

Voyageur Wilderness Programme: A Different Educational Approach

by Michelle Savoie

Some say Voyageur Wilderness Programme (VWP) virtually invented the concept of the “ecological education through wilderness experience” when, in 1960, we took our first student group and eco-adventurers into Quetico Provincial Park. We’re proud to be pioneers in the field of wilderness-based experiential learning and eco-travel. We continue to dedicate ourselves to being one of Canada’s leading wilderness education and eco-adventure outfitting programs.

History

If you look back to 1958, environmental clubs were few, organizations that considered eco-practices were almost non-existent, and the concept of environmental studies at any level in our educational system was in its infancy. It was in this environment that VWP was founded on Voyageur Island, Nym Lake, Quetico, Ontario, Canada, by Charlie Ericksen and Jean Goff Marantette. Charlie and Jean’s great vision was influenced by their connection to the planet and world around them. Even after 48 years the mission remains the same: “ecological education through wilderness experience.” The goal is to give youth an appreciation and understanding of wilderness that will positively influence their connection to the planet.

In 1986 Guy Savoie and family, friends of the late founders and descendants of Métis and French-Canadian voyageurs, took over the program. Inspired by the Savoie family’s proud heritage, the program was further developed to highlight the lifestyle and history of the voyageurs as the first eco-travelers of the lakes, rivers, waterways and portages in this wilderness park.

VWP was instrumental in establishing Quetico’s special “sensitive area designation,” which includes a complete mechanical ban. Over the years, VWP has developed an excellent rapport with Ministry of Natural Resources and continues to be in the forefront of ecological practices while assisting in the maintenance and promotion of Quetico Park.

Voyageur Persona

The “voyageur” was selected as a theme for several reasons. Voyageurs are part of our heritage and were instrumental in traveling with explorers and map makers to open up the North American continent. They learned from the First Nations how to live in harmony with the land. They were renowned for their perseverance, tenacity and “joie de vivre” (joy of living). These characteristics drove their inner spirit and provided them the strength to accomplish great challenges in the uncharted wilderness. The voyageur of yesteryear has strong links to the wilderness eco-traveler of today.

Wilderness

VWP allows students to discover one of Earth’s last true primitive wilderness areas of international acclaim. Canada’s Quetico Provincial Park is 1,800 square miles of protected, pristine wilderness in Northern Ontario’s Precambrian shield and boreal forest. This wilderness is phenomenal – a world of geological, biological, cultural and educational significance. From May to September, students immerse themselves in the wild, untamed spirit of Quetico and learn about themselves in the process. Wilderness brings the classroom to life and helps students feel deeply connected to the natural world.

The Program

VWP sees wilderness education as providing a catalyst mechanism for change. Wilderness-based experiential learning involves primal experiences, investigation, improvisation, teamwork and problem solving. Our approach in wilderness eco-travel emphasizes self-reliance, reflection, self-knowledge and cooperation. It influences how young people perceive their relationships with their world, and they often come to see themselves as intimately connected to all life. Our genuine hope is that these experiences help young people see their lives and the world in new ways. We believe, as did Henry David Thoreau, that “In wildness is the preservation of the world.”

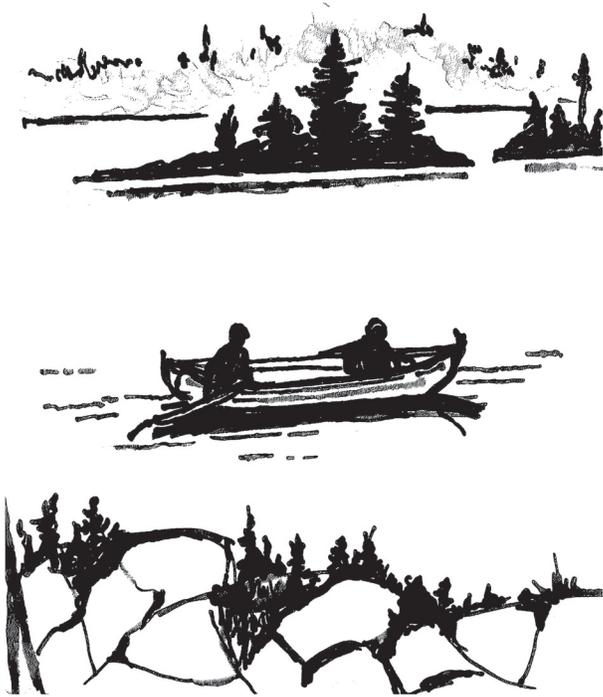
VWP is committed to one very simple idea: if we can help people come to know and love wilderness, they will not let it disappear. Wilderness is something we are privileged to experience. Those of us who come to know and love its wild, untamed beauty need to serve as its guardians.

To visit a place like Quetico and to experience it through the eyes of a voyageur is a chance of a lifetime. It gave me and undoubtedly many other students a newly established respect, then admiration, for the power and magnificence of Mother Nature. I could not have asked for better teachers of these facts! Thank you for allowing me, and all of the other students, to experience true nature in such a perfect manner. I am only appreciative that the program is available.

– Student, St. Ignatius College Prep,
Chicago, IL.

Program Delivery

VWP weaves eco-practices throughout all components of its operations. This approach is based on our Métis and voyageur heritage and the wisdom of our elders. At VWP we



A wilderness experience often strikes people at the core of their being. It has a deep influence on people’s attitudes, opinions, feelings and behaviours. VWP has seen many young people undergo profound personal transformations, and over the years has heard from hundreds who speak of its life changing impact. Wilderness experiences influence how we see the world and our lives within it. At VWP we think this aspect of outdoor education is extremely important.

I have brought countless students through this program and the experience is one of the highlights they recall from their high school years. It isn’t just a trip through wilderness; VWP gives it an educative, environmental message that changes participants in a positive way. I’ve traveled all over the planet, to beautiful and meaningful places – yet none will ever rival my VWP Quetico trips for making me feel that I belong to the Earth.

– Laine Gurley, PhD, Science
Division, Rolling Meadows, IL.
Golden Apple Recipient

are very fortunate to have been given values in life and had certain fundamental concepts instilled into the core of our being. We were “taught” and shown respect for Mother Earth, ourselves, family and community, and how everything is interconnected. The objective is to produce youth who grow into moral, ethical, contributing adults.

You immediately see our traditional unique approach to ecological practice on arrival at the Quetico Park Nym Lake landing. We greet participants with our “Montrealer” canoes – 32- and 36-foot-long replicas of canoes used by the voyageurs during the fur trade era. Students embark and paddle a short 800 m to Voyageur Island on Nym Lake at the boundary of Quetico Park. This natural mode of transportation moves many people in a non-motorized manner. For efficiency we coordinate the arrival and departure of groups so that when one group is leaving, another is arriving.

Another eco-friendly component is the transportation of supplies to the island. We have two pontoon boats with four-stroke motors. These motors are more expensive than two-stroke models, but their ecological benefit is outstanding – especially their fuel efficiency. Compared to two-stroke motors they use a fraction of gas and oil. They also exhaust into the air, in contrast to regular marine motors that exhaust into and pollute the water. Nym Lake, as well as Quetico Park, is a spring-fed watershed located on the continental divide and therefore in a pristine state. Because the area’s crystal wetlands and bogs are an example of Mother Nature working efficiently to maintain pure water, we are dedicated to preserving its water quality.

Speaking of watersheds and wetlands, VWP is the first island location in Ontario to have a sub-surface water treatment project or wetland to treat wastewater. We worked for five years with the Ministries of Environment and Health and a consulting firm for authorization to create this marshland. It was completed in 2000, at the time when

there were only 90 wetland installations in operation in Canada.

Wetlands are areas inundated with surface water or groundwater that support plants adapted to saturated soil conditions. Wetlands are valuable water-storage sites, holding back floods in wet seasons and gradually releasing the water in times of drought. They filter out pollutants and sediments from water that passes through them. They are also irreplaceable habitat for a vast number of birds that breed or feed in them. Wetlands have been described as “nature’s kidneys” because the physical, chemical and biological processes break down some compounds (e.g., nitrogen-containing compounds, sulfates) and filter out others. The natural pollutant-removal capabilities of wetlands have brought them increased attention as a way to filter wastewater.

The wastewater from our central shower and bathroom facility feeds into the wetland. In connection to our wetland we conserve water use through the use of six flow-reduced showers, three one-pint flush toilets and two non-pressure wash basins. The main kitchen has three flow-reduced faucets at sink areas. Although an abundance of pure water literally surrounds us, we practice conservation use as a commitment to further reducing our ecological footprint.

Electrical energy conservation is also an eco-practice embraced by VWP. Primarily due to the fact that years ago there wasn’t power in place, we continued the natural rustic approach. The buildings do not have air conditioning or heating systems. Natural light through windows is the main source of lighting while evening lighting systems include low-wattage, high-efficiency light bulbs and electronic motion sensors. High-efficiency appliances include refrigerators, steam dishwasher, propane stove and Paloma water heaters used in the main kitchen. Paloma water heaters are very energy efficient because they only heat the water that is being drawn through the unit.

Our program is also active in all three Rs: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle. Our recycling efforts include the collection of recyclable materials and transportation to processing centers. Our dead fall from trees and branches is collected and chipped on-site then distributed to designated paths.

Related to reduction and reuse is our purchasing power and selection of equipment and goods. When purchasing we consider many factors including packaging and natural products. For example, our freeze-dried food is provided by Richmoor, which offers all-natural products with bulk packaging. In terms of equipment and containers, everything is re-useable and sourced for eco-quality and durability, including backpacks, paddles, tents, lifejackets and even containers for food storage and eco-travel.

VWP is devoted to promoting ecological integrity – ensuring wilderness can be appreciated in its natural form for generations to come. We adhere to environmentally friendly practices for this very reason. In addition, there is no better way of educating youth in eco-practices than leading by example. We also instill the seven principles of Leave No Trace (LNT, www.leavenotrace.ca) in all our participants. The LNT principles were created to educate outdoor enthusiasts on reducing their environmental impact in the wilderness:

1. Plan Ahead and Prepare
2. Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces
3. Dispose of Waste Properly
4. Leave What You Find
5. Minimize Campfire Impacts
6. Respect Wildlife (and Nature)
7. Be Considerate of Other Visitors

Voyageur Island's eco-system is monitored and maintained to ensure minimal impact and sustainable use. Designated paths link buildings and activity areas. Other areas are designated as wild, untouched by foot or development. Participants are asked to remain on designated paths and are more than

pleased to comply once they understand the potential impact of wandering through the undergrowth of this island's pristine areas. As with every forest and eco-system, there is natural tree loss. With many old-growth trees, some between 500 and 600 years old, we regenerate Voyageur Island every year by planting indigenous white and red pine species.

The aforementioned ecological aspects of our program delivery touch upon major areas that people can readily relate to. However, we also carry it through to the last detail and incorporate it into all aspects of our everyday lives. These values are reflected by our personal, down-to-earth, authentic interaction with people. It's a deep commitment by us – we LOVE what we do. VWP and its participants live and embrace the spirit, traditions and life-changing, timeless wilderness experiences that inspire our connection to the world.

VWP's Green Belief

We truly believe that we are not masters of nature, but rather a small strand which is part of the large web of life. Ever since VWP's inception, we have been aware that actions and decisions today will affect what will happen tomorrow. We are committed to being at the forefront of environmentally friendly practices. VWP is devoted to promoting ecological integrity, not only on Voyageur Island but in all aspects of our participants' eco-travel through Quetico Park and surrounding areas. This commitment ensures that wilderness will be appreciated in its natural form for generations to come.

Michelle Savoie is the CEO/General Manager of the Savoie family-owned Voyageur Wilderness Programme. Please visit VWP's website (www.vwp.ca) for information about an upcoming Teachers' Professional Development Workshop linking experiential learning to the classroom.