crossed prairie, the width of the boreal forest, and then the “barren lands.” It included a 29-day university outdoor education program, lasted 100 days, and ended at Kugluktuk on the shores of the Coronation Gulf in Canada’s Eastern Arctic territory of Nunavut.

Seven people participated, one member left the expedition in Yellowknife and there the seventh, a student from the first month, joined the team. The expedition members, being athletes, guides, and educators, were pursuing various levels of post-secondary education related to outdoor recreation, tourism, education, and/or socio-cultural perspectives on physical education. Degrees ranged from a first undergraduate degree to doctoral studies. Experience levels also varied from having grown up canoeing and having led international environmental education and adventure programs to those on their first-ever canoe trip. An overarching interest among participants was the past, present, and future role of outdoor recreation and education as a mode of personal, social, and environmental learning.

Introduction

During the winter of 2004 and 2005, the daydreams gave way to long hours of planning and preparation. Food was dried, equipment procured, sponsorship arranged, and courses planned. The first leg of the journey began on May 9th, 2005 in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains with three instructors and a group of 12 undergraduate students. This group of 15 traveled for 29 days on the Athabasca River from Hinton to Fort McMurray, Alberta. There, the students returned home and the three instructors were met by three additional members of the expedition. Together, this team of six completed leg two: paddling the remainder of the Athabasca River, across Lake Athabasca, and down the Slave River to Great Slave Lake in 21 days. Low on time, unsure if the weather would hold, and wanting to complete our journey to the ocean, we made our way around Great Slave Lake—from Fort Resolution to Yellowknife—by truck where we adjusted the team for the third, final, longest, and most difficult leg of the journey. The 50-day long third leg of the expedition had us leaving from the docks of Yellowknife, traveling slowly North against the current of the Yellowknife River, over the Canadian Shield, and into the barren lands of the Arctic tundra. Lake-hopping and portaging heavy loads occupied nearly four weeks until we finally crossed the height of land, into Starvation Lake, down the Starvation River, into Point Lake, the headwaters of the Coppermine River. This famous river took us to Kugluktuk, Nunavut, on the shores of the Coronation Gulf, part of the Arctic Ocean. We arrived August 16th, 2005, 100 days after leaving Hinton, Alberta. The full route can be seen in figure 1.

Why?

The research was directed by the first author’s interest to explore, during our expedition, some of the foundation ideas within his Master’s thesis (Mullins 2005). This previous research involved a critique of dominant Western conceptions of nature and culture—wilderness and civilization—as foundations for outdoor recreation and environmental education. Moving beyond a critique, and in response to Beringer’s (2004) call for a relational or ecological approach to adventure education that can account for the role of landscape in human change, the research looked at the theoretical implications of Ingold’s (2000) anthropological approach to environmental perception and learning.

Informed by rigorous analysis of various conceptions of relatedness seen across Indigenous peoples’ worldviews, Ingold (2000) strongly critiques dominant Western conceptions of indigeneity, selfhood, culture, and “the environment.” Furthermore, he shows how experience and skill development allow humans to make sense of, act within, and connect to their world. Ingold (2000) begins with the assumption that each human is always already immersed in and encounters—from his or her unique position—an environment at once natural and social. We use the term socio-environmental to denote the combination of social and non-human environments.

The skills humans learn in dealing with our environment influence the formation and expression of personal and social identity. For Ingold (2000), skill involves an organism-person—indissoluble mind and body—acting with care, judgement, and dexterity, as part of a system of relations, in order to perform a particular function within a richly structured environment. Skills, learned through hands-on experience, taught to us by others, and afforded by one’s surroundings and creativity, also influence our milieu (Ingold...
Landscape, according to Ingold (2000), is temporal; that is, its shape is constantly changing and in flux given the processes at work in the local environment. Through the practice of skills, we shape and change our environment as it shapes and changes us. Thus the identity of persons and meanings of places are relative to what we do in our lives and where we do it. It follows, then, that the activities and landscapes in which we engage influence who we are. Each human and each place comes to embody a unique position relative to other people and places as well as certain skills and non-human environmental processes such as the flow of a river, the weather patterns, and changing seasons. Dwelling in the world, Ingold (2000: 348) tells us, “is tantamount to the ongoing, temporal interweaving of our lives with one another and with the manifold constituents of our environment.” The members of the expedition wanted to explore if and how this process works through outdoor recreation and education activities and learning, specifically within our university program and larger expedition. We focused on our understanding and experience of identity, place, and skill.

Outdoor recreation and education have been shown to impact identity development and self-concept (Beringer 2004; Haggard and Williams 1991; Klint 1999). Hanna (1995) and Haluza-Delay (1999) assert that shifts in identity-related environmental thinking and attitudes require specific attention and focused educational programming. Despite this, Hanna (1995), and more recently Beringer (2004), contend that outdoor recreation and education research, ensconced in traditional dominant Western individualism, has not attended to the role of context and relations in the development and expression of identity. Wearing and Neil (2000) have made significant strides in connecting identity with the settings and structures of recreation experiences through dynamic and dialectic interactions. Payne (2000) argues that environmental education research has paid little direct attention to identity and its development, especially related to embodiment and place, as a creative process.

Notions of place, and/or sense of place, have also garnered significant attention in the outdoor recreation and education literature. Stokowski (2002: 368) defines sense of place as “an individual’s ability to develop feelings of attachment to particular settings based on combinations of use, attentiveness, and emotion.” Other authors (Fishwick and Vining 1992; McAvoy and others 2003; Raffan 1991; Walker and Chapman 2003) explore place, and various levels of attachment to it, as resulting from interactions of persons within their environment over time that lead to cultural meaning and environmental values.

Environmentally-oriented skills abound in outdoor recreation and education: students learn travel and navigation, weather prediction, and interpretation of “natural” and “cultural” history. Little has been written on possible connections between learning and practicing skills, and changes in participants’ environmental perception and values. Haluza-Delay (1999) argues that an ‘activity focus’ in adventure education detracts from students’ environmental learning; whereas Thomas (2005: 39) argues this tension can be ne-
igated by using adventure activities to “explore particular regions, communities, and their histories.” Surely, we argue, it is important to recognize that all skill is contextual and cannot be performed in a vacuum. Making a hard distinction between setting- and activity-focus is problematic, as skill performance requires attention, in some way and to some extent, to one's environment.

The notion of 'weaving' people and places together sparked desires to share the expedition. We shared, and continue to share, it in three ways: first, through the inclusion of an academic program that had students join the full first leg of the journey; second, through actively engaging local people and places we encountered during the trip; and third, to a larger social setting through presentations and publications in both academic and non-academic forums. We wanted to share the trip for two reasons. First, to connect the expedition to aspects of our personal and professional lives as a challenge to dominant notions of wilderness and nature as “out there,” distanced, and separated from “culture” and “every-day” life. Second, to understand the ways outdoor recreation could establish and maintain relationships with people and places. Putting this into practice meant the members planned and taught five university-level classes that included basic and instruction-level canoe tripping skills, introduction to outdoor environmental education, leadership in adventure education, and environmental philosophy of outdoor education and recreation. Furthermore, we began our trip a short drive from the university. Throughout our journey we sought out and made time to visit with locals and attend community events, we tried to open ourselves to the various lifestyles taken up in the landscapes through which we traveled, and reflected on our impressions of and on them. Instead of flying, we paddled north to watch the changes in landscape, weather, lifestyles, and environment between our starting and finishing points.

How?

In order to explore the relevance and applicability of Ingold’s (2000) work to our situation, members of the expedition and leaders of the university program were asked to journal about their experiences given the core concepts of place, identity, and skill. Journaling was prompted by these themes along with the happenings of our journey. As co-investigators, we read and discussed Ingold’s (2000) elucidation of the themes in order to come to some understanding relative to our various experiences. Weekly, we gathered to discuss if and how the prompts and Ingold’s (2000) work resonated with the various members based on what each of us had done, seen, discussed, heard, and thought as we traveled together and shared the experience of life on the river from different perspectives. We attempted to place Ingold’s (2000) research and theory of environmental perception in dialogue with our lived experience on the river in the context of outdoor education and recreation to see how each informed the other.

Insights

An analysis of the taped discussions and written journals, as they relate to the main themes, has not yet been completed. Our reflective practice, however, led to realizations and questions, as well as alternative approaches to and implications of theories and practices that we feel are relevant to those interested in outdoor recreation and education provision in ‘wilderness’ areas. In what follows, we describe cursory impressions, observations, thoughts, and examples derived from the entire trip. These certainly require further analysis and research.

Education of Attention

In many Indigenous societies as well as Western “hands-on” learning environments, the student learns through what Ingold (2000) calls an “education of attention” by working through an apprenticeship in a richly structured environment. For the student, such an education reveals salient processes and elements in his or her environment and allows for the development of the skills necessary to work with these aspects to accomplish particular tasks. The mode of travel and activities we undertook influenced our perception and the meaning of aspects of the environments that were significant to our daily life. The skills needed to navigate a canoe through the river required an education of attention to currents, wind patterns, the size and location of rapids, and a partner’s actions. While discussing the river with jet boat operators, for example, we found they could tell us little about the relative location of rapids, and they perceived features in the river such as rocks, ledges, and shoals at a scale applicable to their activity and mode of travel, but often misleading to our group of canoeists.

While the students worked hard to learn navigation skills, they struggled much more while learning to see, hear, and feel the river. Instead of resting on and practicing their perceptual skill to make decisions about route, campsites, and lunch spots, our students often deferred to the map as a crutch, even when the information it provided was of little practical use. Much later on, when we found ourselves on the big lakes in the barren lands, we had to learn to look at the landscape differently to find our way. The expanse of water and land, combined with a lack of trees, made parallax difficult to observe and distance hard to judge (see fig. 2). Discerning points, bays, and islands from the background into which they “disappeared” required great concentration and attention. These moments of learning brought the difference between navigation and wayfinding into bold relief. Navigating meant finding our location and plotting a course on a map-grid in relation to the landscape as space (fig. 3) (Casey 1996). Wayfinding required our students and us to learn how to see, hear, and feel our way through our environment from our particular place (see fig. 4).

Attention to canoeing was facilitated through “formal” instructor-student relationships and working one on one with students while sharing a canoe. Furthermore, it continued through informal relationships as well. During outdoor recreation or education expeditions, life often occurs in a group context that complicates the mentor-apprentice relationship. We noticed various layers of “learning relationships” that shifted in time and space based on interpersonal associations and one’s role in “the group.” Students often commented that their need to attend to environmental and social processes increased dramatically when they moved from a follower into a leadership role. As an assignment, teams of students assumed the leadership of the group over
Figure 2—The expanse of water and land combined with a lack of trees made distance hard to judge.

Figure 3—Navigating meant finding our location and plotting a course on a map-grid in relation to landscape as space.
a period of six days. The instructors of the program noticed that the “leaders in training” practiced and commented on an increased need for attention to the state of the group, group members, and environmental factors such as weather patterns, river morphology, and navigation. While students varied in their ability to perceive and respond to various subjective or objective factors, their leadership role required them to learn more about their socio-ecological environment, make sense of it, and respond in order to accomplish daily leadership and group tasks.

Good group dynamics facilitated perspective sharing and learning, poor group dynamics and power struggles stifled or channeled it. Education of attention did not necessarily follow lines of designated “authority” in the group, from official leaders to the followers but, rather, from those with more to those with less experience and knowledge in a topic, skill, or location. This was particularly evident during informal peer-teaching that happened between students on the university program. Such learning happened in many directions between various members of the group depending on their experience, role, and life history. An older student who had lived and worked in the Athabasca area brought much to the group by way of attuning our attention to the influences of local and international industry on a landscape many students had perceived to be “wilderness.” Further, his interest in local plants and bush craft prompted learning about properties of plants and techniques to create everyday products such as baskets, bowls, and spoons. Enabling students to share skills through peer-teaching helped the whole group become more familiar with the places they visited, landscapes they traveled through, as well as the identity, skills and personality of the group members. Following the university program, expedition members made a conscious decision to use consensus leadership. The six group members were able to engage in sharing of skills and knowledge, and explore complementarily, without the formal leader-follower power structures. In this way, each person’s skills, biography, and style contributed to the nature of the group—for better or worse—creating more complex lines of authority based on various skills and knowledge contained within the group.

The changing landscape provided further opportunity for various learning relationships to develop that spoke to members’ past trips, skills in other activities, and family history. One member’s knowledge and experience with arctic cotton allowed the group to avoid a particularly wet campsite, and presaged the coming barren lands; another’s childhood botany lessons enabled the collection and use of blueberries and various other edible wilds present in specific regions through which we traveled, while a third’s experience as a competitive sailor allowed for greater perception of, and strategy in negotiating wind, weather, and water currents on some of the large open lakes.

As the expedition wore on, the group became increasingly aware of how apt the name “Paddling the Big Sky” was to our journey. We were, indeed, in “big sky country,” but more to the point, we were traveling in relation to the sky just...
as much as – if not more than – the river. Our daily lives, temperament, campsites, and energy levels, for example, existed in relation to the flux of the wind, air temperature, cloud cover, and rain relative to the movement of the river and what it offered in terms of current strength and direction, rapids, portages, bank material, wind breaks and the like. We lived, and live, in relation to a world of movement, which we attended to as we performed our daily chores and accomplished our goals.

Members of the expedition expressed feeling “in place” and “at home” when they could more easily relate to, and operate within, the pattern of movement afforded by particular landscapes. A favorite in the group was the Canadian Shield; our time there was reminiscent of many past trips and leant a sense of familiarity (see fig. 5). Even though we had never before been to this part of the shield, we felt comfortable finding camping and clean water, while anticipating travel conditions and requirements. This was not the case for most of the Athabasca River and sections of the Slave River, on which we felt less comfortable dealing with the heavily silted water that ran on and on past very wide banks of deep, sticky mud (see fig. 6).

Education of attention, then, appeared to occur in formal and informal learning relationships during outdoor recreation and education. Our experience suggests that the meanings of aspects of the environment that were revealed

Figure 5—Time in the Canadian Shield landscape leant a sense of familiarity.

Figure 6—On sections of the Slave River, heavily silted water ran past very wide banks of deep, sticky mud.
depended largely on the confluence and interplay of the activities pursued and landscapes encountered, as well as the participants’ biographies and interpersonal relationships. Is it through an education of attention and enskiment that outdoor recreation and education participants come to understand and establish connections that reaffirm their position within a more-than-human environment? Is this a way that adventure activities can teach students something about their environment? What, then, are the pedagogical implications?

**Place, Self, and Community**

The conceptual place of humans relative to their environment is a central issue in the urban-wilderness or nature-culture dichotomy. Instead of “leaving culture behind” in urban areas and traveling into a supposedly pristine wilderness devoid of human presence, we tried to understand ourselves, and those around us, as part of our environment. By traversing diverse landscapes we recognized a continuum of human presence in the environment; we moved with the rivers in, out, and through densely populated urban areas, hamlets, rural farm land, fishing, trapping and hunting lands, and very remote areas in the boreal forest and barren lands used for mining, subsistence, tourism, and recreation. The variety of human settlement eased the difficulty of our journey by allowing for re-supply and the likes, but also provided more- and less-experienced paddlers with rest, distraction, and degrees of reassurance, which enabled us to continue our journey. Furthermore, the continuum provided personal experience with, and examples of, alternatives to urban lifestyles that we feel are important if, as outdoor educators, we are trying to teach for socio-environmentally sustainable lifestyles.

Human influence was present in all landscapes through which we traveled. The people, trails, and artifacts allowed us to learn more about our surroundings. Opening our programming and recreation beyond the geographical and ideological boundaries of “wilderness” allowed members of the expedition and our students to connect remote areas to our everyday lives and home environments while wrestling with outdoor recreation and education’s influence on, and involvement of, rural communities. Furthermore, traveling through this continuum of settlements opened our eyes to the various ways people are currently living lifestyles—sustainable or not—that create places and landscapes that include and exist in-between the urban and the remote wild.

In our practices as outdoor educators and canoe trippers, we have contributed, and continue to contribute, to the construction and understanding of wilderness that has lasting effects on local environments, communities, economies and ways of life. While significant places have been “set aside” by and for those participating in recreation, the creation/preservation of “wilderness” has also seen the removal and relocation of local peoples and done violence to Indigenous connections to the land (Cronon 1996; MacLaren 1999). As Haluza-Delay (1999) and Hull (2000) have suggested, “leave no trace” ideology can reinforce the idea that humans are alien to, and without influence in, the wilderness landscape. Instead of encouraging such an ideology, we struggled diligently to consider the traces we left (always a mix of good and bad) to ensure that we left our trace, and took responsibility for our journey. We tried to think of and use practices that were as socio-environmentally sustainable as possible given our location, the larger context, and the resulting aesthetics of the place. We tried to reconcile our practices with our unavoidable involvement in shaping our environment. We saw this as an opportunity for education and action in the reality of place-making.

There are towns along our route. At first we struggled with how to approach them given the mission of our expedition. They greatly shaped our attention, our patterns of activity, and our relations. Large and small towns opened our relations outward beyond our immediate environment and allowed us to communicate with friends and family while sending and receiving gifts, stories, and other goods. In smaller towns and hamlets, we met many outgoing and interesting locals who not only provided guidance and local knowledge for the journey ahead, but also helped us glimpse the history of the area and become aware of local social and environmental concerns. For example, the W.A.C. Bennett Dam has caused extensive damage to the Peace-Athabasca Delta, part of which is designated as a wetland of international significance by the Ramsar Convention and is protected by Canada’s Wood Buffalo National Park, also a UNESCO World Heritage Site (Macmillan 1996). The Delta is of major importance to the subsistence practices of the First Nations who live in and around Fort Chipewyan, Alberta. Our stop allowed us to realize the damage done, and the changes occurring to the people, places, plants, and animals of this environment.

The number of people in cities and large towns seemed to encourage anonymity and a measure of isolation that was not present or available during travel with a smaller group or even in a small town where news of our arrival spread quickly. Urban space seemed to distance us from persons and things geographically close to us. We became more self-aware and felt more individuated as we were surrounded by strangers. Yet, when we were surrounded by members of our group, with whom we were very familiar, our identity seemed to be more relational, influenced by our daily interactions, and behaviors. Identity, we found, came less from an image or imagination reflected back at us in a mirror or choice of clothing (we did not have a lot of options), but more from our role in the group, our performance, and how we interacted with others. In a conversation about body-awareness during such times, one group member commented that, “it’s like I have no face.”

We found community where there were no towns. Many locals lived along and spent time on the river, some for work, and others for play. They directed our path, put us in touch with a friend down the way, told us of other groups on the river, and opened their homes and cabins to us. Facilitated by parties’ relative speed and our interactions with the local river community, we came to recognize a community of paddlers spread along the river through space and time. As paddlers, we were connected through stories told from one group to another, left on the landscape and found scrawled in old abandoned cabins, at a portage trail, in green- and red-paint left on the rocks by canoes before us, or boot prints in the almost-dry mud.

Leaders and groups make decisions regarding these types of community, who to interact with, for how long, and when. We encountered some parties on the river who chose not to
engage with reports from past trips, lodges, or fishing guides and to focus on “the group” and the “wilderness experience.” Reflecting on this, our group discussed how the choices we make as leaders and members of a group influence the type of socio-environmental learning, sharing, and knowledge we have access to, and the way in which we understand and represent people and places. Many of the encounters we had in towns, in new friends’ homes, and along the way would challenge some of the staunchest stereotypes of the North and racist attitudes about the people who live there. We can choose to engage or ignore. While these choices are open to leaders of groups or members of private expeditions, they are also made available or constrained through the institutional structures that rationalize and help facilitate outdoor recreation and education. A relational perspective allows recreation practitioners and participants to see, at least in part, how their activities influence local people and places, and make decisions about how to proceed.

Bloody Falls, only 16 km (10 miles) from Kugluktuk at the mouth of the Coppermine River, was the last of our many portages. It gained significance as an end-marker, as well as a point at which the group split up in order to allow members with over-use injuries and fatigue to finish more quickly. While our current situation gave the place—and others—much meaning, stories from the past also influenced place-meaning and perception. Reading Samuel Hearne’s abridged diary (Mowat 1990), for example, as well as the interpretive signs posted along the portage trail, directed our attention to features in and around the falls. Hearne’s story of the battle that gave Bloody Falls its name drew our attention to specific features he mentions as well as to the continuing importance of the falls for local Inuit subsistence. Other stories, such as reports from past trips and accounts of river-running attempts, strongly influenced how we moved, where we paddled, scouted, and walked. Not only did we read and follow others’ stories, we created many of our own. Furthermore, the group discussed the use of slideshows as a way to share stories, place-meanings, personal achievements, and identity attributes with larger audiences. Perhaps the “institution” of the slideshow holds, or could hold, a significant role in outdoor recreation and education as a tool for environmental activism that deserves further attention.

Conclusion

Paddling the Big Sky was a three-and-a-half month journey through 2,800 km (1,740 miles) of northern Canadian landscape. The seven expedition members tried to share this journey in numerous ways, prominent was the inclusion of a month-long outdoor and environmental education program for 12 undergraduate students. We traveled through an ever-changing landscape that included urban centers, towns, hamlets, lodges, and remote wilderness areas. Reflecting on our travel and activities, we used research journals and group meetings to interrogate Ingold’s (2000) ‘dwelling perspective’ and its implications, applications, and adaptations to outdoor recreation and education described by Mullins (2005).

Insights were gained regarding the main themes of place, identity, and skill. We found that our personal histories and the activities we chose or were required to undertake influenced our perception of the landscape and the meaning of places in that landscape. Furthermore, the skills we brought into the expedition, and those we developed along the way, shaped our personal and group identity. As the banks of the river eroded and the buildings of abandoned communities faded into the brush, while portage trails were cleared and industry prospered, we were able to see, and start to understand our involvement in, an ever-changing landscape. These processes, of which we were a part, also contributed to the making and meaning of places along our route. In our experience, education of attention to particular aspects in our environment coalesced around the activities, landscapes, and participants’ biographies and relationships.

Questioning the dominant nature-culture and urban-wilderness dichotomies present in outdoor recreation and education practice and theory, and guided by Ingold’s (2000) perspective on, and interpretation of, various Indigenous worldviews, we came to further realizations regarding the interrelation of self, place, and community throughout the continuum of human presence, from urban to ‘remote.’ We tried to reconsider the role of outdoor recreation and education as an escape from culture. We have begun to see it as a creative experience that allows educators, students, and participants not only to reflect on, and/or escape their normal routine, but also to build and maintain relationships with people and places and to share those relationships as stories in a broader socio-environmental context. This raises questions regarding the ethics of practice and storytelling, which stories should be told, which not, when, and how? The insights presented herein require further analysis and empirical research if generalizations are to be made beyond our experience of Paddling the Big Sky.

Acknowledgments

In terms of the expedition, acknowledgment must be made to the other trip members who did not take part in the authorship of this paper: Anthony Berkens, Haley Elzen, Margo Millette, Alissa Overend and Sean Ryan. As well, thank you to the students involved in the first month of courses.

Financially and logistically, the expedition was sponsored by a number of companies and organizations: a grant from the Expedition Committee of the Royal Canadian Geographic Society, grants from the Mountain Equipment Co-op Expedition and Environment Funds, Ostrom Outdoors, Totem Outfitters, K & K Foodliner, Souptacular, The Cheese Factory, Western Outdoor Works, Shocode, and Alta-Comm Wireless. Additionally, funding from the University of Northern British Columbia allowed Pat to attend and present this expedition at the 8th World Wilderness Congress.

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