

## Are Your Ears and Mind Open to Diversity?

by Tammy Hand

One night recently I stayed overnight at the field centre where I work. The G.W. Finlayson Field Centre is a day centre operated by the Peel District School Board. It is located just south of Orangeville on a beautiful piece of land with all the features that a good outdoor environmental education centre should have. As I was sitting at the computer catching up on paperwork I stopped to listen to the frogs chorusing in the ponds and swamps. There were so many of them. I tried to identify the different types of frogs from their voices. It took me some time as their songs blended together, becoming louder and then softer again. There were wood frogs, chorus frogs, spring peepers, green frogs and I think an occasional bullfrog. Students on wetland hikes are amazed that each type of frog has its own song. They are all frogs, but each has its own unique characteristics and needs, just like the students who visit the centre.

The students who visit the Peel field centres come from varied cultural and religious backgrounds. The Peel District School Board website is available in 17 different languages. The board also has a Faith Forward program with a community liaison coordinator that publishes a Holy Days and Holidays Calendar each year. This calendar helps to familiarize employees of the board with 12 different religions, customs and holidays. It is a tool to help welcome all students to the board and its facilities.

As an outdoor educator I think it is important to recognize, adapt and support the diversity of the students who visit our facilities. The more I became aware of different religions and cultural customs, the more I thought about our various programs and how they could be adapted to accommodate the diversity of students that visit the field centres. Figuring out how to demonstrate

this openness to diversity has required us to engage in research, some creative thinking, conversations, and brainstorming with other educators and technical support people. The following is a brief description of issues that outdoor educators at the G.W. Finlayson Field Centre have become aware of or been able to adapt to.

### Dress

We know that a happy day at a Field Centre involves dressing appropriately, or what we think is appropriate for the outdoor environment and its associated activities. For some religions there are certain specifics of dress that must be followed regardless of the setting. Girls may only be permitted to wear skirts (Muslim, Pentecostal, Orthodox Judaism); some students may be wearing a hijab (Muslim females), patka or turbans (Sikh males); and some students may not have appropriate clothing due to language barriers or a lack of funds.

We encountered a problem with climbing helmets fitting students for the High Ropes Challenge Course. After some research I found a company (Edelrid) that makes a helmet that will accommodate a patka or hijab comfortably and also provides more room for large hair and dreadlocks. For students who are wearing skirts, we have extra pants and leggings at the centre which they can choose to put on under their skirts. The centre also keeps a reserve of other clothing and shoes just in case.

### Dietary Restrictions

There are many religions that fast at certain times of the year (Muslim – Ramadan; Judaism – Yom Kippur; Hinduism – Shravan; Bahá'í – Ala; Jainism – Paryushan). If students

are fasting, then a space should be provided for those who prefer to be away from the food. The impacts of fasting also need to be recognised when students are participating in physical programs such as Ecogames, orienteering, or the High Ropes Challenge Course. Some students may have special permission to drink water on their trip day because they are being physically active. Outdoor educators should be aware of the potential for dehydration and low energy/low blood sugar for these students.

The followers of certain religions cannot eat certain types of foods (Jainism – strict vegetarians; Judaism – kosher foods only,

meat and milk must not be eaten together; Rastafarianism – strict vegetarians; Hinduism – no beef or products made from cows; Sikhism – no halal meat; Muslim – no pork products or meat from a carnivorous animal, only halal meat). These restrictions have led us to reflect on and adapt some of the programs offered at the centre.

In September the G.W. Finlayson Field Centre hosts grade 9 orientation days for some schools within the board. On these days there are between 150 and 300 students participating in “get to know you” games and other fun activities. The day also includes lunch, which takes some planning and

coordination to meet the diversity of the students attending. To accommodate dietary restrictions we have one school that uses burgers from a halal butcher and brings veggie patties for the others. Other schools have brought chicken burgers, or have ordered vegetarian pizza. When smaller school groups have a cook out lunch, we remind teachers to check with their students regarding dietary restrictions. We have found that halal chicken dogs and veggie dogs work best. If there are Hindu students who cannot eat marshmallows then a different dessert is selected.



## Prayer

As outdoor educators we need to be aware that some religions require prayer during the day. This requirement may depend on the students' ages and their parents' wishes. These students should not be embarrassed about their need to pray. The Muslim religion requires its followers to pray five times per day. The times vary depending on the position of the sun. The midday prayer, Salat-ul-Zuhr, falls between 11:50 am and 1:13 pm. The mid-afternoon prayer, Salat-ul-Asr, falls between 2:00 pm and 5:19 pm. Students may need to wash before prayer and should have a clean, quiet place away from activity where they may take their shoes off. Finally, they may need help with direction in order to face Makkah.

## Gender

Certain religions do not allow boys and girls who are not related to make physical contact with each other (Orthodox Judaism). To accommodate avoidance of physical contact, especially during some initiative games, we use sections of webbing or old climbing ropes to link students together. We are also continuously doing research to find initiatives that do not involve direct contact.

Sometimes traditions do not allow girls to participate in overnight programs where there are boys. We offer a camping program at the Finlayson Centre and sometimes get calls from teachers and parents regarding the sleeping accommodations. To accommodate gender issues we have set up tents for boys and girls in totally separate areas, allowed parents to come and tour the facility or have asked concerned parents to pick up their children after the evening program and to bring them back before breakfast.

## Recent History

Another thought on initiative games is to be careful of wording used to frame an

activity. There is an initiative called "mine field" where students try to determine a path through a series of squares without talking. Once all students are safely across the squares using exactly the same route the group has completed their task. For a student who has come from a country that is or has been at war, this imagery does not instill or suggest the fun adventure we may wish them to have. A different metaphor should be used.

## Conclusion

As outdoor environmental educators we are always saying how important it is for people of all cultures to have opportunities to participate in outdoor/environmental programs. We wonder sometimes why there is not more diversity within the field of people who teach or advocate for outdoor/environmental education. With effort, awareness and understanding, we as educators can make the experience welcoming and more inclusive to all. Just as we want all the frogs to have a good habitat so should we provide a good habitat for all students and others who want to get outdoors and explore the natural environment.

## References

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