



## *The Canadian Outdoors*

*Canada is fabulously endowed with natural beauties for its people to enjoy, and the enjoyment of them is a leading feature of our culture. But unless we start treating our precious inheritance more sensitively, we could make our wilderness a paradise lost ...*

□ Any stranger who travels the highways of Canada this summer might well come away with the impression that, beneath their stolid exterior, Canadians actually form a vast tribe of footloose nomads. Mobile campers swarm up hills amidst cars towing motorboats and tent trailers, or sporting roof racks piled high with sleeping bags, water jugs and portable stoves. At night they stop at roadside parks which, with all the open fires aglow, look like Indian encampments as viewed by the early European explorers. The sense of being transported back in time is quite in keeping with the spectacle, which is that of modern Canada reverting to its roots in the wild.

The children who bed down to the lapping of lake waters and the call of loons are perpetuating a national tradition. Canadians have always gravitated to the outdoors. At one time, of course, they had no choice but to live close to nature; but now that the great majority of them reside in cities or sizeable towns, they nevertheless feel the need to get back to it. For Canadians, the call of the wild is more than a literary expression. Even to immigrants new to the country, "the bush" exerts a magnetic pull.

The Toronto author Patrick Anderson once wrote of "the curious pressure of muskeg and tundra and forest" Canadians feel "on their skulls" in the more southerly regions. The unpopulated hinterland is always there, looming over our shoulders, both physically and psychologically. To Anderson, the wilderness landscape "seemed old and violent and sad," but its attraction was irresistible: "In summer we staggered out of the boiling city; the landscape

closed around us; we sank into it like peasants into a feather bed."

The outdoors has a powerful influence on the Canadian self-image. Living in a spacious land of lakes, forests, mountains and plains is what sets people here apart from those in more densely populated countries. Our "northernness" is at the core of our culture. Canadian art and literature in both official languages have always drawn on the wilderness for themes. Rare is the Canadian poet of any era who has not, in his own style, composed a paean to the raw majesty of our natural surroundings. Canadian painters, notably the Group of Seven, have specialized in rugged rocks and ragged evergreens.

Canadians regard their access to the outdoors as an inalienable birthright — or, if they were not born here, a right conferred by residence. Every spring, funds are raised in cities to send poor children to summer camp on the unspoken principle that no one should be deprived of at least a taste of outdoor life.

The right to enjoy nature is written into the law of the land. As early as 1885 the Canadian government reserved its first wild lands, now in Banff National Park, and the federal park system has since spread from British Columbia to Newfoundland. Every province runs its own system of parks and wildlife sanctuaries in which the native environment is preserved.

In most parts of the country, the summer cottage (or "camp" among northerners to whom the word cottage sounds effete) is an enduring institution. As soon as the school year ends, whole families switch households lock, stock and barrel. They become

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temporary savages, complete with skimpy clothing, bare feet, and meals of chunks of meat seared over open fires known as barbecues. Children make their first acquaintance with wildlife by feeding chipmunks and catching polliwogs in jars.

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*Specific activities come second to a simple love of the wild*

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“The plain fact is that Canadians will not summer anywhere but near a lake,” the distinguished editor and author B. K. Sandwell wrote. “Ask any non-seashore-going Canadian where he is going when the summer migration begins, and he will answer without a moment’s hesitation: ‘To the Lake,’ or ‘To the Beach,’ or ‘To the Bay.’”

“In a few instances he may merely say ‘To the Mountains,’ and put you off the scent for a moment. But not for long. Riposte with the query: ‘What part of the Mountains?’ and he will come back with ‘Oh, up by the Lake. You know!’”

Serious outdoorsmen might denigrate summer campers as mere dilettantes who are not genuinely “roughing it.” To some, the only true outdoor experience is to pierce the heart of the hinterland by canoe, making arduous portages over slippery masses of precambrian rock and through insect-infested swamps.

But whether a person stays under a cottage roof or sleeps under the stars is not very relevant. A lake in the evening can be just as beautiful whether it is a kilometre from a highway or the same distance from the Mackenzie River. The populated shores of lakes in cottage country may echo to the roar of motorboats, but in their more distance reaches, it is still possible to find spots where you can experience the feeling that no human has ever been there before.

There is no doubt, however, that what Stephen Leacock described as “the mania for the open bush” rages more virulently in some souls than in others. Those subject to this passion spend winter evenings tying fishing flies, oiling guns or leafing through outdoor books and magazines. A fine winter day will find them cross-country skiing, snowshoeing through the woods, or ice-fishing with like-minded companions. With the coming of the spring breakup

they burn with impatience to get out under the open skies.

They all have their specialties: canoeing, bird-watching, fishing, hunting, hiking, horse-back trekking, white-water rafting, back-packing, etc. But if you analyze their motives, you will find that their specific pastimes come second to a simple love of the wild. They are like the superb Canadian outdoor writer Roderick Haig-Brown when he examined why he loved to go fishing. “Perhaps fishing for me is only an excuse to be near rivers. If so, I’m glad I thought of it,” he wrote.

The mania for the bush drives people to do some awfully illogical things. Fishing is definitely illogical. Dr. Samuel Johnson once defined a fishing rod as a “stick with a hook on one end and a fool on the other,” and anglers themselves will admit that no one ever devised a less efficient method of accomplishing any purpose than fishing with a rod and reel.

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*The real value of the outdoors cannot be measured in dollars*

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“Notice that well-to-do stockbroker crawling about on his stomach in the underbrush, his spectacles glowing like gig-lights,” Stephen Leacock wrote in reference to the mania for the bush. “What is he doing? He is after a cariboo (sic) that isn’t there. Of course, deep down in his heart he knows that the cariboo isn’t there and never was ... He can’t help it: he’s got to stalk something. Mark him as he crawls along; see him crawl through the thimbleberry bush (very quietly so that the cariboo won’t hear the noise of the prickles going into him), then through a bee’s nest, gently and slowly, so that the cariboo won’t take fright when the bees are stinging him.”

The difficulties and discomforts of outdoor life make logical people wonder why on earth anyone would voluntarily expose him- or herself to them. The great Canadian black fly merits special mention in this regard; this ubiquitous pest can turn life in the open air into a kind of hell. Black flies and mosquitoes appear to work in shifts, the former on the day shift, the latter on nights, taking over the duty of tormenting people at sundown. Add to the

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insects thunderstorms, endless rainy days, sudden drops in temperature, cold mud in one's socks, and meals that are either undercooked or burnt, and it can only be concluded that to enjoy all this, a person has to be a masochist.

If that is the case, masochists abound on Canadian soil. Although exact figures are lacking for the number of Canadians who participate in outdoor activities (which in any case are hard to define) the Canadian Wildlife Federation has estimated that 83.8 per cent of all Canadians engage in some form of wildlife-related activity. In a separate study, it was found that some 6.5 million Canadians regularly fish for sport.

Outdoor activities pour huge amounts of money into our national economy. Spending on fishing alone is estimated at \$4.4 billion annually, while the Wildlife Federation calculates other wildlife-related expenditures at \$4.2 billion a year.

The economic benefits are widespread, reaching from huge automotive plants producing vans to tiny village stores. Forest parks and campgrounds are a major source of summer employment for students. And many the budding entrepreneur has got his or her start by putting up a hand-lettered sign announcing: "Worms For Sale."

But the real value of the outdoors cannot be measured in dollars. For those who insist on the practical approach, the most that can be said is that it yields a pay-back to society in physical and mental health and serves as a safety valve for urban social stress. It also has an incalculable educational value: "A natural area is a living library, a changing, revealing library where students can see, feel, hear and taste life in action," wrote the biologist Thomas Morley. The mere experience of being outdoors helps young people to understand their world.

"Surely there is something in the unruffled calm of nature that overawes our little anxieties and doubts: the sight of the deep-blue sky, and the clustering stars above, seem to impart quiet to the mind," wrote Jonathan Edwards. It is that sense of being overawed that comprises the spiritual dimension of being outdoors, and explains why people will put up with hardships and even occasional dangers to experience it.

The grandeur of nature on the scale in which it is encountered in Canada allows us to see ourselves

and our society in perspective. It shows us how small and insignificant we are in the cosmic scheme of things. It puts human beings in their place.

Unfortunately, human beings have overstepped that place in their unthinking use of their power to alter nature — and indeed to destroy it in many cases. The lakes and rivers that have been killed biologically by acid rain and water pollution stand in silent reproof of our reckless treatment of our natural inheritance.

By abusing what we have been given, we have brought ourselves dangerously close to a day of reckoning. "Nature's laws affirm instead of prohibit. If you violate her laws you are your own prosecuting attorney, judge, jury and hangman," the great horticulturalist Luther Burbank wrote.

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### *A picture of growing pressure on accessible wilderness space*

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Because of the sheer abundance of natural glories that are theirs to share, Canadians have traditionally taken the outdoors for granted, paying little attention to the encroachments and depredations that have resulted in the disappearance of millions of hectares of wild lands. In fact, despite the illusion of limitless woods and water one gets when flying over the country, the amount of accessible forest recreation space is shrinking in proportion to the numbers who avail themselves of it. Not only is the actual number of Canadians who use the outdoors growing, but they are using it more frequently. It is estimated, for instance, that roughly twice as much fresh-water fishing is being done in Canada now than 25 years ago.

In every sphere of outdoor activity, a picture emerges of increasing pressure on resources within a reasonable distance of most of its users. It is still possible to fly by chartered aircraft into virgin territory, but that is a privilege that can be afforded by a very small minority. The need is not so much for sweeping expanses of wilderness in remote places where few people ever go as for smaller patches that can be put to active use.

Nor is the requirement for absolute pristine wilderness. It should not be forgotten that people go outdoors to enjoy themselves. It would seem that

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the ideal way to preserve wilderness would not be to let anybody in it at all, but that would not meet the human need for the outdoors.

Walter Stegner, who was chief naturalist of the U. S. National Parks Service for some years, once told a story in this regard about an environmental purist (from the city, of course) who was "giving a hard time" to a park superintendent.

"There are too many roads," he complained. "The campgrounds are too crowded. There should be no buildings ... Why, the place is being ruined by people!"

"You may have a point," the superintendent replied. "But, you know, the crowd would not be so big if you and I were not here too."

"You don't maintain a wilderness area simply by letting it stand alone, especially where wilderness is surrounded by other lands whose use or abuse directly or indirectly extends into a wilderness," Stegner wrote. "Nor can you manage the human use of the wilderness for recreation and inspiration, without appraising on a continuous basis the impact those humans have on the landscape. Wilderness use must be disciplined use, else the wilderness will disappear."

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### *Wild places must not only be preserved, but restored*

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The fact that forest products make up Canada's largest industrial sector, adds to the pressure on the supply of wild lands. This has led to well-publicized confrontations between forest products companies and environmentalists. Lately the industry has become much more cognizant than in the past of ecological concerns. There is a growing recognition that both the industry and the public at large have a stake in keeping our forests in healthy condition. It need not be a matter of one displacing the other. There is room to accommodate both if our wild lands are managed sensitively.

So far, however, Canada has presented proof of the saying that you always hurt the one you love. Canadians worship the wilderness, but that does not mean to say that they also cherish it. Historically, they have cut it down, burned it up, torn it up,

blown it up, contaminated it, over-fished and over-hunted it. They have dumped their waste in it and steadily driven its wild inhabitants to ever more distant refuges — or at least those wild species that have survived the onslaught of human beings. Some species have not. They will never be seen on earth again, and we are all that much the poorer for their demise.

"It's getting harder and harder to find good places," a wildlife expert in Texas recently said. "What we need is another planet like earth with no people on it." Sadly, those sentiments could be echoed in some parts of Canada, where former "good places" are suffering from development, pollution and overuse. In recent years, however, the realization has spread that, if we are to offer sufficient recreational opportunities for our growing population, we must not only protect wild places, but also restore them. Lakes must be cleaned up, and devastated lands made fit for recreational use.

None too soon, Canadians are coming facing the fact that nature is all of a piece; that the way we live in our homes has a direct impact on our natural environment. We cannot expect to contribute gratuitously to waste and pollution without detracting from our overall quality of life.

A new attitude towards the environment has arisen which was neatly stated in the announcement of a recent conference on sustainable development: "We did not inherit the earth from our forefathers. We borrowed it from our children." The question for adult Canadians is: Will our children and grandchildren be able to enjoy the outdoors as much as we enjoy it today?

"Blessed be the country that has many little lakes, for to it belongs no small share of the beauty of heaven," the Canadian essayist Cecil Francis Lloyd wrote. Canada has been blessed with a bounty of natural beauties unequalled anywhere.

They are there for us to enjoy, but unless we go about enjoying them in a more disciplined way, the access which average Canadians now have to the outdoors could become only a memory among coming generations. For those who appreciate the outdoors, Canada is a paradise. It could be a paradise lost if we do not start treating our wilderness as the precious treasure it is.