Tour shines a light on Algonquin history and culture

By Nate Smelle

For more than 200 years, most historical records of the Madaouskairini Algonquin territory/Bancroft area have focused primarily on the miners and foresters who settled and industrialized the local landscape. Because of the lack of acknowledgment of the history of the Algonquin people and their ancestors who have inhabited the same land since time immemorial, historians have only ever had a few pieces of the puzzle available to shape their perspective of the past. To help put together a more accurate account of the area's history members of the Algonquin Nation have created an interpretive tour dedicated to the history of the local Indigenous community, to add to the Bancroft Chamber of Commerce and Stewardship Council's Nature Discovery Tour series.

Gathering atop the Eagles Nest on Saturday morning, the tour group set out on the trails led by Algonquin guides Christine Luckasavitch of the Ondjitigewyaa, Stephen Hunter of the Kijicho Manitou Madaouskairini and Chuck Commanda of the Kitigan Zibi Anishnabeg in Quebec. Making stops along the trail when opportunities for education arose, the guides took turns providing insight on how nature and necessity have defined Algonquin values and culture. Directing the group's attention to the stunning view from Eagles Nest lookout, Luckasavitch explained how approximately 35,000 to 12,000 years ago the landscape would have been covered by a two-kilometre thick ice. As the ice retreated, she described how the meltwater would have flooded the terrain leaving behind a marine ecosystem dotted with islands. Pointing to the seemingly countless tree-covered hilltops and rocky outcroppings stretching out to the horizon in all directions, she invited the group to imagine how important it would have been for the Indigenous people who lived in the area at the time to have a vessel such as a birch bark canoe.

?Almost everywhere you can see other than the mountain tops would have been completely flooded,? Luckasavitch told the group. ?The people at this time would have been travelling by canoe or by following different ridges. If you think about shorelines you have visited, where there are these beautiful little beaches, well this here actually would have been a beach. So, guaranteed there would have been people way up here a long time ago living their daily lives ? making tools, processing meats, setting up their wigwams.?

Remarking on the geological transformation of the landscape the group was marveling over, Luckasavitch described how the Ottawa Valley, the Madawaska River system and the highlands in North Hastings once were home to some of the highest elevations ever to have existed in North America. To emphasize how much Indigenous people would have been dependent on the aquatic environment left by the melting glacier, she highlighted the significance of species such as the sturgeon and the American eel. During this period, both of these species flourished, serving as vital sources of food and medicine for the Indigenous people living in the area. Now, she said sadly they are both on the brink of extinction.

Having worked on an American eel restoration project with the Canadian Wildlife Federation (CWF) on the Ottawa River, Luckasavitch has developed a deep appreciation for the species. With their spawning grounds located in the Sargasso Sea in the Caribbean, American eel faces many obstacles on its migration route north before it reaches the inland waters of the St. Lawrence River in Quebec and eventually Ontario. Hydro dams pose a particularly challenging threat to the survival of the species. Though once plentiful in Algonquin Park, she said there has not been a single eel documented in the area since 1987. Through partnerships established between First Nations, hydro power operators and organizations like the CWF, Luckasavitch said the American eel's chances of survival are improving.

?This is good news for the entire ecosystem,? she said with a smile.

?American eels are carnivores, and they would eat fish like rock bass, so they help to keep populations in balance. Essentially, if you take any type of animal out of an ecosystem it has an impact on a number of other species. One thing we do know is that having eel in an ecosystem is a sign that it is a healthy ecosystem.?

So far, approximately 1,000 eels have been released into the Ottawa River. To help establish safe passage for the species, Luckasavitch said scientists working with organizations like CWF have been tracking where the eels go after being released. From this data, she said they are able to determine where the best places are to create safe passageways. One of the reasons Luckasavitch has become so engaged with restoring American eel populations in the area is because of what the loss of this species represents in terms of Algonquin culture.

?There are Algonquins still alive today that used to spear them, but if you look at the difference between their generation and my generation, if it wasn't for these scientific efforts I would have never even had a chance to see one. Looking at what that does to our culture and how that disconnects us from our culture, it is quite significant ? losing something which would have been one of our most plentiful food sources.?

Luckasavitch, a licensed archaeologist, brought with her a collection of tools and artifacts that she has discovered in various

locations on Algonquin land over the years. Passing each of the items around to everyone in the group, she explained how her ancestors would have crafted the arrowheads, scrapers and pottery they used to survive. In relatively decent shape considering their age ? 2,000 to 4,000 years old ? the artifacts helped to illustrate what life would have been like for Algonquin people inhabiting the Bancroft area long ago.

While Luckasavitch was sharing her knowledge of Algonquin culture, Hunter and Commanda were whittling away on the cedar they were preparing for the birch bark canoe they are building. Using a draw-knife, chisels and a mallet the two carefully split the wood into long strips which Commanda said would eventually be soaked, heated and shaped into the ribs of the canoe. Hunter said when he was a child there were still many people in his community who knew how to build a birch bark canoe. When he wanted to learn the skill a few years back, he said he could not find anyone to teach him. If he hadn't connected with his teacher Commanda he said that ancient knowledge of Algonquin culture could have disappeared from his community.

?When I couldn't find anyone to teach me I was compelled to do it,? Hunter said.

?I really wanted to learn the old way of building a canoe without any shortcuts. I'm so glad I met up with my friend here. In that learning, there were so many other lessons for me.?

Explaining how traditional knowledge such as this has been lost, Hunter shared some of the more recent history of the Algonquin Nation with the group. As the French and English exchanged power and displaced Indigenous people across the country prior to Confederation, he said many Algonquins became disconnected from their identity. The inhumane treatment his ancestors endured at the hands of the Government of Canada also played a part in separating the Algonquin people from their culture. Hunter recalled how in the early 1900s the government unearthed the remains of his ancestors within eyesight of their settlement, so they could be put on display at the Royal Ontario Museum and other museums throughout North America.

?When you suffer through those things your identity becomes something that you cannot celebrate because there is no place for it, he said.

?There's no home anymore where you're comfortable with your culture or comfortable with your identity or sharing these things that are important to you. So, we are lucky to have this new day where we are able to share these things that are important to us.?

From Aug. 1 until Aug. 15 they will be constructing the canoe outside of the museum in downtown Bancroft. Once the canoe is completed, the builders plan to raffle it off to raise funds to develop a series of programs and events aiming to educate the community about the history and culture of the Algonquin Nation.

?We want to create more opportunities to bring people together and build our capacity to share our values and our traditions with the entire community,? said Hunter.

?Building the canoe in Bancroft last year was a beautiful experience. It really brought the community together and started some momentum that is still building. I think it's the canoe ? there is something magical about it. It speaks to the beauty and the perfection of nature, the marriage of natural ingredients, the symmetry and how perfect these materials can come together. Look at it now, it's a log and in a few weeks, it will be a canoe. It shows our respect and our gratitude to these things ? to the *kijick* (cedar), to the *wìgwàs* (birch bark), to the *wadub* (spruce root) to all these things we make this out of.?

Debbie Oxford, one of the participants in the tour from Hong Kong, said she was profoundly moved by what she had learned on the tour. Describing the tour as delightfully informative and necessary, she said she would encourage everyone to experience the tour.

?It was a very enlightening morning,? said Oxford.

?We need to know these things and we should talk about them every chance we get.?