

COVID 19 and the Resurgence of Outdoor Activities: A Personal Narrative and Observation

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Preface

I would like to acknowledge that this narrative is crafted from my personal perspective which is grounded in both experience within my community and academic study. It is a personal reflection from Academic and Indigenous viewpoints. Also, it is written from an observational point of view which is specific to our community context in Cartwright, NL. It is important to note that Cartwright is an Indigenous community within the NunatuKavut Community Council. ~ Ola

The suspension of K-12 classes in NL due to COVID 19 happened quickly and seemed to shock us all. The severity of the situation did not hit home until classes were suspended and announcements were made about the possibility of no more classes for the 2020 school year. It is important to write about this as a narrative because if we look at history, many observances of past historical events come from personal diaries, stories transcribed from those who witnessed an event, or from people who kept journals of everyday life. This article is written from my perspective of what happened in our town, Cartwright, NL, during the onset of the COVID 19 pandemic. I would like to share personal views on how I saw a resurgence of outdoor exploration in the spring season.

Outdoor living in Cartwright in the springtime brings an abundance of land-based activities. With children out of school and families having to stay within their bubble, families were blessed with an amazing opportunity to reconnect their children to the land and places frequented by grandparents and ancestors. In order to have some understanding of lifestyle in coastal Labrador, one must simply realize that every season is magical and allows for many specific activities on the land. I feel I need to summarize some main seasonal activities to ground this narrative.

Summer in Cartwright boasts a busy crab fishing season. Many families return to Cartwright to visit homesteads from years gone by. Berry-picking, especially bakeapples, is a huge family activity. Rod fishing for char and trout is also quite popular. Many families have cabins at surrounding rivers, coves, and islands once inhabited by their ancestors. These cabins allow for revisiting traditional harvesting from the land.

Fall seems to be a season for preserving what has been harvested over the summer. Fish, berries, and small game are carefully preserved in various ways for the long winter months ahead. Days are shorter and food preservation begins. Food from the land that has been harvested over the summer and early fall are now being frozen, bottled, and stored for the long winter ahead.



Figure 1. Christopher Broomfield making partridge berry crumble.
Photo courtesy of his mom, Sue Broomfield

Winter allows travel to many secluded or harder to reach areas because the frozen sea ice is a highway for travel to most traditional dwellings, cabins, ponds, and hunting areas. Snowmobiles provide a recreational activity plus a vehicle for harvesting of firewood for the next year.

Spring is considered a very popular season for many reasons. It brings warmer temperatures and longer daylight evenings. Families have a perfect opportunity to spend from daylight to dusk on day trips to cabins, to favorite boil up spots, to wood paths, and areas of vast expanse that interested them. Sandwich Bay is home to the beginning of the Mealy Mountain National Park, the Wonder Strands, and major rivers that support Salmon Fish camps. The mighty Eagle River has many fishing

lodges that accommodates salmon fishers from the local area as well as all over the world.

School suspension happened on March 13, 2020 which was in the height of prime snowmobiling season. Families soon realized their dream—family outings on the land—and this is where I saw most outdoor learning and relearning/reconnecting flourish. Cartwright has always seen a flurry of spring activity of going out on the land and an opportunity for sustained outdoor activity soon presented itself.

Facebook lit up with albums and photos of families spending time with each other on the land. Staying within family bubbles under advice from the Chief Medical Officer of Health for Newfoundland and Labrador meant families had more time to spend together. This togetherness took on a much more important meaning. It meant connecting to time and space on the land. COVID 19, in my opinion and observation, served as a catalyst for families to gather in spaces on the land which normally would not have happened if school was in session.

Springtime days that are warmer and sunny are a welcome brightness compared to the long, dark, cold winter. Recreational snowmobiling and boil ups are a favorite land experience for many in coastal Labrador. The spring “raccoon tan” (the face is tanned but the eye area remains whiter because of sunglasses) is usually a trademark boasted by those who spend time outdoors during spring. During COVID 19, sharing land experiences with friends and families looked different than it normally had. A family bubble meant only those living in the household could spend time together. This unique situation led to family connections that were deepened as the entire family unit stayed together. Children in Cartwright always maintained a connection to the land, and school suspension meant a great opportunity for daily outings with family when weather permitted.

As I scrolled through album after album on Facebook, I soon realized an emerging trend. COVID 19 became a catalyst (because of time away from school) for parents and families to become creative in how they would occupy their children. No longer were we confined to the classroom daydreaming of being on the land during the beautiful spring days. It became a reality.

A boil up on the land brings significant meaning to those who partake in this activity. It’s not just a boil up. It means carefully preparing food and supplies such as gas, wood, food, and utensils suitable for the outdoor environment. I noticed children learning the skill of lighting a fire in the outdoors.



Figure 2. Christopher Broomfield, Grade 5, practicing chopping firewood.
Photo courtesy of his mom, Sue Broomfield

Kids practiced cutting junks of wood into smaller pieces call splits. This is usually the first step in building a fire. Normally parents would ensure the fire was lit, but now children became involved in this “basic” skill and many have mastered it through practice. This is an example of how children became active participants in the boil up, instead of being bystanders. Learning to light a campfire is a survival skill that is a necessity for living in any rural area. It teaches patience, resilience, and great problem-solving skills.

Roasted wieners and capelin, smores, and tea or hot chocolate are some traditional foods taken on an outing. Not only are children observing how to prepare food, they are engaged and often quite independent in cooking their snacks. But a boil up is much more than the physical aspects of food and lighting a fire. It is a traditional activity that has been passed down through the generations. Sitting by a fire in quiet contemplation is great for mental health. In today’s world of technology, it is an escape from social media and the impacts of reading or being bombarded with written or visual representations we are now accustomed to. Sitting around an outdoor fire brings peace to one’s mind and is often quoted by many as “good for the soul”. This phrase is more difficult to explain in words—it’s a feeling of quiet mediation that the land offers. A boil up and fire offers peaceful thoughts and a spiritual connection to the land that cannot be put into words.

School suspension meant parents and children had almost six weeks of opportunity to get outdoors to enjoy time on the land. Stories about their place emerged. Many families visited past homesteads and practiced traditional skills such as snowshoeing. Snowshoeing—an Indigenous innovation— moved to the forefront of

family activities when out on the land. It provided exercise, fresh air, and a sense of physical and mental well-being.

Outdoor excursions via snowmobile allowed children to observe nature in their community, specific to their context. It allowed them to live and play outdoors. They could be observed cutting wood, making fires, snowshoeing, seal hunting, ice fishing for trout and smelts, and studying the formations of the land as navigational tools. It is a “way of living” that allows freedom from constraints of the classroom. COVID 19 paved the way for a break from classroom study. It jolted us into the natural environment. The main theme I saw emerging was freedom on the vast land and creativity in outdoor play. Outdoor play allows for creativity, sharing, collaboration, and a boost in mental health.

Travelling and exploring the many places around the Cartwright area led to repeated (sustained) activities such as boil ups, cabin visits, snowshoeing, and ice fishing. In my opinion, this led to children observing, practicing, and in some instances, mastering a specific skill. And through this sustainability, children learned. It may have been through observation to practice to mastery—but they still were participants. Being present on the land is a positive step towards regaining confidence and compassion for our community, and this could translate into a greater understanding of our relationship in the global context. Battiste (2013) states that, “Each community will have its own stories and understandings of how they have come to live in a world, and what they value as to how to live in the world”. This statement implies that each community and school has community-specific learnings in their context. Experience at the local level ultimately translates to deeper understandings of the world.



Figure 3. Barrow Brook Mountain – part of the Mealy Mountain Range in Sandwich Bay. Photo by Ola Andersen April 2020

Being on the land also creates a blissful peace and spiritual appreciation for growth and healing. For many, it is a spiritual journey that leaves one rejuvenated. It had awakened the complacency that some of us had towards our surroundings. Many parents could be seen discussing how fortunate we were to live in such a majestic, huge space away from the scary news of how COVID 19 had impacted those in densely populated areas. Our sparse population and “Big Land” has deepened our appreciation for our space and place. And I truly believe our children have benefited from this pandemic because they have grown. They have created relationships and connections to their land that may not have occurred if school suspension had not happened.

I once heard a quote by an unknown speaker as hearsay from another teacher about their experience or philosophy of teaching in coastal Labrador. The quote is, “We are not isolated from the outside world; we are insulated from the rest of the world.” To me, this could mean many things, but in the context of the COVID pandemic and outdoor learning, it has meant that we had the opportunity to reconnect with the land. The space and freedom we have in our small, insulated community has afforded us an opportunity like no other. We were able to get out on the land to savor and experience what our ancestors have enjoyed for years.

Looking forward to how we can incorporate this COVID 19 experience into our classrooms is exciting. We have so many deep learning opportunities to help engage students in their academic schoolwork and their connection to family and the land. When learning is meaningful and engaging, it is more likely to become a lifelong part of our existence. This topic could be another discussion paper, but in general terms, our schools can work towards creatively allowing space and time for outdoor experiences within school slots. It could mean working within community specific contexts of survival skills, land harvesting knowledge, and the social and emotional benefits of being on the land. It requires a collaboration between teachers, Elders, and community to delve into what sustainable activities could be. Creating small mini-lessons within the classroom and then actual experience on the land, could provide a sustainable entry point for engagement and learning from the 21st century pedagogy with our ancestral knowledge. Newfoundland and Labrador has developed a Responsive Teaching and Learning document that specifically deals with Indigenous Education. It states, “The framework will establish priorities and articulate a plan to support authentic educational experiences for Indigenous students so that they see themselves reflected accurately and respectfully in provincial curriculum and resources” (The Way Forward, 2018). This document supports Indigenous learning and teachers must recognize that any outcome can be fulfilled within this context.

References

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