

Respectful canoeing means acknowledging Indigenous authority over the land and water

June 18 2024, by Bruce Erickson



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In a [satirical look at canoeing in Canada](#), Ojibway comedian and author Drew Hayden Taylor once joked that "every time a non-native person whitewater canoes down the Madawaska River, or goes kayaking off Tobermory, they should first take an Aboriginal person out to lunch."

This would, for Taylor, act as a way of showing respect and gratefulness. Taylor's essay pokes fun at the economic, cultural and geographic dimensions of canoeing as a national pastime.

June 26 is [National Canoe Day in Canada](#), and I think we should keep Taylor's critique in mind as we consider how best to celebrate canoeing and all it offers. As an object and pastime that has been adopted and [appropriated by settler Canadians as a national symbol](#), Taylor makes it clear there is a debt owed to Indigenous people for this appropriation.

Can the canoe be used as a way to account and reconcile for [colonial history](#) and present? Many canoeing organizations, like summer camps and wilderness outfitters, are asking a similar question: How can their work support reconciliation? These paddlers want to change the long history of appropriation and inequality that surrounds canoeing in Canada, and they are trying out different approaches.

Building relationships with Indigenous communities

From September 2021 to April 2023, I was fortunate enough to interview 37 canoe guides about their work as part of my ongoing research into canoeing. These conversations gave me a glimpse into the work being done to reshape canoeing.

For these guides, building relationships with Indigenous communities was the central pillar of their efforts. These relationships involved

following community protocols, prioritizing repeated visits and ensuring [economic benefits](#) to the communities.

Expectations for permissions, gifts and compensation should be understood by the guides and the organizations they work for. This includes the understanding that different visits will have different outcomes based on the desires of the community, and that at some times communities may not be interested in hosting visitors.

The bulk of the work for these relationships should be taken on by the organizations, not the individual trip leaders to make sure they are given the time they need.

Language matters

Even if they are not traveling through an Indigenous community, canoe trips pass through the traditional territories of Indigenous Peoples who are rights-holders to those lands. [Guides should recognize and acknowledge this](#), making sure participants don't see these lands as empty.

One important way guides are changing their perspective on the land is to use Indigenous terms for the landscape, [especially place names](#). This reframes places that participants know by settler names and encourages discussions about long-standing Indigenous uses of the area, highlighting the importance of the rights-holders to the future of the land. Craig Macdonald's [Ancient Trails map of Temagami](#) provides a good example.

A false 'wilderness'

The guides I interviewed were also conscious of how they talked about nature and wilderness on their trips. Most guides value canoeing for its

ability to get us to connect with nature and place. Yet, in the context of the national story of Canada as a wilderness country, that connection to nature can often erase Indigenous claims to those lands.

"Wilderness" as a description of the land runs the risk of [making it seem uninhabited](#). This erases the presence of Indigenous people and their stewardship and management of these lands from time immemorial.

Ideas about wilderness as an imagined empty space have lasting impacts that shape our experiences today. Popular canoeing spots were often built through the [dispossession of Indigenous Peoples](#) from places colonially deemed "wilderness"—[Algonquin Provincial Park](#), for example. These ideas outlast the intended colonial dispossession and [have lasting consequences today](#) that are not readily seen on a canoe trip, even as the trips depend upon the wilderness space they provide.

One way around this problem was to illustrate ways the landscape reflects longstanding use. Wild rice is a good example. Wild rice fields might look to many guests as an example of unmanaged ecosystems. The reality is that many [wild rice](#) fields have been [carefully managed for generations to provide better harvests](#).

Seeking Indigenous permission

As we recognize that all canoe trips travel through Indigenous land, we can also start to think about how to gain permission for traveling on those lands. Canoeists should understand that government regulations around access to Indigenous lands don't always reflect Indigenous communities' interests. We've certainly seen this when it comes to oil and resource extraction.

While canoeing differs from resource extraction, it still depends on having access to Indigenous lands. Organizations that wish to support the

principles of reconciliation should seek consent to travel on these lands.

This consent can be negotiated [in a number of ways](#), but the process for it should be dictated by the communities as much as possible. This would not be a process that would happen overnight, but asking for consent to travel on these lands would deepen the relationships between canoeing organizations and the communities whose territories they rely on.

Acknowledging colonial dispossession

Historian [Patrick Wolfe](#) writes that one of the mistakes of popular understandings of colonialism is that it is thought of as an event—something that happened in the distant past. However, settler colonialism is not a past event; it is an existing infrastructure, one based on unequal relationships that last to this day.

Our ability to traverse these rivers and lakes is built on the dispossession of Indigenous Peoples. Experiencing places without recognizing and telling those stories only reinforces the dispossession of colonialism.

By building relationships with Indigenous communities, rethinking "wilderness" and seeking permission, canoeing organizations can follow Drew Hayden Taylor's suggestion, making sure our enjoyment of nature acknowledges the people who have watched over it for generations.

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