

Using Outdoor Recreation to Foster Intercultural Understanding and the Integration of New Immigrants in Montreal

By Adrienne Blattel

“What is snowshoeing?” asked a recent immigrant from Columbia who had kindly agreed to fill out my questionnaire on the outdoor recreation needs of Montreal immigrants. I had listed a dozen different outdoor activities and asked participants to indicate their level of interest in each. Somehow I hadn’t anticipated that new immigrants would have no idea what some of these sports were. But why would they? “Right,” I thought, “I can’t take anything for granted here,” and proceeded to demonstrate with wide tromping gestures that seemed to do the trick.

I am in the process of creating an accessible outdoor recreation program for new immigrants, basically from scratch, so these are important lessons for me. This all started about a year ago when, in the floes of major career questioning, I determined that the most fun thing I could possibly imagine doing would be outdoor sports with new immigrants. An idyllic (if naive) vision of a group of smiling women cross-country skiing in head scarves came to mind.

I come from a multidisciplinary background and was just heading into my eighth year as a project manager at a community development non-governmental organization. But I seemed to be spending every spare moment outdoors, kayaking, canoeing and skiing with local clubs, a key part of my own integration as an Ontarian into Quebec culture. I hail from Ottawa, but I’ve also lived in France, ex-Yugoslavia and now Quebec. In each place, outdoor recreation has opened doors for me to meet locals, practise a new language and generally feel like I’m a part of things. Being outdoors together seems to allow people to get beyond cultural differences effortlessly.

Inspired by these experiences, I decided to embark upon the exciting adventure of making this happen for newcomers here

in Montreal. In short, I aim to foster cross-cultural understanding and the integration of new immigrants through traditional outdoor activities including camping, canoeing, kayaking, hiking, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing and skating. In this article, I will outline the need for accessible outdoor recreation tailored for immigrants, as well as describe my current and future plans for putting in place such a program.

Why Is This Necessary?

Immigrants make up nearly one-third of Montreal’s population, but only the tiniest percentage seem to find their way onto trails, into clubs and outdoors in winter. Many immigrants have not even been up Mount Royal, a classic and highly accessible Montreal destination, even after several years living nearby. And although family picnics of every culture take place in parks in the summer, ethnic communities are conspicuously absent in the winter. Typically, new immigrants spend years in fear of winter and retreat indoors for the season.

And yet, those of us who are avid outdoor enthusiasts will understand how unfortunate this is. We swear by skiing and snowshoeing as the only way to get through winter. For many of us, outdoor recreation has been the source of many important friendships, personal development and fun! Not to mention that this is an important part of Canadian culture and tradition.

More and more, major Canadian institutions are turning their attention to the issue of the under-representation of immigrants in outdoor recreation activities. An article in the *Globe and Mail* outlined the efforts of many federal parks to provide tailor-made camping activities that are accessible to immigrants (Alphonso, 2010). This summer, the Institute for Canadian Citizenship, the Canadian Wildlife Federation and Tim Hortons

Children’s Foundation partnered together to offer a “day at camp” for immigrant families because “. . . nature and outdoor experiences are among the most unique treasures Canada has to offer” (Canadian Wildlife Federation, 2010). Zeccs Québec launched a new project to use fishing as a way to facilitate cultural integration of immigrants in the Quebec City area this summer (Cabana, July 6, 2010). Individual communities are taking notice of this too: the Somali community of Ottawa has put in place a popular family ski program to address community health issues (CBC News, February 17 and 18, 2010).

With a high rate of immigration in major Canadian cities, there is an ongoing need for improved relations between all of our evolving communities. Outdoor recreation could help. A recent study confirms that while immigrants and members of ethnic minorities are less likely to participate in recreational activities in Canada, “. . . recreational participation in multicultural societies has the potential to increase the engagement and interaction of like and unlike groups. Such participation can lead to other social benefits, such as increased understanding across diverse groups and an increased sense of belonging to one’s community” (Aizlewood, Bevelander and Pendakur, p. 24).

Either way, everyone should have the right to try their hand at canoeing, skiing, snowshoeing and skating (not to mention fishing, hockey and a whole slew of other activities I haven’t even considered for now). Of course, in theory, everyone does have the right to try these sports. But in practice, it takes a while to figure things out when you arrive somewhere new. Couple this with a tight budget, no gear, no car, no experience and no friends to go with, and it’s no wonder we see so few immigrants out there on the trails.

If Canada is truly open to immigration, I contend that we need to give newcomers the chance to catch a glimpse of the fabled wilderness they heard about before arriving here. The sports I am focusing on are particularly well adapted to the landscape

and are cherished by many Canadians. And while they are certainly not for everyone, immigrants who are keen on trying should at least be given the opportunity to do so.

After doing some preliminary poking around, it seems that in the Montreal area there is a real lack of programming that brings together immigrants and other Quebecers through outdoor recreation, and that gives immigrants the tools they need to really take to this. This makes me think that such a program could serve as a model.

Setting Up

I approached a number of different organizations with my idea and was lucky to hit on a receptive one—the Milton Park Recreation Association. Based in downtown Montreal, Milton Park regularly organizes accessible sports and recreation activities for local residents as a way to build bridges between people of diverse backgrounds. The organization estimates that approximately half of its 8,000 members are immigrants. There was no formal outdoor recreation program at Milton Park besides a couple of weekend excursions to a lovely family camp northeast of Montreal. The director invited me to run as a board member to develop this program.

My first activity was to set up an inaugural canoe-camping weekend for adults and families. To keep things simple, we had a nearby Scouts camp provide the logistical support, equipment and food. But even in its “no frills” version, it turns out that canoe camping is expensive, particularly if no one has any of their own gear. My supposedly accessible outing was becoming prohibitively costly. Fortunately, a kind individual sponsored the participation of four low-income new immigrants, which helped to address this problem. I was able to round up a group of 15 people in all, from Mexico, Algeria, Haiti, Australia, Britain, Switzerland, France, Ontario and Quebec. Everyone agreed that the mix of people was the highlight of the trip.



It was certainly an interesting learning experience for me. For instance, I realized too late that the weekend I had carefully selected was in the middle of Ramadan, which unfortunately excluded any moderately practising Muslim from participating. On the drive there, while divvying up ham sandwiches, another learning opportunity happened. Although our secular Algerian participant claimed he had no dietary restrictions, he had failed to mention that his 11-year-old son had recently opted to give up pork. Note to self: ham sandwiches are asking for trouble!

I ran a “basic introduction to canoeing” day at Lake Tamaracouta (about an hour north of Montreal) the Sunday prior to our trip. This session provided the group with much-needed familiarity with canoes, but left our J-stroke skills with much to desire. No matter—good humour and determination made up for any lack of technique!

At the end of the day, we discussed the list of what to bring. I was caught by surprise once again when it became apparent that not a single person owned a raincoat. This would prove to be critical when we managed to hit upon the rainiest weekend in months. Participants didn’t have flashlights either, nor sleeping bags, shoes that they could afford to muck up, or non-cotton clothing. We lent what we could, and they filled in the rest at Dollarama.

Finally, the big day arrived. We piled everything into a van and drove three hours to the north Laurentians. By the time we put on the water, it was already dusk. I was grateful we had taken the time to practise before the trip.

After about an hour of paddling, we arrived by moonlight to a campsite already set up by volunteers, the tents courtesy of the Scouts. It had been years since I’d slept in a tent that was not my own. These were good tents, though with fiddly zippers and very small flies. I remember feeling nervous—could I rely on the tent to keep me dry and mosquito-free? I realized how much of our comfort zone “in the bush” is based on the systems we set up for ourselves, the gear we rely on and the knowledge we have from previous trips. I could only imagine how the others were feeling, many of them camping and canoeing for the first time in their lives, none of the gear their own and all of it unfamiliar.

We stayed in two different locations and explored much of the vast Kiamika Reservoir, which was created decades ago to augment flow for hydroelectricity production on the Ottawa River. The area is all on Crown Land. The reservoir felt suitably remote, although some participants were already oohing and ahing when we had barely left the Montreal suburbs.

The rain started on Saturday morning and didn’t let up for the rest of the weekend. As a consolation, on Saturday night we treated ourselves to a sweat lodge on the beach. The immigrants on the trip were delighted and surprised to discover this unexpected Canadian tradition, and it gave us the opportunity to talk about First Nations in Canada. Participants gleefully ran back and forth between the sauna and the lake.

Every photo taken that weekend featured soggy participants in shredded dollar-store ponchos, but they say they had fun anyway and asked when I was planning the next trip. Since then, I’ve turned my energy to submitting funding proposals and developing a business plan for the program so that we can expand it. At the

time of writing this article, I am creating an Introduction to Winter Sports course involving a series of Sunday afternoons in neighbourhood parks learning cross-country skiing, snowshoeing and skating. We are also planning to return to Lake Tamaracouta this winter, where we will spend a weekend learning to build a quincee, something I have never done.

And for next summer, I have a few new ideas up my sleeve. I'd like to develop outdoor language courses that bring people together to practise English, French or other languages, while on the trail or on the water. Also, living on an island means that there are options for canoeing and sea kayaking that can be reached by public transit, so it should be easy to organize day paddling trips. Partner organizations are keen to work with me on a canoe-camping mentorship program that would pair experienced, equipped canoeists with keen new immigrants on a longer trip or two each summer. Other partners are willing to organize bike trips and kayak pool sessions. Down the road, I'd also like to put in place a volunteer program, gather a critical mass of sports and camping equipment and create some kind of sensible system of discounts or "outdoor scholarships" for lower-income immigrants.

My ultimate goal is to create an ongoing, self-sustaining program with a regular offering of inclusive, fun outings. I'd like to bring together an interesting mix of immigrants and other residents from the neighbourhood, and give them the tools to go on to do these sports on their own, hopefully making some lasting connections along the way. I am deeply grateful to the many people and organizations that have already helped me so much, through advice, partnerships and mentoring. I am always on the lookout for good tips and models, so please feel free to contact me at ablattel@sympatico.ca with any suggestions.

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