

Learning from a Distressed Loon

By Hans Gelter

This is a story about a loon, a skinny dip in a tundra pond, and a wilderness camp that had to be moved.

The story starts with the unique “Conference on Wilderness Educational Expeditions: International Perspectives and Practices,” which took place from June 27 to July 13, 2010. The conference comprised 14 outdoor educators from Canada, Scotland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Japan participating in a 250 km-long canoe expedition on the Mara and Burnside Rivers in Nunavut. A common subject for most of the conference presentations was interconnectedness with place and nature. Such presentations included activities such as handicraft from natural material, quiet solo moments, reflections on the concepts of wind and water, playing games, blind paddling and group metaphors.

The Incident

Our expedition ended with a five kilometre portage at Burnside Falls. The first to reach the end of our portage and our camp site, I decided to take a quick swim in a small pond before the others arrived. Upon entering the pond I became aware of a distressed Red-throated Loon (*Gavia stellata*), a circumpolar species familiar to me from Sweden. A usually quiet species that breeds in small tundra ponds, it clearly communicated that I had trespassed beyond its comfort zone. Aware of its behaviour I hurried to wash myself and quickly leave the loon pond. While the rest of the expedition arrived and started to raise camp, the loon mate made several attempts to land in the pond, sweeping over the camp with its goose-like flight-cackle, while the female in the pond answered with a crow-like croaking call. Each time the male gave up and left. When people came too close to the pond the loon either submerged or took off from the pond, but quickly returned again. The distressed loon made me raise my own tent a safe distance from the loon pond, but, despite the distress displayed by the loon, four of

the seven camp tents were raised very close to the pond, the nearest only a few metres away. I decided to investigate further to determine the reason for the loon’s distress.

I walked along the waterline of the pond and quickly found the exposed loon nest with two eggs, just a few metres away from a tent. Making my colleagues aware of the situation, it was decided to move the four closest tents away from the pond. Given that many hours had passed since my dip in the pond, the damage was probably already done. In the cold weather the eggs would have cooled down to a fatal level as neither of the parent loons could incubate the eggs due to our camp business. Our ignorance of the incident probably killed the loon chicks in their eggs. This may be of minor ecological significance, as only about 30% of loon eggs hatch and usually a replacement clutch are laid after egg loss (Camp, 1977). The loon eggs could just as well have been taken by wolves or ravens, and natives previously gathered loon eggs for food. However, our misbehaviour made us uncomfortable, and when breaking the camp the next day, to ease our guilty consciences, we made great efforts to not further disturb the loons when passing the pond with our gear.

Theoretical and Practical Consequences

Despite its ecological insignificance, the loon incident had a pedagogic significance. As the basic theme of the conference was “connecting to place” and “interconnecting to nature,” one might expect our expert group of outdoor educators to “walk our talk” concerning how to behave in nature. However, it made me wonder to see how we tramped on flowers and ignored the warnings of white-crowned sparrows when passing near their hidden ground nests; some in the group even followed a rough-legged hawk to get a better photograph, despite its warning calls and flight displays to communicate we had come too close to its nest.

David Selby (1996) suggested that education programs need a harmonization of “message” and “medium” through the insight that “the medium is the message.” It’s not what you say, but what you do that is important, especially in outdoor education. We talked during the trip about how to connect to nature and the landscape, yet were unable to “read” the language of nature and its obvious signs. Clearly there was a gap between the message and the medium. I wrote in my notebook: “. . . a lesson for all of us to be observant and aware of our behaviour and ways of being in nature—a skill that is central to friluftsliv. As Nansen said; “Friluftsliv is to be at home in nature,” not to be a tourist. At home you know all the things and their way, while a tourist is only superficially acquainted with the place.”

Were we merely “tourists” on the tundra, or were we at home? Was nature only an arena for our conference and of instrumental value in our fulfillment as outdoor educators, or were we at home learning our different ways of being at home, and respecting the intrinsic values of nature?

During the canoe trip I often reflected on the cultural differences between the Scandinavian way of friluftsliv (Gelter, 2000) and the Anglo-American way of outdoor education/activities; in my experience the latter is more explicitly oriented towards socialisation, mastering activities, and leadership, while the value of being skillful in interpreting and understanding nature is regarded more as an implicit, positive outcome of being in nature. While I truly enjoyed the social skills of my Canadian and Scottish friends, at times this group socialisation in its various forms took over the experience of more modest communication by nature.

Outdoor education often is oriented towards, in Selby’s terms, traditional knowledge-oriented processes of learning about (the outdoors), the skill acquisition process of learning for (outdoor activities, personal and social development), and learning in or through (activities in nature). But this loon incident would add another learning process

central to genuine friluftsliv—learning from nature, letting phenomenon in nature speak and tell their stories, and showing respect for nature’s messages. Due to our involvement with our social and outdoor activities, we didn’t listen to nature, to the loon and what it had to say to us about our behaviour. We became imprisoned in an anthropocentric trap that disconnected us from the surroundings. We were tourists in nature.

Surveying textbooks on outdoor leadership and outdoor experiential learning, I found subjects such as environmental awareness, minimizing impact, landfulness, place-based learning, environmental stewardship, and ecological literacy, but very little about learning from nature and the skill of subjective interconnectedness with nature. Could the traditional anthropocentric focus on technical, social and personal dimensions in outdoor education explain the loon incident and my experienced gap between theory and praxis in connecting to the land?

References

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