

Aboriginal Youth Week Comes to Camp: Partners in History, Culture, and Environment at Georgian Bay Islands National Park of Canada

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Beginning in 2000, Grade 7 and 8 Aboriginal children, teachers, and resource people have gathered for a week each September for holistic learning on Beausoleil Island, part of Georgian Bay Islands National Park of Canada. Our partners, local First Nations and Aboriginal communities and the Midland YMCA Camp Kitchikewana, take students on a journey through activities designed to enhance their knowledge of, and appreciation for, their history and culture. Archaeology plays a role in helping that happen.

Aboriginal Youth Week (AYW) is a unique experience, held at Georgian Bay Islands National Park of Canada. It takes place at YMCA Camp Kitchikewana (also called “Camp Kitchi”) on Beausoleil Island, the main island in the park (Figure 1), and has been held in September since the year 2000. AYW is a partnership between Parks Canada, the Cultural Advisory Committee of the national park, the Midland YMCA, and local Aboriginal communities. For four consecutive days, mainly Grade 7 and 8 youth, with older teen cabin leaders and their teachers, take over the entire camp and learn a multitude of things. Resource people for the week include Aboriginal Elders, educators, national park staff,

YMCA staff and others with an interest in contributing to the proceedings. It takes place at the second smallest national park in Canada, a place with a very large and diverse herptile population in ecologically sensitive and culturally significant surroundings. Young people have a chance to explore not only the history of the park and its natural and cultural themes, but also to learn more about Anishinabe history and culture, taught in a place significant to them, by their own educators and Elders. Archaeology is a big part of what they learn.

We do archaeology during AYW for several reasons. First, it is Parks Canada’s mandate to manage cultural resources and any impacts on



Figure 1. Location of Beausoleil Island in Georgian Bay (courtesy of Parks Canada).

those resources. Beausoleil Island contains evidence of at least 5,000 years of Aboriginal occupation. Human use of the island, especially in the last 100 years, has resulted in impacts to those archaeological resources, which must be mitigated and monitored. The YMCA Camp itself is responsible for some of those impacts, since it is situated on the site of the so-called "Ojibway Settlement" of the mid-nineteenth century. Cabins, sewer lines and other modern amenities have cut into deposits; thousands of little feet each summer have churned up artifacts. The YMCA Camp participates in archaeological mitigation by Parks Canada staff, houses the archaeology crew, helps pay for the work, and teaches cultural resource conservation and management messages to their campers and families.

Second, our long-range mitigation and management programme for the archaeological resources of the national park help illustrate the direct links between Anishinaabe people of the Georgian Bay area and the island which many families call "home". In particular, the Chippewas of Beausoleil First Nation (now living at Christian Island), trace their ancestry to this place and beyond, as do many families of Aboriginal heritage in the Honey Harbour area. A third reason why we do archaeology here, is that it helps us connect scientific knowledge with traditional Aboriginal knowledge in very tangible ways. When Elders can hold artifacts in their hands, establishing a connection with the people who made them, the sense of history is very clear.

YMCA Camp Kitchikewana is located on the sheltered eastern shore of the island (which is known in Ojibway as "Baamidonegog" or "rocky place floating about the mouth of a river"), at Treasure Bay. The camp is in the transition zone from sandy deciduous woodlands to the bedrock-and-coniferous forest cover immortalized in the Group of Seven's paintings. Evidence of nineteenth century cabins and outbuildings associated with Chief John Assance's community, which lived here from 1836 to 1856, is found throughout the camp. Features, artifacts, and cellar depressions have been mapped and those being disturbed are slated for excavation by Parks Canada.

The camp is one of the oldest and largest YMCA camps in Ontario, and is based in Midland. Its history goes back to the Boys Parliament of Canada established around 1900; the YMCA camp itself was set up in the same location in 1919-1920, before the national park came into being in the late 1920s. So, even though it seems to be a strange use of a national park, the camp, and one other like it, still lease lands there. We should also mention that Parks Canada itself also operates a seasonal campground, day use area, and visitor centre on the island. Initially with a recreational focus and some teaching of so-called "native lore", the YMCA camp has, in the last 15 years, shifted its focus to environmental awareness and includes messages relating to Parks Canada's natural and cultural heritage themes. YMCA Camp Kitchi and its staff have become our partners in educating the public about preserving these values for future generations.

Outdoor education programs for school groups are the mainstay of Camp Kitchi's activities in shoulder seasons (May-June, September-October). Elders from the Cultural Advisory Committee at the national park noticed that lots of non-native kids were able to attend Camp Kitchi to learn about the history and culture of the area, but wondered why their own Aboriginal children didn't have the same opportunity. The simple answer was, no one ever asked the question before! So, working together, the Committee, community representatives, Parks Canada staff and YMCA staff created Aboriginal Youth Week to meet that need.

Seven Anishinaabeg communities (Figure 2) usually send committee members and young people to the youth camp. They are: Chippewas of Beausoleil, Georgina Island, Mnjikaning (formerly Rama), Moose Deer Point, and Wasauksing First Nations together with the Georgian Bay Métis Council and the Barrie Area Native Advisory Circle. We should mention that the Mohawks of Wahta from Bala, Ontario also participate on the Cultural Advisory Committee, but do not send youth to this camp, which has a mainly Anishinaabe focus. In 2002, approximately 75 children from six communities attended.

Figure 2. *First Nations adjacent to Georgian Bay Islands National Park of Canada (courtesy of Parks Canada).*



Young people learn many things during their stay in camp. The seven Grandfather teachings (wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility, and truth) are presented by Elders, with the “Ojibway word of the day” at every meal. They are encouraged to listen to Ojibway speakers, to speak Ojibway, and to try out their singing and drumming skills. Traditional crafts and skills like leatherwork, skinning rabbits or smoking fish are presented in rotational blocks, so every person tries every activity. A guided hike helps them understand the island’s natural environment in the context of Anishinaabe traditional knowledge, places of interest in the history of the park, etc. Skits encourage them to work in teams, to present information publicly, and to show their communities with pride. They also go to the archaeological dig, help screen the backdirt, ask questions of the crew, and visit the field lab where they can see the artifacts that have been found (Figure 3). At supper every night, the “artifact of the day” is shown by one of the archaeological crew and its significance is shared with them. The final night in residence culminates in a traditional Feast and a Drum Social. They are encouraged to keep a diary of their experiences and they are given the chance to hear gender-based teachings on their roles in Anishinaabe society. All

around them are Aboriginal role models—Elders, teachers, resource people, park staff, staff of their own First Nations, archaeologists—who encourage them to walk their path in life “in a good way”. It is a powerful week, full of learning.

In the archaeological activities, they are presented with physical evidence of their own history, and given two perspectives on what things are. One example is the discussion associated with finding pieces of lead in the historical layers of the dig. To Western-trained archaeologists, these amorphous bits of lead have a utilitarian purpose: to be melted into lead shot or used as weights on a fishing line. But one day at a



Figure 3. *Archaeologist Cesare D'Annibale explains aspects of the archaeological site to participants in Aboriginal Youth Week (courtesy of Parks Canada).*

Cultural Advisory Committee meeting in September 2001, where these pieces of lead were being passed around as part of the assemblage of typical objects found the previous year, an Elder pulled his ceremonial pipe out of its leather bag and showed how the soapstone had been carved in relief, in such a way as to receive a lead inlay, which made a decorative silver-looking pattern against the dark stone. His pipe, he told us, was more than 200 years old and had been passed down to him for safekeeping and use in Midewiwin ceremonies. This kind of evidence shows the young people that “they have always been here” and helps engender pride in their past.

This year, three of the archaeological crew were of Aboriginal heritage; they were joined by a young Aboriginal person attending the camp who has a special aptitude for archaeology and who acted as “heritage interpreter” when groups rotated to the area for the activity. Visiting students are encouraged to ask questions and to raise issues with the archaeological crew. One of the drawbacks though, is the enthusiasm with which students respond to watching archaeology. Staff find they have to reinforce the “leave it in the ground message” when the students get excited about being able to find things. They want to go home and dig everything up, so the need for an education in archaeology, good recording practices, and scientific methods has to be repeated. Many young people have not had much exposure to archaeology as a career, although forensics is a trendy subject on TV and in movies. To see archaeologists working in front of them is a good experience. They begin to think about contributing to their communities’ well-being by taking Native Studies or Anthropology. There is no doubt that positive role models help with that kind of thinking. We continue to seek out and hire Aboriginal people for the crew whenever possible. The federal government has a special mechanism for hiring under-represented employment groups, which allows us to target self-identified minorities like Aboriginal people. Although the Camp Kitchi dig is usually only one month in duration, for some mature applicants, one month away from

home is “do-able” in terms of family responsibilities and gives them experience which can lead to other opportunities in the future. Sometimes extensions of job terms are possible. Hiring Aboriginal students on the regular seasonal crew reinforces our commitment to providing meaningful career training opportunities and increases sharing of traditional knowledge among the archaeological crew members as well. Those jobs provide needed economic inputs to communities, too. We have been amazed at the quality of work and commitment that archaeological labourers have brought to the Camp Kitchi digs over the years (Figure 4).

Elders are supportive of the work being done; one effect of having the Cultural Advisory Committee oversee the project as well as the Youth Week experience, is being able to have a “Ground-Breaking Ceremony” to honour Mother Earth, before the dig begins each fall. And, Elders are asked for advice and opinions on specific artifacts



Figure 4. Archaeological labourer Arthur Ulrich works at the site in 2002 (courtesy of Parks Canada).

that are found in the course of the work. They visit the dig frequently during the week, often sitting on a bench provided for them and speaking quietly together in Ojibway while watching what is being found.

One of the strengths of the AYW programme is the partnerships that have formed as a result. The national park has established the position of Aboriginal Heritage Educator and has hired a person of Aboriginal heritage to do that work. She visits Aboriginal communities on park business, chairs the planning committee for AYW, facilitates the work of the Cultural Advisory Committee, and delivers heritage presentation programmes in the park and in outreach activities.

Each year's experiences with Aboriginal Youth Week build on the previous foundations and communities are eager to take part. Great pains are taken to have different activities and presentations each year, so one year's Grade 7 students do not receive the same activities when they visit again in Grade 8. The week is structured so that there are often two points of view given, both holistic and scientific. Students are encouraged to think for themselves and to find the significant elements of information in what is presented to them. The YMCA camp provides a structured environment, with bells rung at certain times to indicate rest periods, meals, etc. Students from different communities bunk together in the cabins and the people in each cabin eat together and share table duty. The YMCA camp staff are responsible for physical safety while campers are in residence and oversee recreational activities like canoeing and kayaking. They also scoop up any curious rattlesnakes which wander into camp—in 2002, one snake came along to a women's teaching given outdoors by an Elder from Chippewas of Beausoleil First Nation! (She later said, to another Elder, "they like to learn things!")

The ceremonial and spiritual part of one's life is reinforced during daily activities. Everyone (archaeologists and camp staff, too) is encouraged to be up and ready for a smudge before the day's activities start. Elders give examples to the youth in comportment, Aboriginal protocols and etiquette. Being attentive to dreams and the

seven Grandfather teachings, being able to state one's name, nation and clan affiliations in the traditional language, are especially shown as part of everyday interaction. Oration and public speaking are encouraged with fireside story time. Tobacco is available in a special lounge area, to be used as offerings and to give to Elders if the young people have questions or problems they need help with. Dialogue is supported and leads to many interesting discussions.

The positive feedback we have received from this annual event has been tremendous. Aboriginal teachers find it a particularly good experience because it helps the students see the potential of staying in school, while still recognizing and honouring their Aboriginal heritage. This year as well, AYW was featured in a full page article by Maurice Switzer in *Anishinabek News*, a monthly publication which is distributed to over 40 First Nations across Ontario, and is widely read. Local First Nations councils and schools are able to plan their education budgets in advance, knowing that the event will be held again next year. Elders from each community also reinforce the positive messages learned at camp when students return to home and school, since many Elders volunteer in the schools with language and other programmes. AYW experiences are also shared across Parks Canada. National park staff write articles for newsletters and occasional publications such as *First Peoples Focus*, and they share information on how the programme is organized with their heritage presentation colleagues at national workshops. And now, you are part of our "feedback network" too! We hope, by this example, to encourage all OAS members to reach out into Aboriginal communities and to get involved in showcasing Aboriginal history. It is just as important that *we* learn to be open to other ways of thinking, as it is for Aboriginal youth and Elders to learn about archaeology and what Parks Canada does.

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Wasauksing First Nation, the Mohawks of Wahta and the Georgian Bay Métis Council. We thank these nations for being stewards of the land so that we can continue to work together and to share what we have learned.

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