In the spring of 2010, 16 Recreation and Leisure Studies students from Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario, travelled to Cuba to complete a fourth-year field class titled International Field Experiences in Recreation and Leisure. After a week spent in Havana, Brock University students engaged in a unique outdoor education experience. With support from Mountain Hardware (that provided tents and sleeping bags), Brock students were able to share a cross-cultural experience with 16 Cuban students from the University Superior de Cultura Fisica, Cuba’s national university for sport and recreation. Together both Canadian and Cuban students travelled to the western province of Pinar Del Rio where they exchanged knowledge on outdoor and environmental education at Cuba’s National School of Speleology.

When we were asked to reflect on “sense of place” and how this concept fit into the program, we were surprised that many of the tenets of place mirrored the pre-departure curriculum of this course. For example, gaining knowledge of the political, social and environmental conditions of Cuba, prior to departure, helped Canadian students understand and engage in informed and critical discussion with their Cuban peers. However, upon further consideration of place, the most intriguing and unexpected realization was that Cuban and Canadian students naturally began to teach one another new ways to understand and connect to their home country. The following stories from the trip exemplify two moments where this unexpected exchange occurred: 1) at the Museum of the Revolution, and 2) reactions to “Leave No Trace” (LNT) principles.

At the Museum of the Revolution

During the first week spent in Havana, Cuban students from the Universidad de la Habana toured the Canadian students through the Museum of the Revolution. Without preparation, Cuban students knew the story behind every picture of Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and other prominent revolutionary figures. They knew dates, they knew political songs, they knew why and when the bullet holes appeared in the wall of the front foyer of the museum and they knew how these various moments in Cuba’s history affected their own lives. The Canadian students were intrigued by Cuba’s story and equally impressed by the amount of knowledge Cuban students knew about their native country. At the end of the tour, a Canadian student commented, “If the Cubans were to show up in Canada and I had to tour them around and tell the story of my history, I certainly would not have the same knowledge. It would be embarrassing.”

Later on in the week, a Canadian student approached a Cuban student and complimented her on her knowledge of her country’s history. The Cuban student gave a smile and responded, “Do you not have to take history classes in school?” The Canadian student nodded yes, and the Cuban student quickly replied, “Well, what happened?”

The realization that Cuban students knew their country so intimately was a recurring point of discussion for the remainder of the trip. Their knowledge of Havana far outweighed our collective grasp on the history of our country’s capital city, let alone Canada as a whole. This significantly impacted our group and motivated students to learn more about the history of Canada and how they fit into that history.
The complexity of the stories above far outweighs the scope of this paper. However, while it may appear counterintuitive, these stories do exemplify the potential of international field experiences’ ability to inspire students to connect to their home country. For the Canadian students, making the connection from these experiences to home in Canada was reinforced by a presentation from an international organization operating in Cuba. During the presentation a student asked, “When travelling in Cuba, what’s the best thing I can do for the country as a tourist?” The presenter replied, “Well, not much in two weeks. But how you choose to live your life in Canada does affect the rest of the world, including Cuba.” As outdoor educators who wrestle with effective strategies for the transference of international field experiences to the everyday lives of students, we related well to this presenter’s philosophy and encouraged students to consider his advice.

As educators, our unexpected realization that both Canadian and Cuban students were teaching each other new ways of connecting to their home countries did not happen until after the course ended. It is our hope that in future courses both students and we will be more attentive to these teachable moments.

Utilizing the stories presented in this paper as a tool for class discussions may be one approach to better applying the aspects of sense of place as they relate to not only the way we travel but also the way we choose to live at home.

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