

Fishing: Learning to Live Well on This Land

By Andrew Lee

I recently embarked on a theoretical journey in which I learned much about myself in relation to the natural world. One of the most prominent things I learned was that how I carry myself impacts how I view the world and its many inhabitants. I will refer to this realization as my personal environmental ethic. On a recent ice-fishing adventure on a nearby lake, I was reflecting on this journey and realized that my specific passion for the outdoors might very well serve as a vehicle by which I can enable others to develop their own unique environmental ethic.

I believe that fishing can aid in fostering a certain ethical view of the environment. It allows participants to carry themselves into the world in a creative way that not only foregrounds Indigenous ways of knowing but also allows for a certain connection to be made with nature. Because fishing can be both a meditative practice and one of subsistence, it might prove valuable to the fostering of connection to the natural world and to alternative ways of knowing for students.

Fishing as a Meditative Practice

Fishing can be very meditative in nature, regardless of whether you fish for subsistence or pleasure and practice catch and release. In a book that I recently read entitled *Catch and Release: Trout Fishing and the Meaning of Life*, Kingwell (2003) describes the times in fishing when there appears to be nothing happening.

To the outside eye, perhaps, it seems dull and lifeless; we might even look as though we are doing exactly nothing. And yet, we are doing everything, all the complicated invisible things that fishing demands: concentrating, looking, thinking, wondering, calculating. (p. 126)

In drawing on this rather profound statement regarding the meditative qualities that fishing requires, I would argue that by

designing curriculum in schools involving fishing, we might foster a greater sense of place consciousness and connection within our students. With some guiding principles for the activity, students will be afforded an opportunity to connect with nature in a unique way and engage in a practice that is not only historically relevant to many Indigenous cultures but that is also reflective and challenging to both the mind and the body.

In my experience as a fishing guide in Northern Ontario, I have recognized the meditative powers of fishing. I have seen the thrill of the catch, the necessity of the kill and the harmony that one attains simply by being out on the water and immersed in nature. Whether you are a novice, a seasoned professional or are completely new to the activity, the meditative powers of fishing can move you to be drawn to a specific region or to become an advocate for something you value. The qualities that fishing requires and provokes are ones that might lead participants towards developing their own environmental ethic. The connection that those who participate in fishing appear to have with nature is, in my opinion, equal to that of any other outdoor activity. Participants can pick their enjoyment at any level.

Fishing as Place-Conscious Education

It is important to note that I do not wish to simply employ fishing as a method to attain successful place-conscious education. Rather, I am attempting to unpack the philosophy upon which critical place-based education is based. Greenwood (n.d.) asserts that place not only provides a specific local focus for ecological experience, but also helps to break down the dualism between “culture” and “environment.” Because fishing, as a means of subsistence, is based on traditional epistemologies¹ and involves a specific interaction with (and experience in) nature, it would appear to be a viable activity for students to make authentic connections

with the natural world. The purpose of this participation would be twofold: it would engage students in alternative ways of knowing (culture) and would also engage them in the outdoors (environment), thus assisting in overcoming the culture/environment dualism.

Successful Curriculum Design

For the successful creation of a critical place-based curriculum focused on fishing, I suggest that those involved engage in dialogues with local First Nations and community members who might have historically relevant information based on the specific place where your school is located. Greenwood's critical place-based theory notes the importance of knowing what has happened in the past, what is happening now and what some possibilities are for the future (Greenwood, n.d.). By educating students about what has happened in a given place from multiple perspectives, including those of First Nations, and educating about what is currently happening, we might foster creative imagination for the future and successfully engage in one aspect of critical place-conscious education.

Conclusion

By recognizing opportunities to engage in outdoor experiences, provide subsistence and foster an environmental ethic, all in their own communities, students might become more inclined to advocate for environmentally sustainable activities in their own regions. Granted, fishing is only one of these opportunities and may not be for everyone. I challenge readers to find something in their own community that engages students in the environment for a specific purpose and recognizes alternative ways of knowing. I have chosen fishing as one of these practices because of my personal background, the meditative qualities that fishing requires and provokes, and the specific Indigenous ways of knowing that are consistent with traditional fishing methods. Learning to live well on this land involves the formation of a specific environmental

ethic that might begin to form from engagement in activities such as fishing.

¹ I am referring to both the traditional Indigenous practices of fishing and the traditional sustainable methods of commercial fishing such as long-lining and jigging rather than bottom trawling.

References

- Cheney, J., & Weston, A. (1999). Environmental ethics as environmental etiquette: Toward an ethics-based epistemology. *Environmental Ethics*, 21(2), 115–134.
- Greenwood, D. (formerly Gruenewald; in press). A critical theory of place-conscious education. In M. Brody, J. Dillon, J. R. Stevenson, & A. Wals (Eds.), *International handbook on environmental education research*. AERA/Routledge.
- Gruenewald, D. A. (2003). The best of both worlds: A critical pedagogy of place. *Educational Researcher*, 32(4), 3–12.
- Kingwell, M. (2003). *Catch and release: Trout fishing and the meaning of life*. Toronto: Penguin.
- Weston, A. (1993). Before environmental ethics. In Armstrong and Botzler (Eds.), *Environmental ethics* (pp. 96–103). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Andrew Lee is a Master's student in the Faculty of Education at Lakehead University. He grew up in St. Mary's, Ontario, spending every free moment catching carp and bass in the Thames River and swimming in the historic "quarry". During university he has studied in both the Faculties of Outdoor Recreation and Social Sciences at Lakehead. While working towards a Bachelor of Arts in History and a Bachelor of Education, he spent his summers guiding fishing trips in Northern Ontario and leading canoe trips in Algonquin Park. Looking forward, he hopes to continue researching the meditative practice that he believes fishing is.