

Learning from Earth and Ocean

This article by Karen Charleson first appeared in the February/March 2003 issue of WaveLength Magazine.

It was raining when I first woke up. Sharp, wind-driven bullets were pounding the shake roof of our longhouse. In slower rhythm, larger drops filled with evergreen needles and scraps of moss and lichen joined in from the overhanging tree branches. Water streamed over the skylights.

It was blowing a westerly. Not one of those typical Pacific Northwest westerlies that pick up force in the afternoons and die out late in the evening, but rather a westerly that blew all day and night, filled with long squalls of wind-pushed rain and hail. The mountains behind us were covered in fresh snow. The harbour was a mass of whitecaps.

“As long as it doesn’t squall when they get here,” we said.

And it didn’t. Not at first. When the water taxi first rounded Rondeault Point to come into view, the squalls held off. As soon as it had dropped anchor, however, as soon as Steve had begun to paddle the canoe out to bring participants and their gear ashore, the squalls and wind, as though stored up power from the brief intermission, threw themselves at us with renewed force. Wind blown sheets of rain and hail forced tops off waves, turning them instantly airborne.

Steve can paddle the canoe through almost anything. A good thing. Unloading eight people with their month’s camping gear, along with our first aid instructor’s usual, back-breaking duffel bags filled with manuals and enough bandages to wrap a small wounded army, required more than a few trips from boat to shore in the two-person canoe.

I stood at water’s edge, moving packs and bins up and away from the encroaching tide, struggling to see against the wind and rain.

This was how the participants of Hooksum Outdoor School’s May 2001 West Coast Outdoor Leadership Training session had their first look at Hesquiaht Harbour, at Iusuk. After an hour and a half boat trip from Tofino, the last ten miles over open Pacific, they had arrived. My gut churned in panic. The same familiar panic that even today still re-introduces itself to me at the start of every single program – whether a short three days or an intensive month. Can we possibly made good on our promises to all of these people? These hopeful, eager faces?

The answer, of course, is invariably yes. In this diverse and awe-inspiring world of Hesquiaht traditional territories, the value of active, experiential, adventure-based outdoor education explodes beyond measure.

Hooksum Outdoor School is, at its core, about connection, an intimate connection between ourselves, the people who come here, and the vast and humbling grandeur of Hesquiaht traditional territories. As comfort levels increase among participants, the overwhelming sense of well-being that radiates from the group becomes almost tangible.

Indigenous knowledge is not merely a course component. Culture is not taught by means of a two-hour presentation or crafts session. Culture, as any traveler to foreign lands will tell you, is not learned in isolation. Culture is learned in daily life, in daily tasks, in daily conversations and experiences. In friendships gained and moments shared.

When talking to new participants, Steve frequently uses an analogy comparing being here to being in your own house. In your house you know where the bedrooms are, he says, you know where the food is kept; you are safe and comfortable. Here, at Hooksum, the whole harbour becomes your house, your comfort zone.

It does not take too long. This realization builds that what others call wilderness, we call home. What others see as adventure, we see as life. Living in the rhythms of the natural world, away from roads and electricity and false comforts, brings a quiet confidence and pride in our abilities to care well for ourselves and each other. Our students gain a well-earned pride in their capacities to learn from this natural world of earth and ocean, of tide and swells, of soaring eagles and lumbering black bears.

At Iusuk, the sun rises behind us, behind the forest that fronts the beach. As it rises higher into the sky, the first direct rays reach us, filtered through the shadowed glory of ancient temperate rain forest. Sunlight is separated into beams that slowly rise until they encompass us completely. Each morning resembles the dawning of the first day.