

## Haskayne Wilderness Retreat – *ii'taa'poh'to'p* in Real Time

Indigenous teaching and land-based learning help students find purpose in leadership

One of the most popular Adventure Leadership offerings through CCAL is the Haskayne [Wilderness Retreat](#). Starting in 2004, these courses run every July in Kananaskis for undergraduate and MBA students. Drawing from business and outdoor leadership, sustainable development and experiential environmental education, wilderness therapy and adventure learning, the one-week Retreat combines outdoor activities and self-reflection with team building and personal growth challenges. A key feature of the program is the Indigenous guides and knowledge keepers on the leadership team who engage with students throughout the week culminating in a 24-hour wilderness Solo

The course probes leadership topics in the larger context of sustainability helping students clarify their core values, sense of purpose and call to service as leaders. Such deep self-inquiry is fundamental for developing one's identity as a leader establishing foundational ethical frames from which decisions are made, moral character is established and integrity is maintained. "We use the land to learn about ourselves," states Dr. David Lertzman, founder of the Wilderness Retreat and Haskayne Adventure Leadership co-chair. "Alone in the woods overnight things get real pretty quickly. We go outside our comfort zone, confront vulnerability, and in doing so find resilience and power." So, what is the role of Indigenous knowledge keepers and their practices?

Lertzman suggests sustainability is unlikely to be achieved without the participation and leadership of Indigenous peoples. "We are privileged to live in a country where Indigenous knowledge and wisdom stretches back for thousands of years. How can we meaningfully approach the topic of sustainability without involving and learning from those who provide the only living examples of sustained human cultures in the ecosystems we currently inhabit?" This has implications for teaching practice. "A strategic contribution of authentic intercultural learning is that we gain access to ways of thinking outside our cultural box with insights into ourselves and the world we could not come up with on our own. Indigenous ways of knowing and being offer learning practices that engage the whole person eliciting a profound sense of intimacy with ecosystems and insight into oneself." As part of this, students get to experience ceremonies led by Indigenous elders including a purification or Sweat Lodge ceremony followed by an overnight wilderness Solo.

Inspired by traditional Indigenous practices of extended reflective isolation in the outdoors, the Solo is a peak transformational process in wilderness experience programs. Tim Kletsy (MBA Candidate 2020, GEMS), described that "The Indigenous elders taught us how important it is to have a sense of purpose in this world and how gratifying it can be to hold space for one another. My life purpose came clear to me on my Solo, which is to serve others in need. Being of service is one of the most meaningful and fulfilling things in my life." Such land-based learning is also aligned with the University of Calgary's Indigenous Strategy, [ii'taa'poh'to'p](#).

*ii'taa'poh'to'p* is a *Niitsitapi* (Blackfoot) word that refers to a special place in nature where one can stop, become rejuvenated and get what one needs to complete their journey. Sarah Chow (MBA Candidate 2021, Finance), shared that "Drawing on the wisdom of Indigenous people, the Retreat served as an *ii'taa'poh'to'p* on my journey in life, where I am grateful to have gained a renewed sense of identity and a strength of purpose for my path ahead." Indigenous peoples have distinct leadership philosophies and governance traditions to which elders bring a grounded sense of community and spiritual maturity. Not only does this mentor students in

diverse leadership styles and teachings directly relevant to sustainability, it supports people to delve their deeper questions. “When it comes to the deeper questions,” Lertzman notes, “for the elders, that’s their expertise.”