

THE MEANING OF WILDERNESS ACTIVITY

Adapted from Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center, Ninth Grade through Twelfth Grade Curriculum, Social Studies, Historical/Cultural Perspectives, Lesson 6: “Celebrating Our Diversity Through Wilderness”)

Have participants read the following essay before the activity:

Excerpt from: Innu Support and the Myth of Wilderness, By Jennie Baron

How do we ... connect with and speak about contemporary Aboriginal struggles in the places we visit? To get at this question, first I want to take a deep look at something we often take for granted: the whole notion, or myth, of wilderness.

For a brief history of this cultural myth, let me outline an argument given in an essay by environmental historian William Cronon [who] argues that wilderness, “far from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity ... is quite profoundly a human creation—indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history.” That is to say, when we use the term “wilderness,” the meaning that comes to mind is distinctly Euro-American and relatively recent in the history of ideas.

As Cronon notes, if we look back a mere 250 years in North American and European history, we do not find people wandering around remote corners of the planet looking for the “wilderness experience.” He says it’s not that they couldn’t do so; they didn’t want to, for wilderness didn’t mean to them what it does to us today. As late as the 18th century, the most common use of the word “wilderness” in the English language had to do with landscapes also described as desolate, savage, or a wasteland. According to Cronon, the connotations of wilderness were nothing like they are today; if you found yourself there, you would likely have found yourself feeling bewildered or terrified, hardly at peace with the universe. The wilderness was a place you went only against your will, in your darkest hours of fear. It was the antithesis of all that was orderly and good.

By the end of the 19th century, Cronon writes, the meaning of wilderness had been turned on its head. This is when we find Thoreau declaring, “in wildness is the preservation of the world.” This is when the North American public is starting to see in the wild spaces on their map a little piece of heaven on Earth. Yosemite and Yellowstone are declared the first American wilderness parks, and in the first decade of the 20th century we see the emergence of the movement to actually protect wilderness. Cronon writes, “In a mere fifty years, Satan’s home had become God’s own temple” (1996, p. 72).

How did that happen? Cronon cites two influential and pervasive cultural constructs: the romantic notions of the sublime and the frontier. The doctrine of the sublime derived from the theories of people like Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. According to them, sublime landscapes were those where the supernatural lay just beneath the surface, the places where God was most likely to be encountered: on the mountaintop, in the canyon, the waterfall, the

thundercloud, the towering forests. Cronon observes that the most popular and celebrated landscapes in North America tend to be sublime landscapes, as are most areas designated as national parks. (It is only recently that we have begun using other criteria—ecological criteria, for example—as a basis for judging and valuing less sublime landscapes, like grasslands or wetlands.)

The second cultural construct that helped turn wilderness into a quasi-religious icon derives from the romantic attraction to primitivism: “the belief that the best antidote to the ills of an overly refined and civilized modern world was a return to simpler, more primitive living” (Cronon, 1996, p. 76). According to Cronon, this European ideal of the primitive was embodied in [North] America through the myth of the frontier: the frontier represented not just the edge of “civilization,” but the whole process by which Europeans and easterners moved west, and “shed the trappings of civilization, rediscovered their primitive racial energies, reinvented direct democratic institutions, and thereby re-infused themselves with a vigor, an independence, and a creativity that were the source of American democracy and national character” (1996, p. 75). In this way, the frontier—that is, the wilderness—became associated with the very essence of what it meant to be American.

In Canada, of course, the frontier myth looks a little different. For one thing, the frontier is to the north more than to the west, in the sense that the North has been more closely associated with our national character and self-image. But the mystique and the feelings of longing associated with the lands beyond the frontier are probably just as familiar to a large number of Canadians.

The point Cronon makes is that by the early 20th century, wilderness had not only become sacred—that is, imbued with the presence of God—it had also become inseparably associated with our respective national identities. To lose wilderness would be to lose our myth of origin. My reason for giving you all this history of wilderness, of course, is to show just how culturally constructed the idea of wilderness is. “Wilderness” as we understand it today is largely the product of religious, historical, and cultural influences. By association with the sublime, wilderness has come to be sacred; wilderness has also been made more-or-less synonymous with “emptiness”—it is the place beyond the frontier.

Now, it is no accident that we recreational canoeists don’t live in the places we call “wilderness,” because the myth of wilderness is rooted in the idea that for a place to be really natural it must also be virtually pristine. The problem with the myth of pristine wilderness is that it is in many ways an illusion. You probably know that many places we consider pristine are not in fact “pristine.” Historians are just now learning about the history of modifications and adaptations of the land for human uses—including fire-setting, even the domestication of plants in the middle of places we think of as virgin forests. And you may also know that the establishment of the first large “wilderness” parks in the U.S. was made possible precisely by removal of the parks’ original inhabitants!

But the fiction of the pristine suppresses this history. This is not just a matter of forgetfulness or even cruel irony. It’s more of a sleight of hand that some would say amounts to racism because representations of the wilderness as empty, unnamed, unmapped territory, as places awaiting discovery and ownership by Europeans have been used historically to dispossess



Aboriginal people of lands they have used, travelled, named, and made.

So here is where we encounter our contradiction. Many of us are wilderness advocates. We love the stunning places we visit[.] We want to protect them. At the same time, many of us recognize the terrible things that have been done by colonial governments in our name, and want to take part in healing and reconciliation with Aboriginal people. We want to support Aboriginal rights and see Northern people like the Innu regain their health, autonomy, and self-reliance, with a fair land base of their own. But when we try to bring together our concerns for both the place and the people of Labrador, we run into problems because the discourse of “wilderness” is highly restrictive when it comes to Aboriginal rights, and human rights in general.

I learned this the hard way. In May 1997, I took part in organizing a public talk by Innu leader Daniel Ashini in Toronto. Our group had decided to set the stage for Daniel’s talk by presenting a slide show prepared by another Innu support group in Vermont, who call themselves the Friends of Nitassinan. The slide show came with a prepared script, which gave me great discomfort to read, though I did not at the time understand quite why (nor did I have the knowledge or experience to narrate the slides without a script). After our somewhat stiff and self-conscious presentation of the slides, I got my first clue why I felt so uncomfortable. Daniel Ashini took his place at the microphone and began his talk with words to this effect: Although you may not have seen it in those pictures, there are people living in Nitassinan. Daniel’s comment was brief and tactful, but it illuminated in a moment the contradiction inherent in the literature of the other support group: They call themselves “Friends of Nitassinan” and yet described their mandate as “Defending Eastern North America’s Last Frontier.” Where notions of the frontier—a fundamental part of the wilderness myth—imply emptiness, the word “Nitassinan,” meaning homeland, implies occupation.

So what kind of human occupation can this contradiction allow? In a phrase, romantic primitivism. Sure enough, if we go back to the slide show, we see ample evidence of an effort by the Friends of Nitassinan—however unconscious—to massage Innu reality and objectives so they conform to a romantic primitive image. This was done through their choice of images, as well as through what the script said, and what it failed to say (for instance, the slide show didn’t mention settlers or other Labradorians anywhere). Of 73 slides in the show, only six showed people. The Innu and Inuit were not even mentioned until slide #21, and the mention was indirect, with an image of a caribou skull left hanging in a tree. That skull, and the next slide, which showed ancient tent rings, was presented as “the evidence of the continuing occupation of the land by the Innu and Inuit” (as if that was the only evidence). And the text read: “The Innu and the Inuit are as much a part of the ecosystem as the animals. They have evolved together.” The script overall boiled down to one simplistic message: Save the Innu because they are part and parcel of wild Earth. This is a problem, not only because that message is easily contradicted by the tragic images (gas-sniffing youth, etc.) we see on TV and in the papers, but because it is based on the delusional desires of the so-called support group more than on the actual goals and realities of those whom they profess to support. And when supporters project those desires onto the Innu, it can lead to major problems.

First, this sort of Chief Seattle-ization, this romanticization of real people, puts the Innu on a pedestal from which it is impossible not to fall. It creates the expectation that the Innu, or



Aboriginal people in general, should live more honourably than we do, and not make the same mistakes. So when Aboriginal people litter, overhunt, log, or build hydro dams, they are doubly condemned: High expectations produce bitter disappointments.

The second problem with this kind of representation is that it perpetuates the idea that Aboriginal claims to the land are only legitimate if Aboriginal people continue to live as their ancestors did 100 years ago. This is a silly expectation to have of any ethnic group. In fact, opponents of the Innu have used this way of thinking to argue against Innu land rights by claiming that the Innu are no longer “traditional” because they take planes to their hunting territories and take along store-bought food.

This is an idea supporters have to challenge, in the name of fairness, pragmatism, and the right of the Innu to self-determination. We have to learn to see tradition not as stasis, or preservation of a thing or technique, but more as the thread of continuity that links past, present, and future in a dynamic flow. Moreover, the continuation of traditional life in the modern day is often, in fact, enabled by planes, radios, Ski-Doo's, and other modern means. Perhaps the biggest problem with the discourse on “wilderness” . . . is that the idea of wilderness leaves precisely nowhere for real people to live permanently inside its boundaries, and no way for them to make a living. This may be where it's hardest for supporters to reconcile their environmental priorities and their wish to support Innu self-determination. It's not that the political goals of environmentalists and Innu are fundamentally incompatible; many Innu themselves choose to speak as protectors of the land, and they choose to work with environmental groups as allies. No, the problem with such Aboriginal-environmental alliances is more that it's too easy to assume that our issues and goals are the same, or at least more similar than they really are. Consequently, those who insist on seeing Nitassinan as that last-chance place to preserve wild Earth are often shocked and dismayed if and when the Innu decide it's in their best interest to embark on joint ventures, engage in forestry, or benefit from a mine. Even if those developments are carried out in ecologically and socially responsible ways, many environmentalist supporters often can't bring themselves to support them.

This is not to say that the Innu do not have a special culturally-rooted relationship to the land. But in my experience, when Innu speak about their concerns for the land, they do so not as primitives or innocents in the wilderness, but as participants in a peopled and productive landscape. Their concerns for the land and animals are inseparable from their concerns for their health, and their way of life—that is, life in the country, or *nutshimit*. (Notably, Innu discourse is different from that of environmentalists—they, like most Northerners, tend not to speak of “wilderness,” but rather of “the land,” “the country,” or “the bush.”) In contrast to the discourse of wilderness, their words convey a sense of there being a place for humans in nature, not alienated from it.

So how do we connect with and speak of contemporary Aboriginal struggles in the places we visit?

Whether we call ourselves environmentalists, recreational canoeists, or wilderness advocates, I think we need to recognize the origins of our own perspectives on the lands we call “wilderness”; that is, the cultural and historical roots of the myth that has cast us as visitors-only in these stunning places. In describing these places for others, we need to choose language



that, far from suggesting emptiness, reflects and respects the prior occupation and continuing use of these lands by Aboriginal people.

We need to admit that the interests of recreational canoeists, of urban environmentalists, and of Aboriginal people are different: at times, closely aligned and complementary, but nonetheless distinct. Consequently, we need to take great care not to appropriate (and distort) another's cause to bolster our own.

Finally, where our interests do not coincide or complement each other, we need to feel free to admit some disagreement. For instance, where we may recognize Aboriginal title to land and support the Aboriginal right to self-determination, we need not always favour all the things that are done with this right (e.g., if they include environmentally unsustainable practices). In closing, I want to note that the challenge of reconciling our advocacy for wild places with Innu support is not just about making room for Aboriginal rights. It's also about the challenge we all face, of bringing our love of "wilderness" to bear on the places that we ourselves live: those local, less pristine, less sublime places that make up most of the natural world. It is not enough to save large tracts of wild lands that only the few most privileged among us can ever visit, and then only for a few weeks a year. Certainly there are substantial ecological non-human benefits to wild lands conservation and protection; for that reason these are laudable and important goals. But they can also lead us to fetishize certain distant and beautiful places as an escape from the forsaken lands we inhabit, driving an ever-deeper wedge between who we are and where we want to be. As Cronon writes, "to the extent that we celebrate wilderness as the measure with which we judge civilization, we reproduce the dualism that sets humanity and nature at opposite poles. We therefore leave ourselves little hope of discovering what an ethical, sustainable, honourable place in nature might actually look like" (1996, p. 81).

This is today's environmental challenge: not just to preserve wild lands and species, but to transcend the human-nature dualism at the basis of the "wilderness" myth. If we can do this, we will have found not only a comfortable coexistence for environmentalism and Aboriginal rights, but also the philosophical basis for a new view of humans as belonging to this Earth. As we strive for ethical, sustainable, and honourable living, we will be welcoming ourselves back home..

Ask:

- "What does the word "wilderness" mean to you?" [typically participants say things like "escape," "pristine," "untouched," "peace," etc.]
- "Do you think of this place as 'wilderness?'" (Discuss why or why not)
- "What do you think this place means or meant to the indigenous people in this area?"

Conclude: Most cultures throughout the world have some understanding or connection to the concept of wilderness, but they do not all define it in the same way or value it the same way. To many of the early European cultures, wilderness was a place of darkness and mystery. To indigenous cultures around the world, wilderness provides them with sustenance or their livelihood. To many people, the word "wilderness" itself is heavily loaded because much of the American Wilderness-designated lands were established through the forcible removal of people who once inhabited those lands. "Wilderness" as a pristine and untouched space doesn't really



exist in any of our public lands, most of which are now or used to be inhabited by other people (in the Wind Rivers, for example, Shoshone and Sheepwater Indians were original inhabitants). Every area in which outdoor organizations run trips has a rich human history we cannot ignore. This also means we should not assume that these lands mean the same thing to us as they mean to the people who live(d) there.

