

This Land Is Our Land

Embracing First Nations people, “tourists” and “townies,” the Temagami Community Foundation is building a new future for this once-divided region.

BY CHRISTINE LANGLOIS

A crew of energetic boys and girls in shorts and T-shirts constructs a “human sculpture” on the sun-dappled pine floor of the Bear Island Community Centre. Two kids go down on all fours, side by side, to form a base. Another child stands with a foot on one child’s back and a hand on another’s head. A fourth child links arms with number 3 and touches toes with someone else. As they climb and intertwine arms and legs, all eight get the giggles and hang on tight to avoid collapsing in a tangle.

It’s the last afternoon of their summer arts camp on Bear Island, a tiny aboriginal community on Lake

Temagami, about 450 kilometres north of Toronto. Like all the six-to 13-year-old campers, they started the week as wary strangers separated by labels: “natives” from Bear Island, “tourists” from the lake cottages and “townies” from the town of Temagami on the mainland. Now their wriggling, wobbly sculpture perfectly captures their new linked reality as pals.

The camp is a project of the Temagami Community Foundation (TCF), a fledgling group that hopes to connect the people in a community that is almost as well-known for its divisions – between aboriginal land claims, forest management and lakefront protection – as for its dramatic granite outcrops, ancient pines and big water. There are

144 Canadian foundations dedicated to improving communities, but TCF is the only one that has First Nations people sitting at the same table with locals and seasonal residents. And this is a big accomplishment – relationships among these three groups have a long history of acrimony, and not just in Temagami.

LEARNING TO COMMUNICATE

Although billed as an arts camp, its real purpose is to get 40 kids from different worlds to interact and understand one another. And organizers leave nothing to chance: they include an equal number of campers from each of the three communities and transport the town kids by bus and pontoon boat to Bear Island. Cottagers converge in their

own boats every morning to drop off their kids. All week while the campers draw and paint, listen to stories told by local elders, go for boat rides around the island and swim at the beach, they also learn about one another’s lives. And, by the last day, most have shed any of the stereotypes they arrived with.

For artist and cottager Bettina Schuller, who planned and taught the program, one simple moment made last year’s camp worthwhile. A group of kids lunching outside had congregated on a rock in the shade of a large white pine. As the kids chatted, the tops of three blond heads huddled close to two black-haired ones. In 17 summer visits to Temagami from her home in Jesup, Ga., Bettina had never seen aboriginal

and non-aboriginal kids just enjoying each other’s company. “It was wonderful,” she says, “and it made me realize why I was doing this.”

MAKING CONNECTIONS

The TCF is working to link the three solitudes who have uneasily shared this region for about a century. The passion that Temagami stirs can provoke people to take unyielding, conflicting positions. The summer campers, cottagers and canoe trippers demand environmental protection. The townsfolk battle to keep jobs in their tiny northern community in the face of mine closings and logging restrictions. And the Temagami First Nation has been fighting for a suitable land reserve for more than 100 years. ▶

PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF VICKI MCKENZIE GRANT (TOP); FRANK SMITH (RIGHT)

Against this backdrop, two old friends with long histories in Temagami decided that a community foundation might get people talking, working and playing together. They had no illusions that a children's arts camp, a strawberry tea and a square dance – all organized by the TCF last summer – would solve any complex issues. But they hoped to get people together, in the same room, smiling.

Cofounding director Vicki McKenzie Grant knows Temagami from every angle. She's a "native," she has been a "townie" and now she's a "tourist." A member of the Temagami First Nation who grew up on Bear Island, where most of her extended family still lives, Vicki was a band administrator for 10 years, then moved to Temagami when her husband opened a law practice in town.

"The one thing I told my husband when we got married was, 'Don't ever expect me to live in Temagami,'" she says. Afraid of racial prejudice, Vicki had resisted the move, but her fears proved unfounded. She made good friends in town and recently moved again, to Stouffville, Ont. She returns every summer to her cottage on Deacon's Island and laughs that she's now one of those "tourists" she used to dismiss as people with lots of money and paternalistic attitudes.

By Vicki's definition, the TCF's other founding director, Walter Ross, is also a "tourist," but he bristles at the word. Walter insists he's a "seasonal resident" who participates in the community. An accountant who retired a few years ago from a big Toronto firm, he has made Temagami his summer home since he was a 13-year-old camper 50 years ago. With his wife and grown kids, he spends summers at his cottage with his books and canoe.

Walter and Vicki have known each other for 30 years and had often talked about how to improve relationships in this community they both love. Keen activists, neither wanted to create an organization that only focused on their own issues. What they did want was to get people collaborating on projects that they could all agree would make their community better – and, when

they couldn't agree, to discover "they could still have a good time together," says Walter.

So the two invited others from all three communities to form the TCF board. Some were tentative at their first meeting, but the group quickly jelled with a sense of shared purpose, says Walter. Together they managed to attract enough donations from the community, including a \$14,000 grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, that they could announce funding for several projects when they formally launched the foundation at a ceremony on Bear Island in July of 2002. "That put

us on the radar screen in the community right away," says Walter.

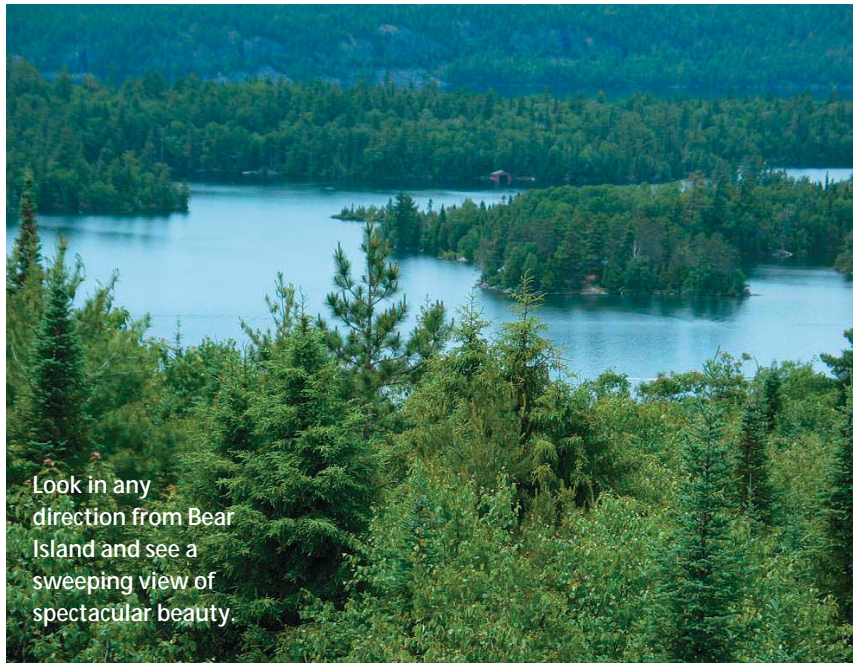
HAVING A SAY

Along with the arts camp, one of the first initiatives to get TCF funding was a group going after a sustainable forest licence (SFL), which controls how a forest is managed and logged, for the region. The regulations – and the politics – around the issuing of these provincial licences are as dense as the forest itself, especially in Temagami, where any talk of logging can spark controversy. (One local jokes that the town should host a



A SHARED HISTORY

First Nations people have lived around Lake Temagami for at least 5,000 years. The seasonal residents and the townspeople didn't arrive until early in the 20th century. That's when the Ontario government established the Temagami Forest Reserve of 5,900 square miles to protect the lakeshore and the forest from development and logging. In 1903 the railway was built through the area, linking the south to the mining camps farther north and opening up the lake to visitors who were keen to explore the wilderness. Temagami village sprang up around the train station, and youth camps and cottages began to dot the lake's many islands. Today the population of Bear Island stands at 200 and the population of Temagami at 1,000. Summer residents now number 10,000 (almost half are American); the rough beauty of Temagami lures travellers from all over the world.



Look in any direction from Bear Island and see a sweeping view of spectacular beauty.

one every year to discuss their goals. Walter says, "Coming together around the community SFL really deepened working relationships."

GROWING CLOSER

When Bettina sees campers painting a mural or listening to an elder's story, she imagines those same kids 20 or 30 years into the future, when they might meet at a negotiating table, the town hall or even at Marg's coffee shop on the town's main drag. She hopes they will be able to "communicate and be open with each other." And, thanks to the foundation, she's pretty sure that will happen.

Last August Bettina's family, including Sophia, her seven-year-old daughter and an arts-camp veteran, attended the Temagami First Nation's annual powwow. As soon as they arrived, two First Nation girls who had also been at camp ran up and gave Sophia a hug. They stepped back so Sophia could admire their traditional jingle dresses, then all three took off by themselves to dance to the drumming. "Before arts camp, that would never have happened," says Bettina. ●

protest every fall when business is quiet, to keep the restaurants full.) With the exception of one granted to the Bracebridge region in Ontario, these licences are usually issued to logging companies.

But everybody in Temagami wants a say in how their forest is managed, so the TCF gave a grant to help the Bear Island Band Council and the Temagami First Nation Council get the province's attention for their proposal. They want a community SFL overseen by a community-based, nonprofit corporation with a local board of directors that comprises representatives of the lake residents, townspeople and Temagami First Nation as well as logging companies. This corporation would then have the legal responsibility for managing the forest and taking environmental, employment and First Nation issues into account as they do so.

The TCF grant helped the group hire a consultant to research the Bracebridge model and put together a glossy brochure for the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources that argued Temagami's case. "We caught the eye of the minister," says Wayne Adair, the town's mayor. No deal has been signed yet, but last January the group got a verbal assurance from Ontario's Ministry of Natural Resources that it

would receive a community licence.

Vicki says that small grant had a big impact: the leadership of the Temagami First Nation and the town worked on a project together for the first time. And it won't be the last. The band and the town councils held a joint meeting last spring and plan to hold

Five Steps to a Fresh Start

If you want to change something in your community, start with these five steps from Monica Patten, president and CEO of the Community Foundations of Canada.

1 Open up. Share your ideas with one or two people you think will be interested. Invite them for coffee and talk about what you'd like to accomplish; it might be a stop sign at the end of your street, a neighbourhood fair or a grand plan for attracting new business.

2 Widen the circle. If you get a good

response from the first group, arrange a followup meeting and invite a diverse group of 10 or 12. Strive for a mix of genders, ages, ethnic backgrounds and viewpoints, and include visionaries, planners and people who will want to make phone calls and do mailings. Work together to establish your goals.

3 Create a structure for your group. This may involve formalizing an organization that meets the criteria of a community foundation (for information, visit www.community-fdn.ca) or it may be as simple as choosing a chairman and

a treasurer. Determine when you will meet, who is responsible for what and how members will report to the group.

4 Do your homework. Are any other groups working on the same initiative? Can you join forces? Contact your community paper and ask whether it has covered your issue.

5 Raise your profile. Get your message out in the local paper, church newsletters and community bulletins. Make presentations to the local town council or service groups, hold an open house and start a website.