



Home » Community

Cultural experience at Alice Lake connects students at Sea to Sky Learning Connections to traditional practice

Keili Bartlett / Squamish Chief

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Sea to Sky Learning Connections students scrape the fur off deer hides at Alice Lake, on traditional deer hunting grounds.
Photo: SUBMITTED



Sitting in a circle, nearly 20 students surround four tanned deer hides laid out in their classroom at Sea to Sky Learning Connections. They take turns proudly talking about how they worked together to make the hides, occasionally reaching out to touch their handiwork.

"One of the reasons why this is so exciting is, for probably about a century, it's the first time within our traditional lands that our children have been learning how to do this," said Charlene Williams, a culture and language worker with the Squamish Nation education department.

✧ *article continues below* ✧

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"With residential school and colonization, the art of deer hide tanning has almost been lost in our community. It's really exciting for the kids to be able to be part of bringing that back."

(1/2) In all my years of education & "tweeting", this may be the most powerful yet... "Day 2 of Deer Hide Tanning was a great success! An absolutely gorgeous day in our territory! So thankful for this amazing experience!" #nofilter #placebasedlearning @S2SLearnConnect @SeatoSkySD48 pic.twitter.com/0gxdW9uL7U
— Brayden Gordon (@brayden_gordon) January 24, 2019

Williams herself had only tanned deer hides once before. It took the students four days to learn how to tan at the Alice Lake longhouse, on traditional deer hunting grounds.

On the first day, they were given the hides from hunters. At the school, the meat was scraped off the flesh, and the hide was soaked in lime for a week.

Lowell Degroot, one of the students sitting in the circle, described how on day two they removed the deers' fur with a variety of tools to create different textures on the hides. The water in the park was shut off, so the students hauled buckets of "sacred" water from a nearby creek to soak the hides in again.

"We had to smear brains on the hide in order to soften it. A lot of them, that's what they were saying was one of the most challenging parts was getting that courage to touch the brains," Williams said with a laugh. "You've got to have a tough stomach."

But for young Heather Ford, handling brains was the best part. It felt like "picking up puke," she said. "This is the hand I used for it!"

Others preferred warming up and hanging out by the fire they built for smoking the hides.

Once the others massaged the hides, it was up to Lindsey Jones to string the material on frames with sinew, carefully adjusting them as they slowly stretched.

"Your hands definitely feel tired after," Jones said.



Source: Submitted

Now the class has to decide who they will give the outcome of their effort to, once two of the hides have been made into drums. The second pair might become medicine bags.

Traditionally, one of the students explained, when you make something for the first time, you give it away because the gift you received was the knowledge of how to make more.

There are already drums made by the students all over their classroom at Sea to Sky Learning Connections, and now they know how to get the materials for the musical instruments. The students and teachers alike want to take the learning one step further.

"Just this morning we were talking about how we need to learn how to skin a deer or actually hunt a deer," teacher Matthew Van Oostdam said. "It opens a whole new plethora of projects, like learning how to build our own bows and make our own arrows."

****Please note this story has been modified to remove an adult's name for security reasons.*

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