



Stories of Place: Ojibwe Knowledge and Environmental Stewardship in the Northwoods

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Abstract:

Ojibwe education is used at Conserve School, an environmental semester school, to help high school students better understand diverse perspectives on stewardship and to explore the history, cultures and place of the Northwoods of Wisconsin. In the Environmental Stewardship class, students learn about indigenous history, culture and environmental perspectives from a local Ojibwe educator. The students use this perspective to help them appreciate their place at Conserve School and explore their own environmental ethics. Students also participate in Ojibwe seasonal celebrations to better comprehend how place and people are interrelated.

Eleva Potter is the Assistant Director of Student Instruction at Conserve School, an environmental semester school in northern Wisconsin. She is the lead Environmental Stewardship teacher and works with six Teaching Fellows to create an engaging and innovative course for 60 high school students. Her interests include sustainable living, environmental justice, indigenous knowledge and creating an inclusive classroom.

Jerry Jondreau is the Director of Recruitment at the School of Forest Resources and Environmental Science at Michigan Technological University and an Ojibwe Indian from the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community in Baraga, MI. His interests include Ojibwe language, culture, knowledge, and perspectives; linkages between human and environmental health; diversity and inclusivity within the natural resource profession; and environmental justice and policy.

Key words: Indigenous Education, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, Environmental Education, K-12 education

Introduction

Conserve School is an environmentally-focused semester school nestled in the Northwoods of Wisconsin whose mission is to inspire environmental stewardship. To help further this goal, each of the 60 students takes the Environmental Stewardship course. Traditionally, this course has focused on famous environmentalists such as Aldo Leopold and delved into topics such as resource management and land conservation. Last year the curriculum for this course was revamped in order to better address the Conserve School Learning Goals of: comprehending the complex meanings of sustainability and stewardship; understanding and critically evaluating the complexities of environmental issues, including their ethical dimensions; advocating effectively for what students believe is just; recognizing and critically examining environmental issues across cultures and disciplines; and understanding the ecology, history, and cultures of the Northwoods from the local to the global levels. This curriculum update also allows the course to better reflect the backgrounds and experiences of a diverse student body and better explain the full history of the Northwoods through utilizing Ojibwe education.

Ojibwe Education at Conserve School

Conserve School was started in 200 through a trust gifted by James Lowenstein. It is a private non-profit semester school. Each fall and spring semester around 60 students spend four months at Conserve School to be immersed in the study and practice of environmental stewardship. Students take courses in art, English, history, science, Spanish and outdoor skills, exploring these subjects through an environmental lens. The Environmental Stewardship course provides students with the opportunity to dive deeper into environmental issues, understand their environmental ethics and explore how they can best be environmental advocates. To better address Conserve School's Learning Goals and represent our diverse student population, indigenous education and environmental justice has been incorporated into the curriculum. Examining environmental issues from multiple perspectives helps students better understand the complexity of these issues, how ethics inform perspectives on issues and how perspectives vary based on cultures and disciplines. Addressing Ojibwe history and perspectives in the course especially addresses the Learning Goal on understanding the ecology, history and cultures of the Northwoods. Students learn more about the full story of the Northwoods through learning from Ojibwe educator Jerry Jondreau, writing their own land ethic while considering Indigenous perspectives and participating in Ojibwe seasonal celebrations.

Jerry Jondreau is the Director of Recruitment at the School of Forest Resources and Environmental Science at Michigan Technological University and is a member of the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community. At the beginning of each semester Jerry is invited to speak to the entire Conserve School student body to welcome them to Ojibwe land, give a brief history of the Ojibwe people in Wisconsin, Michigan and Minnesota and also relate an Indigenous view on the environment and stewardship.

When Jerry speaks to the students, he first describes the history of the Ojibwe people. He explains that the Anishinaabek Nation is comprised of three nations, Ojibwe (Chippewa), Odawa (Ottawa), and Bodawaadomi (Potawatomi), that were originally part of a long and arduous migration from the East coast. The history dates back to a place now known as the Labrador Peninsula, which is located in Canada. Through a series of prophecies brought amongst the people, the Anishinaabek Nation set out to find the land where food grows upon the water, now known as manoomin or wild rice. To respect the oral tradition of the Anishinaabek, Ojibwe people will not retell this history via text. What is important to understand is that the present distribution of the Anishinaabek people spans from Michigan to North Dakota and into a large portion of Canada, which to this day, comprises one of the largest Indigenous nations in North America.

Jerry further explains that the land that is in discussion related to Conserve School falls into the homelands of the Ojibwe people from present day Michigan and Wisconsin. The Ojibwe culture is steeped in a way of life that is still alive today. The cosmology of the Ojibwe is rooted in an understanding that all things are connected and that human existence is predicated on the gifts of all other beings. This understanding creates the foundation by which the Ojibwe conduct their existence today. The Original Treaty between humans and all creation provided a culture that acknowledges the interdependence of everything and forged the responsibility of human beings to become stewards of place and the protectors of life. Through ceremony, dance, music, feasts, reciprocity, and traditions, these responsibilities are still carried forward.

Students are often surprised to learn that Conserve School is on ceded territory. Jerry illustrates this by explaining Treaties, specifically the 1842 Treaty of LaPointe, when lands were ceded to the United States government by the Lake Superior Ojibwe while usufructuary rights (hunting, fishing, and gathering) were retained within the contract. The ceded territories associated with this treaty span from the western Upper Peninsula of Michigan, Northern Wisconsin, and Eastern Minnesota. These rights retained within the Treaty were cemented in the U.S. Constitution under the Supremacy Clause (Article VI, Clause 2) which states that Treaties are the Supreme Law of the Land. Jerry also shows a short documentary about how his grandfather was arrested by the Michigan DNR for harvesting fish that were out of season in regards to state regulations but were harvested legally under treaty rights.

Lastly, Jerry describes how the concept of land conservation and stewardship was an integral component of Ojibwe life. The lands of Conserve School fall within the ceded territory and understanding that the U.S. Constitution invokes that Supremacy Clause, it is important that the students of Conserve School be exposed to the original land ethic embodied by the Ojibwe culture. The history associated with the treatment of the Ojibwe people including the confinement of Ojibwe people to reservations, cultural erasure, assimilative policies, judicial persecution, and the continued battle to maintain Treaty Rights are important backdrops to understanding the privilege experienced today during the conservation movement and the associated impediments to the revitalization of the Ojibwe culture.

Before students come to Conserve School they are asked to read “The Land Ethic” by Aldo Leopold. After Jerry’s talk they are asked to write their own version of a land ethic and detail who or what has influenced their point of view. Here are a few excerpts:

Nature does not offer resources, but rather relatives to every being. This is a prominent value in the Ojibwe culture. This was also one of the values that stood out to me when Jerry Jondreau gave a presentation about his culture. He explained that what one takes from nature, one has to return, otherwise, this is considered stealing. This opened my eyes about my perspective on nature. All my life, I have always known the definition of stealing and that it is immoral. However, what startled me was that I never applied to the land. Somehow, as I grew up, I lost how to apply the same basic morals to the land around me. I learned from Jerry that nature and its resources are relatives that one should share a connection with. I still continue to learn how to apply deep connections to land, and therefore truly practicing my land ethic.

Stewardship class has created and influenced my land ethic. The most influential piece had to be having Mr. Jondreau of the Ojibwe tribe speak to us about how he views the land. How their tribe sees the land as family, friends, actual living beings instead of the usual western, economic, way of seeing the land as just entities for sale and possession.

Last week a guest speaker named Jerry Jondreau, an Ojibwe forester and activist, came in to talk to us for stewardship class. What he had to say really touched my heart. He talked about the land and how him and his people interact with it. He explained that they treat the land as if it is a relative in their family. And that whenever they take something from the land, they always give something in return. It was truly inspiring to hear him speak. And I knew once I heard what he had to say that I wanted to grow and learn from what he said and to treat the Earth with just as much love and respect.

Students are further exposed to Ojibway history, culture and perspectives on stewardship through participating in maple syruping and wild ricing.

Seasonal Celebrations

Jerry also helps the students understand the story of this place by explaining the importance of wild rice and maple sugar to the Ojibwe people. Last spring Jerry and the father of an Ojibwe student, Damon Panek, shared a maple sugaring ceremony with the students and staff.



Damon Panek explain the syruping ceremony



Jerry Jondreau describing Ojibwe history

The opening prayer of the maple syrup celebration was said in Ojibwe by Damon followed by an English translation. Then Jerry and Damon explained how they create a reciprocal relationship with maple trees by offering them a gift in return for their sap. A plate for the forest was created by putting venison, maple syrup and berries on a piece of birch bark. Each student also had an opportunity to add to the plate by putting a pinch of tobacco on it. The plate is then placed in a tree and then all of the participants are able to partake in the feast by trying the wild rice with maple syrup and berries.



Students taking part in the offering for the trees



After the feast was given, students were taught how to tap the trees by drilling a hole in a healthy, large tree and putting a spile in the hole and hanging a bucket from the spile. Once the sap started flowing, students helped to collect it and brought it to the boiler where it evaporated into maple syrup that was enjoyed in the dining hall on pancakes. This was an important experience for students to understand the history of the Northwoods including Indigenous knowledge and gratitude for the natural world and the resources that we are able to harvest right in our back-yard.



Students learning how to tap the maple trees

Conclusion

By injecting Indigenous knowledge into the Environmental Stewardship class at Conserve School, students are better able to understand diverse stories of place, consider a new perspective as they create their own land ethic and understand how culture, history, place and stewardship are interrelated. The hope is that this experience will inspire the students to learn more about the full stories of the places where they're from and that this knowledge will help them better understand diverse perspectives on stewardship.