

Learning from the Land



An evening class on the water. Photos submitted by Dr. Alex Wilson

Students in the Land-Based Master of Education Program at the University of Saskatchewan leave the textbooks behind. Instead, they focus on studying the land as a text, and in the process, develop a rich understanding of Indigenous knowledge and ways of being.

– Dr. Alex Wilson –

In a time when the land is being exploited and our eco-system is in crisis, we need to fully understand our relationship to, and responsibilities to, the land. This summer, 23 students from across Canada came to northern Manitoba to take part in an innovative master's degree program that is based on the primary concept that the land and water are both the text and the teacher.

This unique program, which graduated its first cohort of students in 2011, seeks to teach an alternate way of learning, one that places a high value on Indigenous knowledge. As the initiative's co-founder, Dr. Stan Wilson, explains, "It sprung from the need for Aboriginal teachers to receive a more relevant form of education, one which would encourage them to get out of the classroom and use the land and resources around them." The graduate classes are run by the University of Saskatchewan and taught by professors who specialize in land-based and Indigenous education. The students in the program are all working in the field of education as certified teachers, school principals, or administrators.

Throughout the program, students learn about their own collective histories and obligations to the earth. This summer, the master's students were based in Bakers Narrows, a provincial park near Flin Flon. There, students learned how to paddle in voyageur canoes, read the waters,

and seek out and use some of the medicinal plants of the area. They travelled by boat to explore the petroglyphs at Tramping Lake and interviewed elders from the Opaskwayak Cree Nation. They were visited by a number of guest lecturers, including conservationists, athletes, elders, and environmentalists. The two weeks ended with the students preparing and hosting a feast to thank the elders, community, and the staff at Bakers Narrow Lodge.

Many of the procedures and processes in this master's program are driven by the Cree concept of *pastahowun*, which explains that we are related to, and must live in respect and harmony with, people, plants, animals, fish, rocks, the air we breathe, the constellations we see, the water that sustains our life, and the soil on which we tread. Although the students who attended were from many different language groups, this concept of *pastahowun* seems common to all Indigenous groups. In order for Aboriginal teachers to pass on this philosophy to their students, they must learn about it themselves. This program certainly provides that foundation.

Days for the students were long but fulfilling; they were up at 7 a.m., then running or paddling before breakfast, which was followed by classroom lectures either in the "classroom" (a tipi or the dining room at Bakers Narrows Lodge), or out on the land. They then had physical activities again and time for writing and analyzing their experiences, and the days concluded with classroom lectures typically after 10 p.m. Many students worked well into the nights.

This land-based initiative received the U of S Provost's Award for Innovation in Learning, the Manitoba Spirit of the Earth Award, and, most recently, was recognized in the Manitoba Legislature. In his speech to the assembly, MLA

Frank Whitehead said, “The course focused on a holistic approach to education by going back to the land and learning from local elders.By expanding the notion of the classroom to include returning to and learning from the land, the students are able to connect with their roots and learn the importance of protecting the environment. While many students are increasingly disconnected from their natural environment, these students are truly learning from theirs.”

Although the curriculum for the program is primarily focused on land-based learning, the students are also expected to excel in scholarly writing and research. All of them will be presenting their work at an International Educational Conference.

Now that the students have completed their first courses this summer, they will be taking an online course that focuses on Food Sovereignty. They will then travel to Hawaii where they’ll study Indigenous language revitalization. After another online course, next summer they reconvene for land-based coursework in Stl’at’imx First Nation, Lilloet, BC. Their final courses will be offered during the summer of 2015, and the students will graduate that fall with Master’s of Education degrees.

As professionals in the field of education, these graduate students will have a unique opportunity to teach younger generations how to understand, and value, the land on a deeper level. Pearleen Lachlab, a teacher in Little Pine First Nation, and a graduate student in the program, offers her insight: “Anyone can develop Indigenist ways of being and understanding. It helps us develop a closer connection to land, and its elements, and the spiritual energies emanating

from all things.”

To learn more about this innovative program, visit the U of S website: <http://www.usask.ca/education/efdt/m-ed-program/land-based-indigenous-cohort/>



**U of S students and professors with MP Niki Ashton.
The tipi served as a sometime-classroom for the course at
Bakers Narrows.**