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CASE STUDY

This is Indigenous Land: An Indigenous land-based approach to climate change education

Winnipeg, Manitoba

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Overview

This case study describes an urban and rural Indigenous land-based climate change education camp. Through this camp, participants learn about Indigenous people’s enduring relationships with land and place, their roles in protecting land and water, and connect with other young people committed to climate action. The camp brings together Indigenous facilitators with a post-secondary team of students and youth for an immersive experience in Indigenous land-based climate change education.

While the focus of this case study is on the four-day camp experience, this camp is the foundational experience for a larger, year-long Land and Water Program. Participants spend the four days building relationships with each other and with the land in urban and rural settings, acquiring ecological knowledge, and beginning to understand how climate change impacts these relationships.

This case study illustrates an approach to include climate change in Indigenous land-based education in holistic and multidimensional ways, across subject areas, and through diverse pedagogical practices. We have learned that when participants’ relationships with land are strengthened, climate change comes to matter, and that all participants, Indigenous or not, benefit from an Indigenous land-based approach to climate change education.



Photo: © Land and Water Program

Post-secondary team members at This is Indigenous Land camp, November 2019

Background

The Land and Water Program, coordinated through the University of Manitoba’s Community Engaged Learning department, is an Indigenous land-based climate change education program that brings together a high school cohort with a post-secondary team. The post-secondary team is comprised of students from the University of Manitoba and the University of Winnipeg, as well as other young adults who are not currently enrolled in post-secondary programs. This is Indigenous Land camp, the focus of this case study, is a foundational and critical opportunity for the post-secondary team to come together and receive training to help facilitate the overall year-long program. After this training, and with support from the Land and Water Program coordinator, the post-secondary team helps to lead a year-long program that includes monthly land-based field trips that address different themes. Themes have included land-based education in the city, land-based living in the North, nourishing our bodies and spirits on the land, building community around Indigenous concerns for the environment, and health and wellness on the land.

... seeing “the land as our primary text and teacher”

— A. Wilson, personal communication, August 4, 2018

Initially, the Land and Water Program was designed as a peer mentor program that employed experiential approaches to introduce post-secondary students and high school students to climate change vocations. However, the Indigenous land-based approach had a more significant impact on the participants’ overall engagement and learning by (1) seeing “the land as our primary text and teacher”; (2) centering relationship and connection to the land and each other; and (3) recognizing that everyone has something to offer (the high school students, youth who are not engaged in formal post-secondary programs, and others).

The program helps participants recognize the serious and pressing nature of the problem (climate change and its impacts on Indigenous land, culture, and spirituality), and understand the importance of collective action for climate change prevention and interventions. The Land and Water Program aims to build a community of young Indigenous climate activists and land defenders.

The Land and Water Program coordinator is a Métis land-based educator. The coordinator's role includes recruitment (the post-secondary team, facilitators, and elders), and overall program design and development. In addition to facilitating land-based learning, the coordinator oversees the logistical planning for the program. The program development has been influenced by the University of Saskatchewan's Indigenous Land-based Master of Education (MEd) concentration. This MEd program has informed the Land and Water Program coordinator's approach to pedagogy, including many of the camp activities described below. These activities were developed and honed over time by land-based MEd educators and elders, and are grounded in an Indigenous paradigm and pedagogy. While climate change education and action have been a focal point of 'Land and Water,' the program development has also been heavily impacted by the program coordinator's own experience taking climate change education courses as a student in the MEd program, taught by Dr. Marcia McKenzie, director of the Sustainability Education Research Institute at the University of Saskatchewan. For more information about the University of Saskatchewan's Indigenous Land-based MEd program, please see <https://education.usask.ca/students/graduate/efdt-cohorts/land-based-indigenous-cohort.php>.

Approach

During the University's fall reading week break, the Land and Water post-secondary team participates in 'This is Indigenous Land' camp, a four-day land-based camp that is the beginning of their Land and Water journey. The principles that informed the camp design include:

- **Relationality:** Exploring what we love about the land
— *Help learners foster a conscious relationship with land*
- **Making climate change matter:** Understanding what we stand to lose
— *Link climate change to what learners already care about*
- **Relational accountability:** Protecting what we love
— *Empower learners to intervene*
- **Confronting loss through ceremony:** Ecological grief and Indigenous practice
— *Help learners confront and grieve climate change related losses through ceremony*

The post-secondary team is comprised of predominantly Indigenous university students and young adults, most of whom grew up or currently live in the city, and who are motivated by an interest in land-based experiences, climate change education, and opportunities to access ceremonies, elders, and community activists. The programming is led by group of facilitators, including an Indigenous coordinator, young Indigenous knowledge holders, and [two-spirit¹ \(2SLGBTQ+²\) elders](#). The make-up of the facilitator group honors an Indigenous principle that recognizes that knowledge and knowing come from multiple sources (Hawaiian proverb Ō.N. 203), and aims to challenge gendered perspectives on roles and relationships with land and ceremony.

¹ Two-spirit is a contemporary term used by North American Indigenous people whose gender and sexual expressions do not fit within the Eurocentric gender binary or heterosexuality. The term is inclusive of Indigenous people who identify on the LGBTQ+ spectrum as well as those who do not use these labels.

² See <https://www.uwinnipeg.ca/rise/terms.html> for more information about the 2SLGBTQ+ acronym.

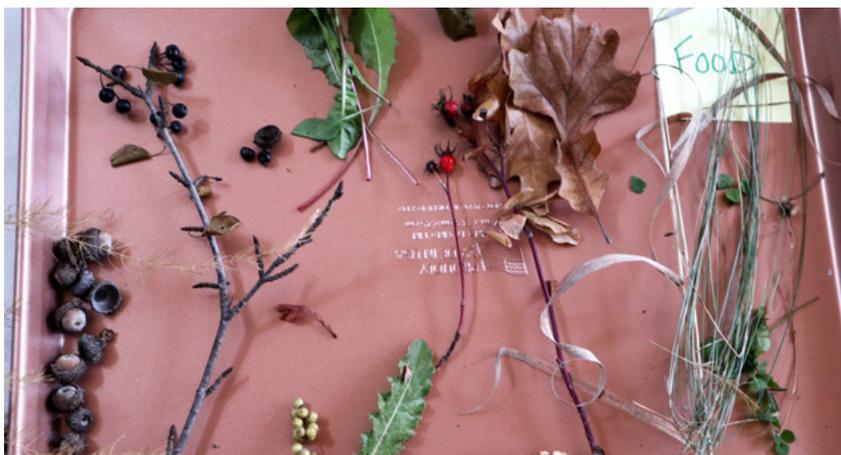
The first two days of the camp take place in the North End of Winnipeg (an area with a high Indigenous population). During this time, participants return home at the end of each day of programming. The final two days occur at a camp outside of town, and include an overnight stay. The mix of urban and rural land-based experiences is important. It is openly and often acknowledged that both locations are Indigenous land, just visibly impacted by settler colonialism and climate change to different degrees.

Below are a few examples of land-based activities that take place during the camp. Some of these activities were developed by experienced land-based and climate change educators, and generously shared with the University of Saskatchewan's Land-based MEd students. Others were developed in collaboration between the coordinators, facilitators, and elders in the planning stage. Many aim to build participants' ecological knowledge by supporting and strengthening their connection to environment and place.

Winter Survival: The group spends an afternoon walking through the Assiniboine Forest, one of the largest urban forests in Canada, led by Métis knowledge holder, Jenna Vandal. Jenna shares many edible berries, plants, and trees, and shows participants how to identify them in the winter. The next day, participants take a walk-about through a rural forest near the camp. Working in small groups, learners are asked to identify three foods and three medicines. They were amazed by the number of foods and medicines they were able to find once they actually started to look. Elder Albert McLeod adds an additional layer of learning to this activity by asking the groups to consider the kinds of shelters they would need to survive in the winter, and where to place them (for instance, considering wind breaks, access to the river, and the kinds of wood or materials to use).



Working in small groups, learners are asked to identify three foods and three medicines. They were amazed by the number of foods and medicines they were able to find once they actually started to look.



Photos: © Land and Water Program

These activities provide the group with opportunities to discuss the ways that climate change impacts them personally. Learners begin this conversation by acknowledging that climate change-related loss is typically framed as far away in both time and geography. While people do not experience many extreme weather events in Manitoba, participants come up with a list of actual climate change impacts that they have already experienced (such as traditional food sovereignty and insecurity in northern Manitoba, and shorter, colder winters and hotter, drier summers in Winnipeg and Manitoba). Participants are encouraged to think about the things that they love (e.g. food, camping, harvesting) and to consider how climate change is currently or could impact these things. The premise of this is that people are more driven to protect what matters, what they love, and what they stand to lose. One Cree participant shared an example that really hit home for her: longer, hotter summers mean that ticks (parasitic insects) are moving further north into her community. While some might see this as a minor impact, those who lead active outdoor lives, lead a subsistence lifestyle, and/or participate in subsistence economies can understand the negative implications of ticks on humans and animals.

ID a Tree: Learners are paired and asked to lead their blindfolded partner to a tree. The blindfolded partner is encouraged to hug the tree, dig their fingers into the grooves in the bark, feel around for odd branches or knots, and otherwise use their senses to connect with their tree. They are then led back to a starting point, remove their blindfold, and attempt to find their tree again. This activity allows participants to reconnect to the land. Following this activity, learners use art and expression to depict a special or sacred place, and then discuss questions such as: what roots us to place? What do we love about the land? How is climate change threatening our sacred places?



Photo: © Land and Water Program

Photo: © Land and Water Program



Photo: © Land and Water Program

Connecting Participants to Community

Activism: The group visits Rooster Town, a former Métis community in Winnipeg that was sold to a developer, despite its historical and archaeological significance. Participants learn about the land defense action that is taking place there. The group also attends the Aboriginal Youth Opportunities! weekly gathering, Meet Me @ The Bell Tower, which has been held weekly since 2011. These events bring the inner-city community together to celebrate, and to address climate injustice, food insecurity, and community safety. Participants also take part in a screen-printing workshop with Cree Métis artist, Justin Bear L'Arrivée, where three designs are developed to celebrate the This is Indigenous Land camp.

Grieving: Ceremony and prayer are culturally-appropriate grief practices that can help learners confront and grieve climate change-related losses. From an Indigenous paradigm, space must be made for nation-specific grief practices (avoiding a pan-Indigenous approach) that help Indigenous learners cope and heal from ecological grief and land loss. For this to be successful and inclusive, the dogmas that can often exclude 2SLGBTQ+ and female-bodied people from ceremonial spaces must be addressed. Elder Charlotte Nolin leads the group in a closing pipe ceremony, a first for many participants, who later shared how meaningful the experience was.



Photo: © Land and Water Program

Outcomes/Results

The This is Indigenous Land camp endeavors to achieve the following outcomes:

- **Foster a conscious relationship with land and culture**
- **Link climate change to what matters:** Sacred or special places, ancestral knowledge, traditional foods, and what we love about the land
- **Build connections:** Connect post-secondary team members to community leaders, elders, land defenders, and climate change activists to the land
- **Empower participants to intervene:** Emphasize collective actions aimed at system change, land defense, and climate action; and bring participants in contact with community activism
- Confront land loss and ecological grief through Indigenous ceremony

Generally, the connection to land, elders, and ceremony were participants' most meaningful experiences. When asked about their biggest takeaway from the program, one Métis participant shared, "It was my first time experiencing smudging and listening to elders speak about indigenous history." This speaks to the overarching goals of the program, which include connecting youth to elders and fostering a relationship with Indigenous culture, which many have been disconnected from. Others said,

- *"It was great to have elders there with us."*
- *"I feel more connected to the North End neighbourhood" [a predominantly Indigenous community].*

Other feedback from the post-secondary team demonstrated that the camp helped them understand the important role that a land-based approach to climate change education can play in lifelong learning for change. A Cree participant shared, "It empowered me to be more aware of how I can actively partake in my individual holistic learning experience." An Anishinaabe participant added, "This program allowed me to reconnect and understand my role in climate change, changing the ways I view it, and learning what I can do at the individual level."

"This program allowed me to reconnect and understand my role in climate change, changing the ways I view it, and learning what I can do at the individual level."

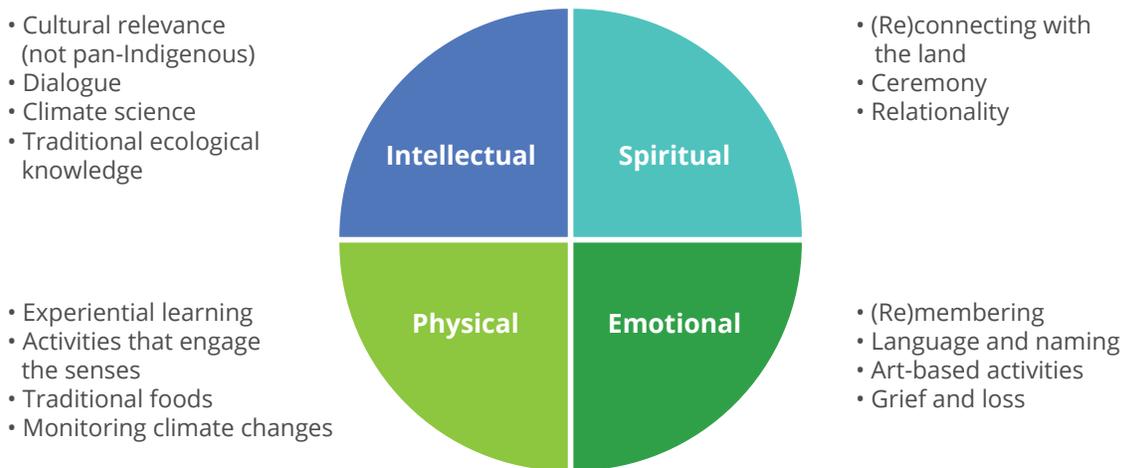
— Anishinaabe participant

Lessons learned

Climate change can be included in Indigenous land-based education in holistic and multidimensional ways, across subject areas, and through diverse pedagogical practices.

Holistic

Holistic education addresses all aspects of a person and/or topic: the spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental/intellectual. It recognizes that climate change education from an Indigenous paradigm is not anthropocentric; the holistic health, wellness, and sustainability of land, water, animals, and other aspects of a thriving ecosystem are just as important to the health, happiness, and survival of human beings. Holistic land-based climate change education addresses these aspects and more.



Across subject areas

Indigenous land-based climate change education can be included across subject areas (Keith Anderson, Cree Elder, personal communication, May 11, 2018), including:

- Science (e.g. observing, monitoring, and tracking climate change; traditional ecological knowledge; and climate science);
- History (settler colonialism);
- Geography (how different regions are affected by and experience climate change differently); and
- Social studies (the connection between capitalism and climate change, and the unequal impacts of climate change).

Diverse pedagogical practices

Indigenous land-based climate change education can be taught through diverse pedagogical practices, including:

- Storytelling, which may involve restorying the urban as Indigenous land to counter narratives about urban places as settler spaces (Bang et al., 2014);
- Experiential and art-based activities to help learners connect on an emotional and physical level with the land (Pelo, 2015; Bigelow, 2015);
- Language and naming; Bang et al. suggest that emphasizing place names demonstrate “an intentional pedagogical focus on relationships” (2014, p. 47); and
- Ceremony (a meaningful way to confront land loss and ecological grief).

Resources

Main page:

Land and Water Program

<http://umanitoba.ca/community-engaged-learning/land-and-water-land-based-education>

Partners:

R. B. Russell Vocational High School, Winnipeg School Division:

<https://www.winnipegssd.ca/schools/RBRussell/Pages/default.aspx>

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