My Own Voice in Environmental Sustainability

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If learning about environmental sustainability was the goal, I could not come from a more privileged upbringing. My journey is not one of finding knowledge of environmental sustainability but one of finding the confidence to be a voice for it. When I was born in 1996, both my parents were full-time staff of the Pembina Institute, an Albertan environmental think tank that aimed to push governmental policy towards environmental regulation. My first weeks were spent under the desk as my parents continued to work towards educating the public on the negative impacts of green house gasses. The people my parents surrounded themselves with then continue to be part of my life, and I am proud to be able to claim Jason Kenney’s pro-oil development “War Room” has placed targets on the backs of numerous family friends.

While this childhood was rich in information about sustainability and what was needed to protect the environment, it created little space for me to create an environmental identity of my own. My parents were knowledgeable and outspoken, so I felt I had limited new information to contribute to the family discussion. Outside the home, I found it difficult to be vocal for the opposite reason I had plenty of information provided via my parents, but growing up in Red Deer, Alberta,  all my friends’ parents reliant on the oil industry for income, to speak up and share would be to risk ostracization. I don’t begrudge my peers for sticking up to their parent’s values, I do the same, but I feel Red Deer lacks healthy dialogue and few individuals would risk biting the hand that feeds them regardless of how dirty the hand.

My time at TRU gave me the space to have to a dialogue. I started my post-secondary journey in the Adventure Guide Diploma. My cohort provided a stark contrast to the individuals with whom I went to school in Alberta. The adventure students ranged greatly in nationality, age and life experiences but they were unified under a common connection to nature. The courses in the diploma also taught me something that has drastically altered the way I approach the environment. The guide diploma requires reflection on oneself, making journaling a requirement. Through my reflection, the concept of responsibility emerged. Conversations with friends over beer became discussions addressing, not whether or not  climate change was occurring, but rather the degree to which consumers or producers were responsible for curbing the emissions that exacerbated it, and the role we as guides play. The responsibility and agency of the individual became a point I continued to grapple with.  I felt complicit in a system (tourism) that profited off the bounty of nature while offering little to protect it.

It was not until I moved into the Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies (BIS) that I felt that I could start creating answers to the ethical questions I had created in the Adventure Guide Diploma. The BIS degree, by nature, is largely un-defined. This provided infinite possibility while demanding incredible passion to finish. Suddenly, I was surrounded not only by those with environmental concern, but individuals who agreed that to solve a problem as great as climate change, everyone needed to bite off a piece of work to solve this collective problem. Many of my close friends focussed their research on methods of improving their own small realities. It was in joining these people I realised I had my own unique voice. While I didn’t have the skill to square up to industry like my parents did, I had gained in-depth knowledge of sustainability and adventure tourism to tackle my small reality. I decided to spend the last two years of my degree using my reflective ability to critically examine the rafting industry, an industry that provided me summer employment during my university career. The courses I chose aimed to improve my knowledge of both tourism and the environment and my extra-curricular activities attempted to promote the balance of the two. I began to really find a voice through this process.

I would be remiss not to mention a large life event that occurred concurrently to my time at TRU that profoundly shaped my perspective on the environment. In my third year, I met my partner. Her ancestry traces back to Haida Gwaii, and through our relationship, I found a passion for intercultural approaches to environmental stewardship. The Haida people have lived sustainability since time immemorial on the West Coast, and it became apparent that to approach climate action from only a colonial perspective would be short-sighted. It was through this new perspective and the power of the AdventureU Club that I was able to bring a Haida film to the school. The instructor who oversees the club, Craig Campbell, continued to help me weave intercultural perspectives with environmental consciousness throughout the rest of my degree.

This past spring, I finished my degree and defended my thesis. I focussed on specific business practices that could be used to improve the impacts of commercial rafting on the environment. It feels like a huge accomplishment not only to speak about tourism’s responsibility to improve but to have done primary research, created knowledge and have 70 pages of my work to printed for others to read in the library. I feel that my time at TRU empowered growth in how I perceived environmental sustainability and how I view my ability contribute to positive change. Since finishing my thesis, I have continued the work I started at TRU by continuing the conversation with the owners of the companies I interviewed about how they can improve their practices. I have also contributed to the International Rafting Federation’s development of environmental and social best practices.

Moving forward I will use this knowledge and confidence to use my voice regardless of its reception. I know that there are people who share my desire to change the world in the BIS, and this knowledge helps me fight despite pushback elsewhere. I’ve recently taken a job with a Northern-Albertan First Nation and my work has allowed me to contribute to designing sustainability education and outdoor recreation programs for Indigenous youth. The nation has just invested several million into renewable resource development and it’s part of my job to ensure that generations to come understand the role this new approach to energy will play in the future. I leave this degree feeling optimistic for the world and like I truly have a place alongside my parents in the push for global environmental sustainability.