

There's No Place Like Home

By Mike Elrick

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The integrated program that I teach — the Community Environmental Leadership Program (CELP) — begins with a five-night wilderness trip. Here our connections to the Earth are clear: water comes from lakes, fuel comes from trees and our waste decomposes in the soil below. Students learn quickly that they shouldn't pee in the water they are drinking. This is logical and easy to understand on trip. But on a typical day at home and at school, water comes from the tap, waste is flushed down the drain and fuel comes from a gas element on the stove. The learning is not as simple. The connections are not as clear.

It is my opinion that to live sustainably on this planet, we need to begin at home. We need to bring the wilderness trip lessons into daily life. The following unit, called "bioregions," is an example of how I attempt to do this in an integrated program based in the City of Guelph. This unit can be taught in all settings, obviously tailored to fit each community. Bring the lessons of the wilderness trip into daily life.

This is one of my most enjoyable units to teach and I believe it represents the essence of what an integrated program allows: full-day field trips, all by bicycle, no conflicts with other classes, and seven days when our community is the classroom and we never step inside the traditional four walls.

Bioregions: A Seven-Day Unit for Understanding Home

Day One: We begin with a one-day CANBIKE instruction course. The morning is spent discussing rules of the road for bicycles and doing riding exercises in the parking lot. In the afternoon, we head out on the city streets and learn to "be traffic." This is important since five of the seven days are spent entirely on bicycle, the Earth-friendly and cost-effective form of transportation. (Teacher's note: Of all the

activities we do in CELP, urban biking is by far the most dangerous. Safety and proper instruction are critical).

Day Two: Water Day by bike. Stop #1: We begin with a tour of the Arkell Spring Grounds just outside of town. This is where Guelph obtains 80% of its water supply. I make sure the city employee lifts off the maintenance hole cover so that we can actually view the water flowing out of the ground. While there, we also visit the local river at the Spring Grounds to discuss the ground water recharge system. Stop #2: We then follow the underground pipeline into town to our purification plant and pumping station. Here we see where the water is stored, how it is chlorinated and the way it is then pumped into our houses. (At this point, I ask all students to take a drink of water, and then try to go to the washroom. In this way, we become part of the water's journey!) Stop #3: We finish the day by getting a tour of the sewage treatment plant. I ask for students to be shown the outflow pipe into the river. We discuss how Brantford gets its drinking water from this same river further downstream.



Day Three: Waste Day by bike. We begin by riding to our local wet/dry plant where 60% of our waste is either recycled or composted — a progressive facility for our times. We then travel to the landfill where the rest of our waste ends up. (I gather up any non-recyclable garbage that the class has produced over the last week and ask them to toss it on the ground at the landfill. I tell them this garbage is simply taking a shortcut!)

Day Four: Food Day by bike. We first tour a local farm. Over the years we have visited dairy, chicken and vegetable operations. We then tour our local abattoir. Guelph is home to the largest abattoir in Eastern Canada, in which over 15,000 cattle are slaughtered each day. They take us through the entire “disassembly line” (as they call it), including the place where the life of the cows is taken. This is not meant to be an anti-meat tour but a discovery process of where our meat comes from. (This is a highly emotional tour and I do an in-depth discussion prior to our departure and later engage in a post-trip reflection. I don't ask them to eat anything after the tour!)

Day Five: Organic Day by bus. We look at a sustainable alternative in agriculture. Over the years we have visited an organic lettuce-grower, a meat operation and a vegetable

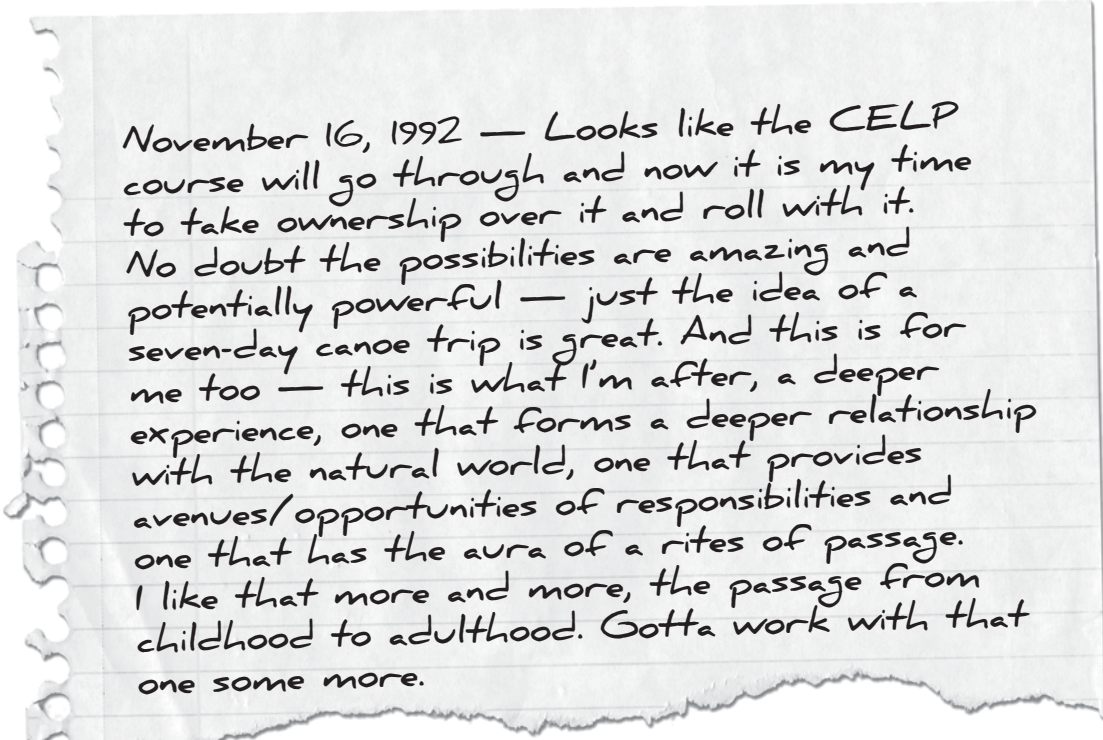
farm that supports Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). We do lots of tasting when possible!

Day Six: Sustainable or Eco-Home Day by bus. We visit a house that typically has solar/wind power generation, passive solar design, rainwater collection, composting toilets, masonry woodstoves, wood and solar hot water. We investigate alternatives to the norm and talk about what is possible.

Day Seven: Municipal Politics Day by bike. We visit City Hall where we sit in the actual chairs of our local Council and Mayor. One of our councilors discusses how local government functions and answers questions regarding local environmental issues.

While the curriculum links are endless, here are some straightforward ones for courses taught at the Grade 10 level:

- Outdoor Activities: Bicycle unit
- Civics: Local politics and active citizenship
- English: Hands-on research and interviewing for debates on local environmental issues
- Interdisciplinary Studies: Research skills and collating ideas into debate form.



November 16, 1992 — Looks like the CELP course will go through and now it is my time to take ownership over it and roll with it. No doubt the possibilities are amazing and potentially powerful — just the idea of a seven-day canoe trip is great. And this is for me too — this is what I'm after, a deeper experience, one that forms a deeper relationship with the natural world, one that provides avenues/opportunities of responsibilities and one that has the aura of a rites of passage. I like that more and more, the passage from childhood to adulthood. Gotta work with that one some more.