

## Lessons from Cuba: Using Sense of Place as a Tool to Connect Internationally and at Home

By Samantha Dear & Hilary Sayle

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.

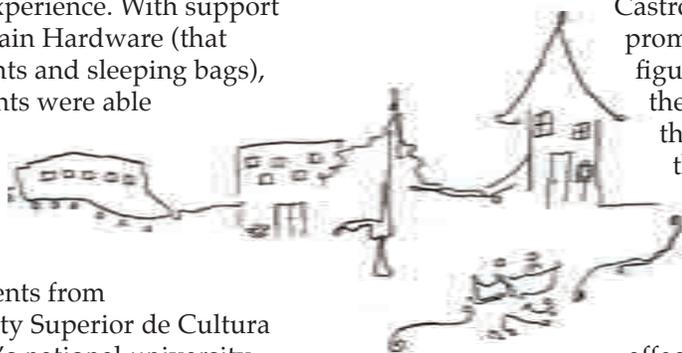
### At the Museum of the Revolution

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.



### Reactions to Leave No Trace Principals

During the second week of the course, both Canadian and Cuban students travelled to Cuba's National School of Speleology, a remote camp in the western province of Pinar del Rio. This was the first time that the Cuban students had left Havana and experienced camping in tents with sleeping bags. During our second day at the camp, Evilio, a Cuban professor of outdoor education, guided Canadian and Cuban students through three kilometres of a karst cave system. Excitement levels of both Cuban and Canadian students grew as Evilio toured us through sections of the caves where it was necessary to either crawl on our stomachs or wade through neck-high water. Schooled in LNT principles, Canadian students remained fairly quiet during their time in the cave, many simply observing and taking pictures. Conversely, the Cuban students rarely stopped loudly laughing and yelling to one another. That night, back at the camp, a Canadian student expressed frustration over the noise level generated by the Cuban students. It was obvious that this student and many others in the course had a particular way they connected to natural places.

Coincidentally, the following morning, three Canadian students were scheduled to present the LNT principles to the Cuban students. The lesson plan involved Cuban students rotating through stations that allowed them to experientially understand the seven principles. After the lesson, the Canadian students expressed that the Cuban students were enthusiastic about the content and thanked them for the lesson.

The following day while on a hike into a forested area near the mountains, Cuban students were much quieter and travelled in smaller groups. The Cubans' excitement level was still high as they observed and asked questions about flora and fauna they had only seen in their textbooks. It was clear that the Cuban students had begun to practise a new way of connecting to place.

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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