

Cedar Ridge Camp: Using the Local Environment

by Grayson Burke with Scott Tavener

In 2007 Cedar Ridge Camp opened for its first season as a traditional co-ed summer camp and year-round outdoor education and recreation centre. The first imperative for the fledging endeavour involved devising a camp doctrine and outdoor curriculum; it seemed a rudimentary task. The mission would centre on creating a program that would encourage personal development and growth through a shared outdoor experience. Our main goals were to promote the formation of close bonds, both amongst individuals and with the surrounding environment; teach the value of teamwork; instil the worth of hard work; and encourage skill acquisition through both work and play. The primary goal of our outdoor education centre was to design programs that would fuse our ethos with the specific aims of each group. Whether working with corporate groups, schools or outdoor enthusiasts we would concentrate on teambuilding, leadership and environmental education.

Though our initial statement of beliefs and objectives remained static throughout our inaugural season, we were met with a serendipitous variable that we had underestimated: our surrounding environment. As we continuously discovered more about our local region, our programming evolved to incorporate the staggeringly diverse landscape and its vast offerings.

In November of 2005 I received a phone call from Peter Ruys de Perez, whom I had known through our shared association with Kilcoo Camp. Growing up, Peter had spent his summers at the now-closed Camp Mazinaw, a boys' camp on Mazinaw Lake. Those years had a formative effect that he retained throughout the intervening decades. Peter long held a desire to return to camping, ideally with his own venture. Following a welcome early retirement, he sought to make his dream into a proverbial reality.

With me on the line, Peter explained that he intended to buy a summer camp and was interested in obtaining my opinion regarding a prospective property. Knowing that Peter had spent much of the previous five years scouting possible sites without success, I expected little more than a rundown hunting cabin and a free lunch from our fact-finding sojourn. Still, flattered by his request, I agreed to go along.

On a November's day, as we drove northward, Peter and his wife, Kelley, explained the general layout of the property, adding a cautionary and obligatory, "It needs a little work." Located 30 km east of Bancroft, what would become Cedar Ridge sat on a private bay with 3,400 feet of waterfront and 150 acres of diverse terrain. As we pulled up to the first building, my albeit low expectations were amply exceeded.

Originally YMCA Camp Wangoma, since the 1980s the property had been a church-run Christian camp. Though slightly ragged, it had the perfect footprint for a summer camp. Peaceful, pastoral and serene, it boasted a plethora of open fields, a spectacular waterfront, a large-scale dining hall, and a secondary winterized lodge with beds for 80 and a fully functional kitchen of its own, furnishing the grounds with year-round activity capability. Following a rainy tour we drove home, feverishly discussing the site's potential. A month later, Peter completed the purchase and Cedar Ridge's inception was official.

By March of 2006, after a winter spent generating a camp philosophy and assembling an advisory board/think tank of former camp directors, doctors, lawyers, school board superintendents and outdoor professionals, we were ready to begin restoring the site. Due to the previous owners' severe lack of funding and fading business, it had endured years of

neglect. Peter and I agreed that, before welcoming a single visitor, every building and system had not only to conform to codes, but exceed them. Thus, throughout the following year, we encountered a diverse array of surprises as we navigated a crash course in water and septic systems, plumbing, building foundations, and sundry other aspects of construction.

We quickly found ourselves ensconced in the day-to-day reconstruction, thus putting program design and area exploration temporarily on hold. Typically — and in direct opposition to our naïve optimism — we finally finished resuscitating the camp long past our self-imposed deadline and well over our projected budget.

Before arriving in the Lower Madawaska region, we had grossly undervalued the local environment's attributes. Having spent the majority of my camping life in Haliburton, Bancroft had long been nothing more than a Tim Horton's stop on the way to Ottawa. Aside from the closeness to both the

Madawaska River and Algonquin Park, we had little understanding of the region; that would quickly change.

The abundance of wildlife in the area rapidly became apparent. Though the camp's former incarnation, *Natureland*, boasted an obvious sylvan connotation, we had assumed it had been an arbitrary and generic title, akin to a suburban street name. However, as deer, elk, wild turkeys, blue herons, snapping turtles and an otter (aka "The Creature") emerged from the surrounding woodlands and lake, we realized how apropos a designation *Natureland* had been. Never in my camping experience, whether on-site or on-trip, had I enjoyed such a close interaction with wildlife. While driving through or wandering about the grounds, deer sightings became commonplace. So numerous was the deer population that we had to caution visitors about the danger of navigating through fields of grazers.

Unique to the area, an extensive elk population had taken up residence nearby. Once native to Ontario, elk had vanished by the late 1800s, largely due to human settlement and unregulated harvesting. In 1999, a massive cooperative effort to



reintroduce the animal to the area began. Today, over 150 elk call the neighbourhood home. Commonly, grazing or ambling elk would upstage our staff during activities. At first, the wildlife acted merely as a curious bonus, but organically, over time, became a teaching tool. Campers had to learn how to exist harmoniously with the animals. It proved a beneficial happenstance.

As the site slowly evolved and structures began to return to respectable shape, our focus at last returned to programming. The environment had already begun to inspire a broad and innovative range of ideas, yet we still wanted to offer many of the standard camp activities, including climbing, archery, kayaking, sailing, canoeing and a wide variety of sports. Once the capacity for these activities was established, we began to explore the myriad off-site possibilities.

Throughout curriculum development, we continued to stress the importance of camper and environment interaction and the value of forming a close bond with nature. Co-opting Peter's experience at Camp Mazinaw, each summer camper would take part in a mandatory canoe trip. Although in close proximity to Algonquin and Bon Echo parks, the propinquity to a stunning array of world-class rivers held a special allure; the Madawaska, Petawawa and Ottawa are all within a two-hour radius.

Upon hearing of our location, whitewater advisor and seasoned river instructor, Steve Reble, excitedly quipped: "What Whistler is to skiers and snowboarders, the Ottawa Valley and Lower Madawaska region is to whitewater paddlers." This became immediately apparent as each weekend in the spring and early summer found the roads awash with kayak- and canoe-strapped cars. We were able to utilize the whitewater, sending day-trips to Palmer Rapids and the Ottawa. The Madawaska served as an ideal two-day sojourn, allowing beginners to develop their river skills in a challenging but safe environment.

While river possibilities influenced our water programming, the extensive trail systems nearby helped to fashion our on-land tripping. Commonly used by snowmobiles in the winter and all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) in the fall, the gigantic system of paths provided a great opportunity for mountain biking and hiking. With onsite access to such a massive trail system, we had another unique feature that shaped our activity schedule.

The city of Bancroft and surrounding region correctly bills itself as one of Canada's best natural, year-round playgrounds, with each season drawing a different sub-culture of adventure seekers. Whether it is paddlers in the spring, mountain bikers in the summer, hunters in the fall, or snowmobile and sled dog drivers in the winter, each season provides the opportunity for different recreational pursuits. With the infrastructure to accommodate winter adventurers, we searched for potential curriculum opportunities. Aside from the aforementioned ATV and snowmobile prospects, we were ecstatic to find an active dog sledding and luge — yes, luge — community that we could utilize. In the coming months, we intend to make use of these disparate activities, using underutilized tools for a fuller learning experience.

During Cedar Ridge's inaugural year, we employed many of the principals that we had discussed in the days following that first visit, yet the area's surrounding wildlife and diverse natural environment had an unexpectedly profound effect on our dogma. As we continue to grow and evolve, we will rely on our teaching axioms while remaining fluid enough to adopt and incorporate the surfeit of natural resources.

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