

## **Learning from a Distressed Loon**

This is a story about a loon, a skinny dip in a tundra pond, and a wilderness camp that had to be moved.

This story starts with the unique canoeing “Conference on Wilderness Educational Expeditions, International Perspectives and Practices” the 27<sup>th</sup> June to 13<sup>th</sup> July 2010, where 14 outdoor educators from Canada, Scotland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Japan participated in a 250 km long canoe expedition on Mara and Burnside River in Nunavut. A common subject for most presentations was interconnectedness with the place and nature. Such presentations included activities such as handicraft from natural material, quiet solo moments, reflections on the concepts of wind and water, paying games, blind paddling and group metaphors.

### **The incident**

Our expedition ended with a five kilometer portage at Burnside Falls. The first to reach the end of our portage and our camp site, I decided to take a quick swim in a small pond before the others arrived. Upon entering the pond I became aware of a distressed Red-throated loon (*Gavia stellata*), a circumpolar species familiar to me from Sweden. A usually quiet species that breeds in small tundra ponds, it clearly communicated that I had trespassed beyond its comfort zone. Aware of its behavior I hurried to wash myself and quickly leave the loon pond. While the rest of the expedition arrived and started to raise camp, the loon mate made several attempts to land in the pond, sweeping over the camp with its goose-like flight-cackle, while the female in the pond answered with a crow like croaking call. Each time the male gave up and left. When people came too close to the pond the loon either submerged or took off from the pond, but quickly returned again. The distressed loon made me raise our tent in a safe distance from the loon pond, but despite the distress displayed by the loon, four of the seven camp tents were raised very close to the pond, the nearest only a few meters away. I decided to investigate further to determine the reason for the loon’s distress.

I walked along the waterline of the pond and quickly found the exposed loon nest with two eggs, just a few meters away from a tent. Making my colleagues aware of the situation, it was decided to move the four closest tents away from the pond. Given that many hours had passed since my dip in the pond, the damage was probably already done. In the cold weather the eggs would have cooled down to a fatal level as neither of the parent loons could incubate the eggs due to our camp business. Our ignorance of the incident probably killed the loon chicks in their eggs. This may be of minor ecological significance, as only about 30% of loon eggs hatch and usually a replacement clutch are laid after egg loss (Camp 1977). The loon eggs could as well have been taken by wolves or ravens, and natives previously gathered loon eggs for food. However, our misbehaviour made us uncomfortable, and when breaking the camp the next day, to ease our guilty consciences, we made great effort to not further disturb the loons when passing the pond with our gear.

### **Theoretical and practical consequences**

Despite its ecological insignificance, the loon incident had a pedagogic significance. As the basic theme of the conference was “connecting to place” and “interconnecting to nature”, one might expect our expert group of outdoor educators to “walk our talk” concerning how to behave in nature. However, it made me wonder to seeing how we tramped on flowers, ignored the warnings of white-crowned sparrow when passing near their hidden ground nests; some in the group even

followed a rough-legged hawk to get better photograph, despite its warning calls and flight displays to communicate that we had come too close to its nest.

David Selby (1996) suggested that education programs need a harmonization of “message” and “medium” through the insight that “the medium is the message”. It’s not what you say, but what you do that is important, especially in outdoor education. We talked during the trip about how to connect to nature and the landscape, yet were unable to “read” the language of nature and its obvious signs. Clearly there was a gap between the message and the medium. I wrote in my notebook: “... a lesson for all of us to be observant and aware of our behaviour and ways of being in nature – a skill that is central to friluftsliv. As Nansen said; “Friluftsliv is to be at home in nature” - not be a tourist. At home you know all the things and their way, while a tourist will only be superficially acquainting with the place”.

Were we merely “tourists” on the tundra – or were we at home? Was nature only an “arena” for our conference and of instrumental value in our fulfillment as outdoor educators, or were we at home learning our different ways of being at home, and respect the intrinsic values of nature?

During the canoe trip I often reflected on the cultural differences between the Scandinavian way of Friluftsliv (Gelter 2000) and the Anglo-American way of outdoor education/activities; where in my experience the latter is more explicit oriented towards the socialisation, mastering activities, and leadership, while the value of skillful in interpreting and understanding nature is regarded more as an implicit, positive outcome of being in nature. While I truly enjoyed the social skills of my Canadian and Scottish friends, at times this group socialisation in its various forms took over the experience of more modest communication by nature.

Outdoor education often is oriented towards, in Selby’s terms, traditional knowledge-oriented processes of learning about (the outdoors), the skill acquisition process of learning for (outdoor activities, personal and social development), and learning in or through (activities in nature). But this loon incident would add another learning process central to genuine friluftsliv – learning from nature, letting phenomenon in nature speak and tell their stories, and show respect for nature’s messages. Due to our involvement with our social and outdoor activities, we didn’t listen to nature, to the loon and what it had to say to us about our behaviour. We became imprisoned in an anthropocentric trap that disconnected us with the surroundings. We were tourists in nature.

Surveying textbooks in outdoor leadership, and outdoor experiential learning, I found subjects such as environmental awareness, minimizing impact, landfulness, place-based learning, environmental stewardship, and ecological literacy, but very little about learning from nature, and the skill of subjective interconnectedness with nature. Could the traditional anthropocentric focus on technical, social and personal dimensions in outdoor education, explain the loon incident and my experienced gap between theory and praxis in connecting to the land?

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