

Field trips boost attendance

Whati students mix tradition and adventure on mapping trip



Whati elder Pierre Beaverho showed students how to make and set a traditional marten trap using only wood.

photos courtesy of Jeremy MacIver



Janelle Nitsiza and Sara Koe Simpson try drilling a hole with an ice auger as their classmates watch.

by Katie May
Northern News Services
Whati/Lac La Martre

Cassandra Beaverho has lived in Whati her whole life, but she'd never been camping at Lac la Martre until two weeks ago – and it was a trip she won't soon forget.

The Grade 12 student was one of 14 Mezi Community School students to embark on the three-day snowmobile excursion as part of their outdoor education course. Last year's class went on a similar on-the-land trip, but this time students brought along hand-held GPS devices to map each historically significant site they passed along the way. Elder Pierre Beaverho and other local chaperones guided the students, showing them how to catch fish and how to make traps using only logs and branches.

Cassandra said her favourite part of the trip was ice fishing, another first for her.

"I really liked ice fishing but I didn't catch anything," she laughed. "I had a lot of fun ... I don't mind going again."

Gereck Moosenose had been out on the land before and was able to help his classmates make camp based on his prior experience, but he said he learned a lot of new things, too.

"The first day was great, the second day was great, the third day was great," he laughed. "It was all great."

He didn't even mind when, on the way back, the group was stalled because of fog, high winds and low visibility.

"It was all white, all windy. We couldn't see," he said. "People were just driving slowly and staying close to each other so they wouldn't get lost in that weather."

The group stopped at the old gravesites of some of their ancestors and prayed for them, paying the land with gifts such as matches or chewing tobacco to travel respectfully.

"We prayed, everybody praying

together. It was all good," Moosenose added. "They should do this all the time because our culture is going slowly so we've got to be good role models for those young ones."

The outdoor education program, which is in its second year, is by far the school's most popular course, said teacher Jeremy MacIver. It was designed to get students out on the land to learn from their elders, teaching survival skills, safety, route planning and risk management along the way. The class also includes certification in first aid, flat-water canoeing and firearm safety. But the course has also had some rather dramatic educational benefits.

"I could finally be Dogrib in school."

"Half the class probably had the worst attendance in the school up until this year, and now never miss a day," MacIver said. "Because they want to get out and do stuff and share what they know with everybody else."

And those students aren't just showing up for field trips – overall attendance in all courses has improved since outdoor education was introduced to the curriculum.

The students keep journals of all their outdoor education activities, allowing them to express themselves in many different ways.

"Some wanted to write, some could draw pictures, some could just sketch something and explain it to me afterwards, but having them go back in their journal helps to reflect on what just happened that week and how does it tie in to the bigger picture," he said. "The biggest comment, I think, so far was a day after building snow shelters a student came back and said, 'This was the best day I've ever had because I could finally be Dogrib in school.'"

For Charlene Tsatchia, a Grade 11 student, the trips are simply fun.

"I had a lot of fun," she said, thanking Pierre Beaverho and the guides on behalf of all the students. "I learned a lot."

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