

Survival courses teach wilderness living skills

Students learn to help others despite being tired, hungry and frightened

Only a few generations ago, the First Nations people and early fur trappers responded to their instincts and willingly shared hard-earned wilderness survival skills among family members and friends. Failure to master this knowledge of the forest often meant injury or death.

By watching and emulating their parents, children learned the best woods to burn, coping strategies under adverse conditions, hunting and fishing techniques and how to be reasonably comfortable in a wilderness setting.

Banishment from the group or tribe often spelled certain death. The outdoors were vibrant with both resources and information.

Today, this learning can be gleaned through wilderness survival courses. However, potential students should be cautioned — sections of realistic survival programs, are, by their very nature, harsh, brutal and sometimes shocking. In a society that exploits the term "wilderness survival" as a selling or advertizing gimmick, these students soon realize that no room exists for the armchair survivor. All participants get their hands dirty, all experience cold nights in the bush and all learn to work

with, not against, the wilderness environment.

A survival course that doesn't include fear and hardships in its syllabus is a deception. There is little or no true learning without work, anxiety, stress and tension. Finding inner peace under survival conditions is not a simple task, it's a difficult journey. Hence, achieving this state of peaceful tranquility is not found in avoiding these apparent roadblocks, but in understanding them and controlling their almost overpowering forces.

The tutored outdoorsperson readily remembers messages delivered by the wilderness. To many, however, a wilderness setting subconsciously emits a primordial sense of fear — fear of bugs, hardships and cold, all of which presented inescapable realities to our ancestors.

Perhaps this is the reason many people are terrified of the bush, especially at night, and lash out at it whenever the opportunity presents itself.

True survival courses advise the learner to work with nature and not against it. The bush is neutral — it won't help you, but it won't harm you. Fish will not jump into your pan — rab-

Wilderness Survival



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bits will not run up to you pleading to become a meal.

However, trees do provide shelter, bedding, food and firewood. If the student can read the signs, (s)he'll know the upcoming weather, where animals are congregating and the possible location of edible plants. To the learned participant, these signs are easily understood, simple to decipher, very legible, plain and above all, honest. As such, the survivor becomes a resourceful person, having the ability to make rational decisions under very stressful situations.

Teaching a survival course in our modern society is, at first glance, an irony. With all of our technological advances, who needs a wilderness survival program? In my opinion, we all do. Many individuals recognize the instability of our society. A power failure in New York, a war in the Middle East,

a derailment in Mississauga, a multi-vehicle crash on Highway 401, or a hurricane in New Orleans are vivid reminders that most conveniences and necessities of life can disappear overnight.

In our modern world, we are divorced from the process of securing shelter, water and food — the essentials of life. It's no secret that the most traumatic part of my entire survival course is the unit on animal preparation. Students shudder when faced with the prospect of having to kill, butcher and consume an animal. We are so very much removed from the food gathering process. Instead, we're almost fully conditioned in believing that our nicely wrapped, synthetic foods originate in the supermarket. We've now become programmed into mistakenly believing that all of our needs must be supplied by our government, our employer and our society.

As a society, perhaps we've lost our ability to differentiate between pain and hardship. Could it be that we are so acclimatized by our artificial, increasingly urbanized environment that an average individual can no longer tolerate heat, cold or dampness? As a culture, we avoid buildings that aren't air conditioned in the summer or well-heated during the winter. Furthermore, many despise swimming in pristine lakes and rivers, preferring instead, the sparkling, sanitized, heavily-chlorinat-

ed swimming pools.

This is the society in which most of us live. And yet, in this region, we are surrounded by lakes, rivers and forests. Individuals who truly love the outdoors believe that the weather — that is snow, rain, biting cold or searing heat — is a constant reminder that we are indeed real flesh and blood beings, totally part of, and not separate, from nature.

There is nothing wrong with being frightened. Everyone, including myself, is in the same predicament. Realistic survival courses are designed to put the active learner in situations whereby working with peers and instructors alike becomes a necessity, when helping each other in times of hardships is the norm, and having faith in one's wilderness living skills, so laboriously learned during countless classroom and field experiences, become ingrained. Survival students routinely help others, even though they themselves are hungry, tired and frightened. They are witnesses to their unmistakable inner peace. It has little to do with an unstressed situation. Rather, it emanates from their insight into the significance of those stresses, their fears, their inner values and their motivation. These students learn that sometimes it's smart to be scared.

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