

Lights in the darkness



By Nate Smelle

There are many reasons for one to feel lucky about living in North Hastings. For me, the most important of these is our easy access to the natural world. Sure there are many fragmented green spaces to enjoy throughout southern Ontario; however, unlike in our province's larger urban centres, we have the privilege of being immersed in a living landscape opposed to one bound in concrete. Having called this place home now for the better part of the past two decades, I have come to see our environment as the defining factor of our local culture.

Cleaner air and water, and a richer abundance of biodiversity are not the only advantages of living in a less manufactured landscape. Here, we also get to enjoy a significantly reduced amount of light and noise pollution.

As much as I miss the trees, lakes, wetlands, and wildlife whenever I spend the night in a city, it is the persistent presence of artificial light, accompanied by the groaning of machines that keeps me up all night, yearning for the peacefulness of forest living.

For those who have grown attached to the buzz of city life, the relative absence of all night lights and grinding gears can inspire a state of fear and anxiety. Some possess zero desire to shed this attachment; choosing instead to remain indoors until the sun comes up. Others enjoy the enlightening thrill of stepping outside of their comfort zone and into the darkness.

While working as an environmental educator and wilderness guide, I had the opportunity to take groups of 30 or more students from schools in larger cities - mostly in the Greater Toronto Area - on backcountry camping trips in the Haliburton Forest and Wildlife Reserve. As part of these overnight expeditions, we would wait until well after the sun went down before taking the kids on a night hike.

Before we left camp to head out on our adventure for the evening, we asked each of the kids, and their teachers, to leave their cell phones and flashlights behind.

Once everyone was ready to go, we would then form a line, hiking the group deeper into the dark woods. With one guide out front, another in the middle of the group, and one more at the tail end of the line, we slowly and quietly walked into the living abyss of darkness before us.

One by one we then asked the kids to stop and have a seat on the trail, and experience the uniqueness of their time and space.

After engaging in the meditation, we would then walk back to camp, remaining silent all the way. To wrap up the exercise, we next gathered the group around a fire that was waiting for us back at camp, courtesy of the guides that stayed behind.

As we sat there watching the flames, each of the children and their teachers had a chance to reflect on their experience, and share their thoughts with the group. More often than not, the "Night sit" as we called it, turned out to be the participants' first real encounter with nature. Many described this encounter as a sort of face-to-face meeting with something bigger than themselves.

Listening to everyone describe their interpretation of the experience, and share what it meant to them, proved time and time again to be an eye opener for me. That said, I recall one student in particular who articulated his experience in such a profound way, that it deepened my appreciation of how valuable our connection with nature truly is.

The young man, maybe 11 or 12-years-old told the group about how despite the fact he had gone to church with his family every Sunday as far back as he could remember, he never felt close to God. Sitting there in the dark forest that night, he explained to us how the night sit/hike was the first time he experienced a spiritual connection to nature; or as he called it "God's creation." Realizing he was part of this sacred space, he said he now felt compelled to protect it; and, to encourage others to do the same.

I was reminded of this young man's enlightening encounter with the divine recently while reading Lakota author and human rights activist, Vine Deloria Jr's book, *God is Red*. In it he writes:

"The lands of the planet call to humankind for redemption. But it is a redemption of sanity, not a supernatural reclamation project at the end of history. The planet itself calls to the other living species for relief. Religion cannot be kept within the bounds of sermons and scriptures. It is a force in and of itself and it calls for the integration of lands and peoples in harmonious unity. The land waits for those who can discern their rhythms. The peculiar genius of each continent - each river valley, the rugged mountains, the placid lakes - all call for relief from the constant burden of exploitation."

If you are looking for a little reclamation of your sanity and want to step outside the bounds of sermons and scriptures, the Perseid meteor shower is the perfect opportunity to experience something genuinely larger than life. If you have heard of the Perseid meteor shower, but never witnessed the annual cosmic spectacle yourself, don't worry there is still time to take in this year's show. Although the light of the full moon will likely prevent optimal viewing this year, experts say skywatchers can still expect to see up to 100 meteors an hour. On years when there is no moonlight, up to 200 meteors an hour can be seen lighting up the night sky.

As long as you are reading this before Aug. 24, all one needs to do to see it, is step outside and stare up at the night sky. For the best view of this jaw dropping phenomena in 2022, head outdoors around midnight on the evening of Friday, Aug. 12 to observe the peak of the Perseid shower into the wee hours of Aug. 13.

Enjoy!