

SUPPORTING INDIGENOUS YOUTH

Why On-The-Land and On-The-Water Programming is Important

How to Use This Resource

This resource is a high-level summary of the value and importance of providing and supporting on-the-land/water programming for Indigenous youth. It can be used to share the impact of on-the-land/water programming for Indigenous youth and/or as evidence to support funding applications. For more information, including references, please see the full report titled Supporting Indigenous Youth: Why On-The-Land and On-The-Water Programming is Important by Dionne Paul, MAA (XIMI) and Holly Gunn, MPH of Changemark Research + Evaluation.

What is On-The-Land or On-The-Water Learning?

Indigenous Peoples have varying and intimate connections with the natural world. What on-the-land/water programs look like is unique to each nation and community. While it can be challenging to provide one definition, some common elements that help define on-the-land/water programs are programs that are informed by Indigenous knowledge and teachings; use the land or water as the main source of knowledge and teaching; and involve cultural teachings and intergenerational knowledge transfer in a rural or nature-based remote location.

Why Is On The Land/Water Programming Important?

Being connected to the lands and waters is central to Indigenous health, well-being, and knowledge systems. Indigenous communities historically, and presently, learned and taught through the lands and waters. Indigenous knowledge does not exist without the land. There are many benefits of on-the-land/water programs for Indigenous youth. While the specific outcomes may vary from program to program and participant to participant, the report by Changemark Research + Evaluation found nine key positive outcomes which are described on the next page.

Why is it Important to Support On-The-Land/Water Programs for Indigenous Youth?

Supporting on-the-land/water programs for Indigenous youth demonstrates a commitment to decolonization and allows Indigenous youth to deepen connections to their cultures, traditional ways of being, and homes. For the last 150 years, ongoing harmful colonial practices have attempted to dismantle the traditional Indigenous ways of being through systems of purposeful oppression and the removal of many people from their homelands. To work towards decolonization, Indigenous knowledge systems must be supported and valued, and colonial systems dismantled. On-the-land/water programs for Indigenous youth are one way to do this. As outlined in the full report, there are challenges involved in delivering these programs including access to funding, the colonial disruption of knowledge transmission resulting in a smaller group of individuals available to lead these programs, and the often emotionally-taxing nature of running these programs. Despite these challenges, on-the-land/water programs have many positive influences on Indigenous youth and with adequate support, they can help youth and communities thrive.

“On-the-land/water learning is more than the physical act of being on the land and in the water. It is a transformational journey to connect with the essence of what it means to be Indigenous by mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually experiencing the inherent magic and wisdom the land and water offer Indigenous people and all people.”

- Dionne Paul, MAA (XIMI) and
Report Co-author (page 3)

To read the full report visit: https://www.nature.org/content/dam/tnc/nature/en/documents/EmergingLeaders_NatureUnited.pdf

Benefits of Indigenous Youth On-The-Land/Water Programs

Leadership

On-the-land/water programs support peer-to-peer and multi-generation knowledge exchange while promoting character building among participants, and helping youth develop the tools needed to succeed as community leaders. These programs can help youth increase their:

- ability to communicate effectively
- willingness to share skills and knowledge
- ability to manage, motivate, and organize others
- likelihood to inspire others
- compassion

Participation in on-the-land/water programs connects Indigenous youth back to their communities, often leading to a renewed or heightened sense of responsibility for their communities and a reconnection to their culture and traditions.

Stewardship

On-the-land/water programs give Indigenous youth an opportunity to understand the land and how to take care of it. Indigenous youth who participate in these programs have reported an increased sense of responsibility in caring for the land, highlighting that it was the connection to the land that sparked the shift.

Climate Change

On-the-land/water programs teach Indigenous worldviews to youth. This encourages an increased sense of responsibility in caring for the land. These programs often educate youth on environmentally-friendly practices and provide opportunities to do research designed with Indigenous teachings in mind. This can foster a greater understanding of what the land can provide and how to care for it, inspiring youth to address climate change.

Food Security

Indigenous food systems are diverse and dependent on the surrounding lands and waters. On-the-land/water programs can teach youth skills in locating and harvesting local foods, reducing the need to rely on expensive and limited imported foods. These programs can also connect youth with equipment and training that support them in accessing traditional foods.

Language

Many Indigenous words that describe experiences, beings, and parts of the land are best communicated when on the land. On-the-land/water programs can provide opportunities for Indigenous youth to share the experience of connecting to language with both their peers and program facilitators in a supportive environment. Additionally, the programs can serve as a safe space and connect Indigenous youth with other community members connecting with their languages.

“Land-based learning fosters the remembering required to become a good ancestor, both on our own territories and as guests on the homelands of others.”

- Morgan Mowatt, Participant in a youth on-the-land/water program on Lekwungen and W̱SÁNEĆ territories (page 10)

“I wouldn’t know how to skin a moose if it wasn’t for the Deh Gáh School allowing me to go out on the land with the Elders and land-users who taught [them] all that.”

- Bradley Tom, Participant in a youth on-the-land/water Program with Deh Gah Got’ie First Nations (page 11)

“Elders tell the youth “if you want to learn your language go back to the land.”

- Jilleun Tenning, Participant in a youth on-the-land/water program with Lekwungen and W̱SÁNEĆ First Nations (page 19)

“[Being out in the bush] provide[d] me with a sense of pride and esteem.”

- Participant in Project George youth on-the-land/water program with Moose Cree First Nation (page 14)

“I think to me land means life. Like, without the land, there would be nothing, like literally. And like it can bring happiness, sadness, every emotion. It’s just a huge influence that I don’t think a lot of people realize, like they take it for granted. And I think that land means, I know it means a lot to my culture, and it probably means a lot to so many different cultures that I just don’t know. And it’s just a really important part of life, a part of everything and anything.”

- Anishinaabe Youth (page 8)

“[I] learned a lot about how [my] people used the river... [It] is a lot more understandable when you can actually see it for yourself.”

- Indigenous Youth, participant in Tribal Journeys on-the-land/water experience (page 21)

Health and Wellness

On-the-land/water programs can impact many parts of the health and wellness of Indigenous youth, including:

- **Physical health** by supporting healthy and outdoor lifestyles, and the enjoyment of traditional land-based foods. These programs can also remove youth from environments that may be stressful or unpleasant.
- **Mental health** by helping Indigenous youth increase their resiliency against social pressures as well as access mental support from their communities and cultures.
- **Spiritual wellness** by connecting youth to traditional practices that help connect youth to ancestors and providing spiritual protection and cleansing.
- **Emotional wellness** by teaching skills and techniques that help Indigenous youth express their emotions in a healthy way.
- **Healing from intergenerational trauma** by providing a space for healing to occur. On-the-land/water programs offer traditional ways of healing while disrupting cycles of abuse resulting from harmful colonial practices.
- **Reducing violence** against girls by giving Indigenous women and girls an environment to heal and regain independence over their bodies. Many land- and water-based programs also aim to restore the strength and health of boys and men which can contribute to reducing gender-based violence.
- **Creating safe spaces for two-spirit, non-binary, and LGBTQIA+ youth:** Being back on the land and waters can provide a space where two-spirit, non-binary, and LGBTQIA+ youth can feel at home, and at ease with themselves.

Culture

Many on-the-land/water programs include opportunities for traditional Indigenous ceremonies and practices (e.g., Potlatch and canoe travel) to be shared between different generations. This is especially important given that these practices were banned for many years as colonizers tried to separate Indigenous communities from their cultures. Through on-the-land/water programs, Indigenous youth (and the adults supporting them) can learn about and practice their cultures in a safe space. Additionally, many on-the-land/water programs provide more flexibility than Western institutions in offering learning opportunities that are more culturally relevant.

Education

On-the-land/water programs help educate youth on important life skills through Indigenous knowledge systems and teachings. These programs can help foster a sense of belonging and confidence in Indigenous youth. They also offer unique experiences that support youth in succeeding, away from the discrimination they may experience in Western institutions. Some programs even offer students an opportunity to earn high school credits.

Employment

On-the-land/water programs provide an opportunity for Indigenous youth to learn valuable employment skills and explore potential future careers. These programs also teach youth other transferable skills that may lead to employment in areas that aren’t being taught in their local educational systems. Networking opportunities through these programs can also lead to various potential career paths for youth.