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A Colonial Audit of the Westcoast Adventure College

The concept of the colonial audit was first made known in July of 2018, when the Vancouver Park Board approved the proposed colonial audit of Stanley Park. The idea is to audit the park's policies and practices, and to look at the ways that colonialism is woven into the Park Board's operation, with the end goal of potential decolonization (Green, 2018). The acknowledgement of a colonial past is important for two reasons. It is important for the Indigenous peoples whose families had to suffer at the hands of colonization, that they may now have the opportunity to heal, and we may reconcile with them. It is also important that those of non-Indigenous heritage know the history of their home, that it is built on stolen land, and that continues to affect large groups of people around them. This essay will be looking at the Westcoast Adventure College, specifically through experiences in the 2016-2017 school year and their online presence, to analyze the level of colonialism in their operations. This analysis will be done by examining four core areas: the built environment, the people involved (leaders and employees), the virtual environment (website and social media), and the courses they offer.

The main 'campus' for the Westcoast Adventure College is actually a combination of the Stickleback West Coast Eatery, Rush Kayak Adventures, and the surrounding grounds (including Cooper's Cove). The college is the third business venture for owner Scott Taylor, and they all share space in the building attached to his personal home. This property is on Te'mexw Treaty land, a group of five Coast Salish nations (Native Land, "Te'mexw Treaty Association"). However, there is no mention on any of these 3 businesses websites or online presence, nor any physical signs on the property, acknowledging this territory. There are also many off-campus locations used by the college, some inevitably respectful enough to have territorial acknowledgements, but some, like the Coast Guard station, the Naval Base, and BC Ferries, have clear colonial practices and ties. In the aforementioned school year of 2016-2017, the closest to respectful territorial acknowledgement the college got was a visit to the Shaw Centre for the Salish Sea, which re-branded several years ago and now refers to the waters around our island in a more traditional way. The main 'campus' allowed for the focus on business in this program to come to the forefront. Very little was mentioned about the

surrounding areas, outside of tides and current patterns, and a lot was discussed of what it was like to build the businesses. A heavy focus on the money-making abilities, not so much of a focus on other aspects of the area. In addition to this, there were many non-built environments. Nights were spent in parks, at Pearson College, and in the bush. Aside from the territorial acknowledgement sign at the entrance to Pearson College, and the occasionally renamed park, there was never a mention of whose territorial lands they were on, and no mention of any other aspect of traditional life in that area. The fix for this seems easy: the Westcoast Adventure College needs to implement the practice of territorial acknowledgement, and to potentially create a specific space in which to separate the learning from the capitalist, and therefore inherently colonialist, ideals of business.

While one can't really say for certain if someone has colonialist intentions at heart, one can certainly try to figure it out! Out of the five instructors listed on the website, two are female, three are male, and all five of them are white and presumed to be cisgender (Westcoast Adventure College, "Our Instructors"). There is also a handful of specialists that are called in to help with specific program aspects, mostly male, all white, and all presumed to be cisgender again (Westcoast Adventure College, "Our Instructors"). Most staff have an extensive knowledge of outdoor adventure activities, safety and first aid, and experiential knowledge. Out of all the instructor profiles on the college website only one boasts of having worked with First Nations groups, saying that it even led to the development of the college (Westcoast Adventure College, "Phil Foster"). Experiencing them as teachers, it was not much better. There were many opportunities to interject Indigenous knowledges, or to bring attention to colonial practices in what we were experiencing that weren't taken advantage of. These issues could be fixed in several ways. First, hiring a more diverse staff, especially in terms of gender and ethnicity, but also in background. More staff having worked with Indigenous nations and peoples, or having taken specific courses in order to learn about colonialism and decolonial practices. Training those currently on staff in decolonial practices. Even hiring a specific staff member to address these topics and issues within the college would be a step in the right direction, but only a stepping stone as it isn't the responsibility of Indigenous peoples to continuously engage with and teach the non-Indigenous people.

On the very front page of the Westcoast Adventure College website, there is a link to a page called 'Our Environment' (Westcoast Adventure College, "Six Facts About Our 8 Month Program"). This page makes mention of Cooper's Cove, on Vancouver Island, and no

mention of the Indigenous territory that the school stands on. There is a focus throughout the website on the local outdoor setting of adventure tourism, boasting the “beauty of the natural outdoors [...] where the gifts of nature are given to you everyday” (Westcoast Adventure College, “Information”). For the certifications received through this program there is a very global focus, speaking of job opportunities around the world. In their mission statement there is not a single word about Indigenous peoples, their histories, or local relationships with them (Westcoast Adventure College, “Mission”). There is even the perfect opportunity, when speaking of conservation and preservation of the environment, which is an important aspect of Indigenous culture. There is an area of the site called articles, and while one would expect to see local news articles showcasing the program, or discussing the good it has done in the community, it was mostly about careers and living opportunities around the college (Westcoast Adventure College, “Adventure Articles”). The college also has a very high Instagram presence, flowing over into their Facebook, in the form of re-posted student photos of the course. The photos are often captioned and geotagged, mostly in the Victoria or Sooke area, and with almost no mention of the traditional Indigenous names people are starting to use for the natural areas in Victoria and Sooke. As Instagram is so highly used, and allows a more concentrated snapshot of the program, it would be the perfect opportunity to use Indigenous nomenclature and to share information about the area and how Indigenous knowledges may be used. With their high internet presence, it is important for the college to showcase the best of themselves, and this should include building and then showcasing their positive relationship with Indigenous and decolonial practices. To start, they could either participate in the staff training previously mentioned and make the changes themselves, or hire someone to do a more in depth audit of their internet presence and show them how they could make it more inclusive and against colonial practices. Though of course, this only really has an effect if their actions follow suit.

As one can see through the coursework in this program, however, their actions do not follow the respectful to Indigenous and decolonial practices we have previously outlined. While it must be said that several courses and certifications offered by the college are controlled by outside organizations, and therefore must be held to different standards, there are plenty of opportunities in the remaining courses for the college to alter the way the information is learned in a manner that teaches decolonial ideals. Such courses include Environmental Stewardship, Adventure Tourism Business, Heritage Interpretation, Leadership and Communication, Survival Skills, Camp Skills, Entrepreneurship, and

Adventure Foundations (Westcoast Adventure College, “Courses In The Program”). These courses overall focus on either one’s relationship with the outdoors, or business. Those courses that focus on the relationship with the natural setting have almost unlimited ways in which they could be altered, from teaching traditional camp building techniques, to traditional uses for herbs and plants*. There is a large emphasis on conservation and preservation of the natural landscape, but as this is a core principle in Indigenous nations, it could easily also be a point to share Indigenous knowledge as an alternative to the colonial narrative. One example of these two main areas of learning overlapping, and still being extremely colonialist, would be the learning about Crown land. During a visit from a government official dealing with Crown land, students were taught about how to gain access to crown land for their own personal/business uses, and not once was it mentioned where crown land came from. One could argue that this shows the college’s underlying focus of business and capitalism are much greater than their reverence of the outdoors. One could also argue that it is difficult to teach tourism and business classes without delving into the world of capitalism, but capitalism is inherently colonial as has been previously mentioned, and therefore these classes are inherently colonial. They were also taught with such reverence that it was clear business was the main thing to be learned about at this school. How to build, maintain, and grow a business in a capitalist and colonial world, without trying to change any aspect of it. There are many ways in which this could be changed, but it would do no good to rid the college of its capitalist lessons unless the world in which it is sending its students is also changed, and that is beyond the scope of this essay.

As you can see, the Westcoast Adventure College lacks the basic elements required to be an institute fighting colonialism. While the safety and certification aspects of the program are controlled by outside organizations (also arguably capitalist and colonial) and cannot be changed, the college has much more control over the courses it teaches itself. The course is also very discriminatory in nature to those that are not able-bodied or physically strong, another inherently colonial aspect, and upon looking through their online presence, are a majority white crowd. While a much more in depth analysis could be done, and much more work to be done on the part of everybody involved in the college, it is clear that the Westcoast Adventure College is, at its base, a colonial institution.

*There was a one time lesson taught by a specialist on uses for local herbs and plants, but it was not Indigenous focused

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