PERSONAL VIEW

Winter camping: reflections on living in the wilderness

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On the evening of Feb. 15, 32 km north of Temagami, Ontario, I laid many small balsam boughs in a depression in the snow. On top of this bed I laid an insulite pad and a canvas sleeping-bag cover. Stripping down to my woollen underwear and cotton parka, I plunged into a down-lined sleeping bag and stared up at Castor and Pollux, almost directly overhead among the rocket-shaped black spruce. It was −25°C. Behind me slept my three travelling companions in the comparative comfort of a tent heated by a portable wood stove and a black dog. The white surface of Lake Manajigama was a blur in front of me; a light wind stirred the pines along its shore.

Why, I mused, had I chosen for my winter vacation a week of wilderness travel in the Canadian Shield rather than the pleasures of the Caribbean or even the thrills of the ski slopes and the lodge? Irritated by my own hatred of urban winters, tired of jogging on slushy streets and seeking involvement in the outdoor life so thematic of Canada's history, I had enlisted in a winter camping course offered by Headwaters, an outfit providing experience in summer and winter travel in the Temagami region. For the price of a pair of skis, Headwaters lends complete winter equipment, provides on-site training and gives informal courses on travel and nature in the North.

Hugh Stewart who, along with his wife Carin, founded and runs Headwaters, teaches a philosophy combining the early experiences of the Voyageurs, modern ecologic imperatives and the native way of life. Nature is to be lived in, and respected.

The Canadian Shield, that vast, infertile crescent, characterizes our country, for it is difficult to traverse, a limitless source of water, a hiding-place for valuable animals and a cache of mineral riches. Stewart and his guides travel the lakes of the southern Shield as did the Voyageurs, paddling and portaging and plodding in front of the toboggan — winter's canoe — when the ice is strong.

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Thus, my night in the open was not intended to be a death-defying act, but an exercise to persuade myself that one can come to terms with the cold, given the proper equipment and attitude. Our preparation had included a lecture on hypothermia, that subtle killer of the North. As body core temperature drops, there is first shivering, then a pleasant euphoria and a feeling of false warmth blending imperceptibly into the period of irreversible cell damage. Despite the many layers of insulation, I began to shiver. According to instructions, I had eaten a number of hard candies before bedding down, but I did not notice the expected surge of metabolic heat.

The narrow sleeping bag wouldn't let me reach my feet to warm them, and my shoulders nearly protruded at the other end. I pulled extra clothes up around my head and decided that, as long as the sleeping bag stayed dry, enough body heat should be available to see me through the night. Gradually a feeling of warmth replaced the shivering, and a pleasant drowsiness overtook me.

When I awoke, Castor and Pollux were behind a veil of clouds, and snow dusted my exposed face and shoulders. My boots, which I had unwisely left upright, were filling rapidly. One sweats little in the deep cold, and after an evening of drinking campfire coffee — stronger beverages are absolutely taboo — one can almost count on being forced to face the cold briefly in the middle of the night. After my little trip in the snow-filled boots, the red sleeping bag seemed an island of warmth. Soon the snowfall stopped, and I again committed myself to hibernation.

Strangely refreshed, I arose before the tent-sleepers, made the fire, reopened the hole in the ice of the lake to draw water, and tried to get the felt liners of my boots dry without burning them. This was to be the second day of our 3-day novice trip over the southern part of Lake Anima-Nipissing, with a campsite on Manajigama and visits to Snare Lake and Breeches Lake.

On snowshoes and dressed in heavy winter clothes, carrying a 15 kg back-pack and towing a toboggan weighing perhaps 40 kg through soft snow is a gentle but persistent aerobic exercise probably demanding 2100 kJ per hour. After 6 hours of this, and a couple more of dragging dead trees and chopping them up, the body expects its energy ration to be increased by about 12 600 kJ. For the first few days at Headwaters, we used to laugh at the size of the portions we heaped on our plates, but as the week went on we made the crucial transfer from pot to plate to mouth in determined silence. As I ate my third bowl of oatmeal, I recalled stories of the old north-woods lumberjacks, who slept in a long tubular shed called a muzzle-loader. The men entered this structure and bedded down in sequence, sleeping in series rather than parallel. Each day save the Sabbath, they faced 14 hours of chopping and sawing Canada's finest timber. Meanwhile, in the kitchen, cooks laboured almost unceasingly to produce hot cakes and bannock. It is said that one of these lumbermen needed 38 000 kJ per day to prevent weight loss; old brown photos of unshaven faces half-hidden behind a stack of "cakes" seem to prove the point.

After breakfast I dusted off my bed and packed for a 3-hour snowshoe exploration of a newly-blazed trail between Manajigama and Breeches Lake. Travel in the north woods can be comfortable. In fact it *must* be comfortable. The traveller who feels the discomfort of cold, weariness or hunger may be entering a grey zone of danger. Physical overloads weaken motivation and perception, simple mistakes can be compounded into serious predicaments.

Planning and equipment are the two pillars of safety. Planning the equipment itself means taking more than the city dweller might expect. Moosehide moccasins that cover the calf are light and perfect for snowshoe travel on lakes and portages, but if a foot drops into water at −30°C the moc becomes an ice corset that drains heat from the limb. Unless the foot and its covering are dried out near a fire, frostbite and perhaps core temperature drop await the traveller at the end of his day. Extra socks, extra liners, lightweight rubber galoshes can be found in many packs, especially at the end of winter when currents have carved irregular caverns beneath the ice.

Although the pack must contain a tin of matches, a hatchet, birchbark (the unfailing tinder of the woods) and small bags of personal possessions, clothing forms the bulkiest and most vital component. Forty percent of the body's heat can be lost through the head, so any winter outfit starts with the hat. A woollen hat plus the hood of a down-filled parka are unbeatable, but I also discovered the versatility of a balaclava in the wind that sometimes swept across the lakes. Lined mittens are essential — gloves are for warm climates. For the body, I preferred wool between several layers of cotton. The down parka, indispensable when you're standing still, becomes a portable sauna when you're exercising in the sun and must be replaced by a light wool jacket or sweater. I found a turkish towel helpful as a scarf to increase the airspace between parka and sweater, to mop the face, and for upper-extremity isometrics while in harness to the toboggan.

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Most lakes of the Canadian Shield run north-south, and trekkers must seek spots with southern exposure for their mug-ups (breaks for hot drinks). Sitting on a log, surrounded by silent cedars, basking in the sun reflecting off a mile of snow creates a contentment that easily rivals that of a Caribbean beach.

The last leg of our trek back to Headwaters base camp was 2½ hours straight north, over the lake and through a series of blustery storms. Physical exertion preempted the possibility of feeling cold, but the temperature was probably only −15°C, and the sun shone intermittently. Given the proper clothing, movement itself will keep you warm down to about −40°C. Then, the Headwaters people caution, fish can swim, dogs can run and birds can fly, but humans should stay in their huts. The human being is, after all, a subtropical animal, superbly adapted to hunt in the noon-day heat when his prey is overcome with torpor.

Indians are puzzled by our concept of "wilderness survival". The bush, like any other environment, offers challenge and threat, but it is a natural environment to which mankind, with its intelligence and skilful hands, can become superbly adapted. You must notice — and learn. You must realize that every action you take has a consequence. When planning a trip you must be thoughtful, take everything you might need, waste nothing, and plan for comfort, not just survival.

This pattern of careful slow travel in harmony with nature, taking advantage of her bounties when necessary, but leaving no scars either on the traveller or on the land contrasts with the accelerated, uneasy assault by sportsmen, who will endure any temporary hardship to set a record for speed, height, distance or killing. Sometime, during my week in the wilderness, I realized that there was a broader analogy between these two ways of travelling and the ways we might move through life, and I was grateful for the experience. ■

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