

Wild Coast Magazine invited Karen Charleson of Hooksum Outdoor School to tell us what inspires running courses on the edge of Clayoquot Sound's wilderness. The essay below appeared in the first issue (Summer/Fall 2015) of Wild Coast.



Still Learning from Earth and Ocean
by Karen Charleson

I remember writing an article about Hooksum Outdoor School called Learning from Earth and Ocean for the old WaveLength Magazine. Now I find myself – a dozen years later - writing again, but still describing Hooksum and the amazing world Hesquiat Harbour. I can't help but go back to my original article. While we have added new programs, new buildings, and new equipment, the basic purpose of the school has remained the same. Our connection here and

the place itself – Ayyi’saqh in Hesquiaht traditional territories – remains constant. I am proud to still be here.

I wrote over a decade ago trying to interest people in coming to Hooksum Outdoor School. I started the article with a description of a particular morning. I talked about the sharpness of the rain drops, how they collected in the tree branches overhanging the longhouse roof, and heavy with evergreen needles and bits of moss and lichen, they fell onto the skylights. I talked about how a westerly gale had blown all the previous day and night, how that gale continued to blow that morning. I described how the wind transformed the harbour into a mass of whitecaps, how the windblown sheets of rain and hail forced the tops off waves turning sea water into airborne spray, how the nearby mountains were left covered in fresh white.

I talked about how we hoped that there were no squalls when the participants of our West Coast Outdoor Leadership Training session arrived in the water taxi. I recollected how it did not rain or hail when the taxi first came into sight; how the gusts held off until the boat was anchored out front and it was time to pick up people and gear in the canoe. I presented a picture of Stephen unloading a group of people and their camping gear by canoe in the middle of a big westerly. I attempted some humour by describing our first aid instructor’s massive duffel bags filled with manuals and enough bandages to wrap a small wounded army. I did not want readers to see the situation as dire; just as a normal big westerly day. I didn’t want to discourage people from coming here, rather I wanted to celebrate the excitement of arriving at Ayyi’saqh and the thrill of the weather.

In retrospect, I think that perhaps it was a strange way for me to try to attract people to this place. Perhaps I should have used the opportunity of the magazine article to describe a warm, sunny, relaxing day. Perhaps I should have emphasized peaceful paddles along

magnificent shorelines and learning on the sunshine beach sand. Maybe I should have slipped into a more readily understood marketing vocabulary, used plenty of words like ‘wilderness’ and ‘remote’ and ‘adventure’. The words other businesses use to attract people. They rang too false to my own ears then. They still do. I do not know Ayyi’saqh or Hesquiat Harbour as wilderness or remote or adventure. I know it as home.

When talking to new participants of our training programs, my husband Steve Charleson frequently uses an analogy comparing being here in Hesquiat Harbour 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, at Ayyi’saqh, he continues, the whole harbour should be your house, your comfort zone.

Hooksum Outdoor School was established in 2000 by Steve and Karen Charleson. For the five years before 2000, the site at Ayyi’saqh had been used as the base camp for the Hesquiaht Rediscovery Society. It was where the Society offered its youth camps and programs. When the Society dissolved, Steve and Karen looked for a way to continue some of the programs that Rediscovery had begun. To that end, they purchased the Society’s assets and began to investigate possibilities. The result was Hooksum Outdoor School. The name Hooksum comes from Stephen’s family, from the House of Kinquashtacamulth, one of the Houses that make up the Hesquiaht First Nation. Ayyi’saqh was – it still is - Kinquashtacamulth territory. We belong here. It is our responsibility to look after it.

Hooksum Outdoor School has always been a work of love, an expression of our feeling for this place, of being in this place. Hooksum is a way for us to share some of what we have here and what we know here with others. It is a way to share some of the immense wealth that this physical and human environment provides in a good way. In the process we nourish our

own connections with Hesquiaht traditional territories. Hooksum has become an identity we cloak ourselves within. I am Hooksum Outdoor School. I am Kinquashtacumlth. I am Hesquiaht. I am here.

As larger society becomes increasingly urbanized, I sometimes wonder at what we continue to try to do here at Ayyi'saqh. This striving to connect people to the natural world, in my moments of doubt, I think that people must find out-of-date or irrelevant. Expecting participants to travel by boat across the open Pacific, unload their gear by canoes, set up their tents in west coast rain, and huddle round the fire in the longhouse absent from central heating; though it is all normal to us, maybe it is too much for others. Expecting people to come here and engage in learning like this when they could attend a course in a swimming pool, in a hall somewhere, in a box shaped classroom, and go home at night to insulated buildings and checking their email and bathing in hot water that seems to appear automatically; in my doubtful moments, I think is unrealistic.

With each group of people that visit us here at Ayyi'saqh, however, I watch them too feel the power of this place. I watch their comfort levels increasing quickly. The sense of well-being that radiates from the group becomes obviously visible. We all wake up on the beach, paddle on the water, walk over beach stones and through forest paths, bathe in the creek, pack and drink stream water. We are all outside most of the day; we walk, talk, eat, think and be as the tides rise and fall, as weather systems change, as it rains and as the sun shines. We are affected every minute of the day by the natural world. Our actions, our thoughts, they cannot help but fall into those natural rhythms. In Hesquiat Harbour our connection to the world is immediate. At Ayyi'saqh, the sun rises behind us, behind the forest that fronts the beach. As the sun rises higher into the sky, the first direct rays reach us, filtered through the shadowed glory of

ancient spruce, hemlock and cedar forest. Sunlight is separated into beams that slowly rise until they encompass us completely.

When our oldest grandson was four years old, he spent most of his time outdoors. He knew the world to be a magical place, a place full of boundless discovery, amazement, and wonder. That knowledge came easily, smoothly, effortlessly. I overheard him one day saying something about rocks growing to two of our daughters – his aunts. One of the girls explained to our grandson that they too - "when I was small" - had thought that rocks grew. Thinking about how our grandson and children grew up, I realized that rocks growing made perfect sense. Rocks are as imbedded with life as everything else.

When I try to explain what it is that draws me to Ayyi'saqh, what convinces us to continue to operate Hooksum Outdoor School, my explanations always rely heavily on feeling, on a sense of magic, and on that basic belief in the world as a living, growing being. My reasons are intangible and difficult to name like the quality of air on a spring day. Yet they are real. I can feel them every time I arrive back at the beach, back at this stretch of forest. Here are centuries of life existing alongside what we did and saw last week and last year and what we will do tomorrow. There is a depth to that recognition that brings a sense of great comfort and safety.

Another dozen years from now, I hope to write another article about Hooksum Outdoor School and living and learning in Hesquiat Harbour. Maybe I'll talk to the editor. Maybe we can make a deal.