

Learning from the land



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By Nate Smelle

Listening to Bark Lake Leadership and Conference Centre's program manager Joe Fortin speak to the Bancroft Field Naturalist Club on Jan. 13 about the beneficial impact outdoor education has on the students visiting the centre, I found myself reminiscing on the times in my life that I have spent working as an environmental educator and guide. Hearing the passion in his voice as he shared a variety of stories of students' first experiences of nature reminded me of how immensely rewarding this occupation can be.

The first memory to arise in my mind from this time was of an encounter I had with a group of high school students from India that I was leading up into the forest's canopy at the Haliburton Forest and Wildlife Reserve. Before heading out on our adventure that day I remember asking the class if anyone was afraid of heights. With everyone in the group raising an arm at the same time, my fellow guide and I smiled at each other, knowing that we were in for a treat of an afternoon.

Having an entire group fearful of heights was not a rarity considering our trail of choice was a series of bridges made of two-by-six hemlock boards suspended 70-feet above the ground. However, what was different about this group was that none of them had ever been in a forest where they could not see a road or building through the trees.

After a short van ride into the deeper woods, we exited the vehicle and went over our safety protocol, before hiking half a kilometre or so to the voyageur canoe that would take us across the lake to the base of the canopy tour. As I led the students through the forest my fellow guide and I would pause to identify the trees, wildflowers and mushrooms, as well as the sights and sounds of the birds paying us a visit.

Hearing the cascading and melodious song of a winter wren through the sound of our footsteps, I asked the group to stop for a moment to hear one of the longest, most sophisticated bird songs they would ever hear. Pausing for a few moments to listen for the song together, the songbird began singing on cue. When the song came to an end about eight seconds later I could hear a whimpering sound coming from the group. Scanning each of the students faces to see where the sound was coming from, I noticed one of the girls wiping tears from her cheeks.

Though tears were nothing new on the tour, they usually didn't start flowing until we were up in the treetops. As my partner led the rest of the group further down the trail, I took the young woman aside to see if she was OK. Asking her what the trouble was, she began crying again as she told me the reason for her tears. Growing up in a part of India that was virtually devoid of trees, she told me that this was the first time she had walked through a real forest or heard such a beautiful birdsong in person.

While still crying, she vividly described the forest's scent, colour, texture, and biodiversity in a way that immediately re-inspired me to pay closer attention to my surroundings. In that moment I realized how hiking this trail two or three times a day for the past few seasons had caused me to take the living landscape for granted. At the same time, it also occurred to me how valuable a tool outdoor education is for connecting us with nature and each other. Two fundamental connections within our society that are in desperate

need of care.