

Finding Canada Outside: Building National Identity through Place-Based Outdoor Education

By Katherine Joyce

If, as Benedict Anderson (2006) argues, nations are little more than imagined communities, then we need to find a way to make imagining the connections between citizens possible. In a country as diverse as Canada, spread over an incomprehensibly large land mass, these connections may require more imagination than Anderson had in mind. One way that these connections have been traditionally imagined in Canada is through national myths, including the myth of the wilderness. This myth draws the Canadian identity out of an “untouched” wilderness landscape.

This conception of the Canadian identity is rife with problems. By nature, myths are exclusionary, privileging those who already enjoy power in society. The myth of the wilderness draws its power from an imagined landscape devoid of people, except for those who are using it as a recreational space, perhaps canoeists. Those who use this landscape for survival, most notably Aboriginal peoples, but also rural inhabitants who live off the land, are conspicuously absent. They do not figure prominently into the picture that the word “wilderness” brings to mind.

But, as much as there are problems with the wilderness myth of Canada, the land provides a valuable connection between all disparate members of Canadian society. And so, I would like to propose a much more inclusive re-imagining of this myth, in which we draw national identity from the land in all the variety of its meanings and uses. In this way, Canadians can work to develop attachments to their specific pieces of land, while acknowledging the interconnections of the national landscape.

There is no doubt that in all countries, but perhaps more significantly in democratic ones, schools play an important nation-building role. Traditionally, this role has been fulfilled through the study of history, which is not without its problems. National

history taught with the purpose of building national identity is often fraught with myth, and excludes the vast majority of people from its timeline. Conversely, Canadian history does not have to be presented this way. National identity can be located in the present, not the past, and in the landscape instead of embodied in a few political leaders and historical figures. This will make it more inclusive of all Canadians.

Creating this new sense of national identity can and should be done in schools through place-based outdoor education programs. Place-based pedagogy, as described by Andrew Foran (2005), “help[s] students connect with their unique place in the world” by blending together outdoor and experiential education, along with geography and history. Although outdoor education programs do not have to be specifically designed or connected to their unique locations, Andrew Brookes (2002) argues that the most effective ones are.

Places are important because they are both physical locations as well as locations with meanings attributed to them by a person or a group of people. E. Relph (1976), a geographer who has written extensively about place, argues that “[t]o be human is to live in a world that is filled with significant places: to be human is to have and to know your place” (p. 6). Knowing one’s place helps people understand who they are, and so people with strong connections to place are more secure in their existence than those who are not.

The attachment to place experienced by communities and individuals “constitutes our roots in places; and the familiarity that this involves is not just a detailed knowledge, but a sense of deep care and concern for that place” (Relph, 1976, p. 37). We need to work to facilitate the development of this concern for place in our increasingly suburbanized and placeless world, in which the identity of places are

weakening “to the point where they not only look alike but feel alike and offer the same bland possibilities of experience” (p. 90). This concern could encourage us, as a society, to work to maintain our distinct places, which will not only protect our national identity but also enhance our environmental protection measures.

Currently, more than 80% of Canadians live in urban areas. For those who grow up in urban areas, there are very few opportunities for daily interactions with nature, with even fewer opportunities for interactions with “wilderness”-type settings. Wilderness settings differ from park or park-like settings found in urban areas in their degree of management. Parks are much more heavily managed, often involving manicured lawns and purpose-planted trees and shrubs. Wilderness settings are very minimally managed and tend to evoke an “untouched” atmosphere. Parks are indeed valuable places, but wilderness areas are special and represent a more natural ecosystem and can only exist apart from dense human settlement. We need to, as educators, work to give every child the opportunity to not only experience natural places but to meaningfully engage with them. In so doing, we can work to communicate the myriad reasons why these places are important and worth preserving.

To do so, we must make these engagements relevant. Although they must be specific to their place, programs should explore the relationships between places and how they have changed over time. Discovering how the city, countryside and forests interact will help make the more distant places meaningful to those who have little opportunity to experience and understand the intrinsic value of wilderness areas. They can also explore how humans alter the landscape to create rural, suburban and urban places, to demonstrate that we are able to affect change and the direction in which that change takes place.

Most importantly, place-based outdoor education programs should be about the creation of home, “the foundation of our

identity as individuals and as members of the community” (Relph, 1976, p. 39). If we all become attached to our homes, to our local communities, we can create a Canadian identity based on shared connections to the land. Although the pieces of land will be different, the land will become valued as an important part of being Canadian. Protecting the environment will become linked to what it means to be Canadian, thus entwining concern for the land and Canadian identity.

But, as you probably know, there will be many challenges in implementing this sort of program. First of all, very few provinces support outdoor education at the provincial level. Of the 13 provinces and territories, only three have stand-alone outdoor education curriculum—Alberta, New Brunswick and the Northwest Territories (Joyce, 2010). The rationale for New Brunswick’s secondary-level course, *Outdoor Pursuits 110*, is to “provid[e] the opportunity to address growing public concern for our precious natural resources, while at the same time providing students the opportunity to experience outdoor recreational activities” (New Brunswick, 1995, p. 1). However, although this course seems to address many important issues and would be valuable for all students to take, very few in fact do. For example, over the past three years (2007–2010), less than 1.5% of New Brunswick high school students enrolled in *Outdoor Pursuits 110*.

Secondly, there are very few programs in faculties of education that train outdoor educators, and those that exist are regionally focused in Ontario. If we desire to implement place-based outdoor education programs, it would be valuable for teachers to be trained in the region in which they would be teaching. Thirdly, liability and legal concerns make it difficult for those teachers with an interest in taking their students outside to do so. As a whole, in this era of international economic competition, our school systems do not readily value outdoor education programs. But we can work to change that.

So, we as educators need to work to introduce our students to the places in which

they live. We then need to encourage them to find the connections between their selves and their places in addition to fostering an understanding of their connections to others and other people's places. We need to show students how we are connected to the land and to each other through the land. As citizens, we need to encourage governments to incorporate place-based outdoor education programs into the curriculum, not only because of its potential for nation-building in community-starved times but also because we need to encourage attachment to the land in order to save the land. We need to understand the Canadian landscape as our home, open to all who inhabit it.

References

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