



OUTWARD BOUND CANADA  
TRAINING ACADEMY

# DIVERSE VOICES IN THE OUTDOORS

## AN ANTHOLOGY



OUTWARD BOUND  
CANADA

The Training Academy is an initiative of Outward Bound Canada.

VOLUME 2

Canada 

The Training Academy is funded in part by the Government of Canada's Sectoral Initiatives Program, as an investment into this sector's economic recovery.

## VOLUME 2



### Land Acknowledgement:

Outward Bound Canada is a national organisation and our head office lies within the shared traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnaabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat, and home today to many diverse First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. We recognize this gathering place where our programs take place is home to many past, present, and future First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people. We also acknowledge our shared colonial history. Our team is committed to reconciling relationships with the first peoples of the land. Our land acknowledgement is our declaration of our collective responsibility to this place and its peoples' histories, rights, and presence.

### Giving a Platform for Diverse Voices

Through honest essays, personal reflections, and heartfelt poetry, **Diverse Voices** explores personal relationships with Canada's outdoor spaces. The project asks writers to reflect on joy and inspiration, to share what barriers exist and why exclusion persists and provides a creative outlet for voices so often unheard.

The **Diverse Voices** anthology is an anthology of human stories, with contributions from a diverse range of communities. Our priority was to ensure contributors share their stories in ways that were authentic and honest to them, and we accepted all interpretations of 'outdoors' so as not to impose our own views.

By highlighting the ideas and experiences of individuals not traditionally heard from within the outdoor sector, it is our goal to encourage internal reflection, support and encourage sector change and prompt rich discussion to broaden our perspective.

### About Outward Bound Canada:

Outward Bound Canada (OBC) is a registered charity that builds resilience and empowers youth through experiential adventures in nature. Since 1969, more than 175,000 participants have experienced our unique high-impact programs for individuals and school & groups, many of which are youth underserved with outdoor education who need our scholarships and bursaries.

Using the outdoors as our dynamic classroom, we help thousands of young people annually to develop their physical, social, and emotional skills and environmental leadership.

Visit [www.outwardbound.ca](http://www.outwardbound.ca) to support our vision of Canada where all youth have access to high quality, impactful outdoor education experiences that help them realize their potential.

### About the Training Academy:

Launched in 2022 and funded in part by the Government of Canada's Sectoral Initiatives Program, the Outward Bound Canada Training Academy for Outdoor Professionals delivers inclusive training across Canada through an innovative combination of experiential workshops and outdoor journeys.

We strongly believe that the outdoor sector should be accessible, welcoming and diverse. By valuing and celebrating the complex and intersecting identities of our participants and staff, we are striving to build a community where everyone belongs.



**OUTWARD BOUND  
CANADA**



**OUTWARD BOUND CANADA  
TRAINING ACADEMY**

The Training Academy is an initiative of Outward Bound Canada.

**Canada**

The Training Academy is funded in part by the Government of Canada's Sectoral Initiatives Program, as an investment into this sector's economic recovery.

# CONSTANCE CHEVALIER (THEY/THEM)



*Connie is a non-binary first-generation white French immigrant who grew up in Montreal/Tiohtià:ke.*

*They have studied journalism, creative writing, translation and French teaching without ever finishing a diploma; they have hitchhiked across Argentina and Chile and ran away with the circus in Barcelona, picked cherries in BC and walked the trails of Gaspésie.*

*They have been working on and off a via ferrata guide and as a circus educator in Québec and in France for the past five years.*

*They are particularly interested in understanding and deconstructing the colonial dynamics that are at play within the outdoors sector.*

# WHAT'S THAT FEELING?

## BY CONSTANCE CHEVALIER

I've been taught  
to see nature as something  
that you either consume  
or exploit

and of course  
it was always implied  
written in the subtext  
repeated over and over again by the tv  
and my parents and  
most of the white cis men  
who dominated my experiences  
within the outdoors

that there were only certain  
specific ways  
in which I could consume (access, explore, learn)  
or exploit (work, eat, heal) in nature

because of my gender  
or my social class or  
my degree of expertise  
or whatever

there are so many reasons  
not to feel welcome in nature  
and I bear such a small fraction of them

but it is enough  
that's the thing  
it was enough to at worst discourage me  
at best make me feel uneasy  
too many times  
and it was enough  
to let me live in ignorance  
for too long

and if these obstacles were enough for me  
then i can't imagine  
what it's been like  
for everyone else

\*\*\*

sometimes I do feel like  
we still have a very long way to go  
to make nature a place of community  
and inclusion  
to turn it back into  
what it has always been

but sometimes I also feel like  
something is beginning  
to happen  
and like I can be  
a part of it  
(and that's  
the best feeling in the world)

I've been asked to provide some context to my poem.  
Disclaimer: I struggle to express my ideas concretely and rationally. What follows is me trying.

#### THINGS I'VE EXPERIENCED PERSONALLY:

Disempowering gender-roles within my family dynamics in the outdoors as a child. Little to no outdoor education due to a lack of parental knowledge; financial means and time; growing up in a big city. Machism, sexism, colonialism, queerphobia and gatekeeping (as well as a sweet lot of gaslighting when bringing up those issues) within the professional and recreational outdoor industry as a young adult.

#### THINGS I'D LIKE TO CHANGE:

Affordable and reliable public transportation to nature areas for the un-motorized folks. Ensuring free/subsidized educational workshops and training programs for marginalized folks (exactly like OBC Training Academy). Re-centralization of Indigenous perspectives. Land back.

#### WHERE I'D LIKE TO SEE THINGS GO:

Less 'cis-het-able-upper-class white male explorers' as the only valid presence in nature; less valuation of 'toughness', 'achievements' and other toxic masculinity injunctions in the outdoors.

More representation for queer, BIPOC, neurodivergent and disabled working class folks in positions of 'power' (as teachers, organizers, facilitators, guides, etc), and a consequent change of paradigm in how we relate to nature.



# P. SATYA JEHMAN



*Satya is a freelance writer and editor, currently accepting new projects. Within this, her focus is the study of yoga, self inquiry, holistic health, self-help, education, women, social justice, diversity/equity/inclusion, Indigenous perspectives, trauma-informed, sustainability, memoir and travel.*

*She is also an instructor for Outward Bound Canada's Training Academy.*

*Satya also facilitates traditional roots of yoga retreats, workshops and ceremonies in the Yogic/Vedic lineage of her ancestors.*

*Learn more about these offerings via the links below.*

*@vedic\_priestess\_temple (Instagram)*

*@vedicpriestess temple108 (Facebook)*

*[www.vedicpriestess temple.com](http://www.vedicpriestess temple.com)*

*Satya acknowledges and expresses gratitude for living on the lands of the Hul'q'umi'num' and SENĆOŦEN (Coast Salish) speaking peoples (also known by its colonial name, Salt Spring Island, BC).*

# BEING IN 'RIGHT RELATIONSHIP' WITH THE LAND & WATER

BY P. SATYA JEHMAN

I was born and raised in the land of the Squamish Nation and grew up with Indigenous kids from the reserve in my elementary school classroom. I could relate to them because their skin was similar to the colour of mine, and we both looked a little different than the sea of white (Eurocentric) bodies in our school and community. Also, we both came from cultures that had been colonized for 200-400 years, as my ancestors were from north India—and that connected us at a cellular level. We share intergenerational trauma and we live in a world where the awareness of that is not prevalent.

Indigenous folks are still marginalized in all the ways. I don't have to sit here and list them because it is blatant, and me listing them here feels like playing a broken record over and over again; still screaming for consideration, respect and justice. But what I can do here is offer an invitation to help bridge this gap when it comes to how we can show up in a good way, both on the land and on the water. A way that respects and considers Indigenous folks and their colonial histories on these stolen lands, and the marginalization that they continue to face. I am inspired to share this because I have been in many outdoor settings as both a participant and facilitator where I have witnessed time and again a lack of consideration, respect and compassion for the Indigenous peoples of the land we happen to be on. This was reflected in the ways that I list below. Being a BIPOC person, empathy for other BIPOC folks is embedded in me, and I am always inspired to speak out against injustices that I witness and/or experience, because I can relate to them deeply as someone who has been on the receiving end time and again.

That being said, I believe that, as outdoor leaders and participants (whether on a multi-day journey or a tour that is simply a couple of hours), it is important to ask ourselves, "How can we be in *Right Relationship* with the land and water that we are on?"

How can we address the colonialism that makes our outdoor interests and hobbies possible?



## 1. PRACTICE LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS IN A GOOD WAY

We can practice land acknowledgments that give ample time and space to recognize the colonial history of the land and water that we are on—to honour and express gratitude for the land and water, and to recognize what a privilege it is to be on the land and water. It is important to be aware of the risk of land acknowledgments simply becoming performative. So, we can ask ourselves, *“How can we go deeper with facilitating a land acknowledgment?”*

We can invite local Indigenous folks to carry out the land acknowledgement if possible, and to share their stories of being colonized and/or of intergenerational trauma, if they are ok with this. We can also invite them to share the creation stories of the land and water, if they feel it is appropriate.

As outdoor leaders, we can take a land acknowledgement workshop facilitated by an Indigenous person in the region we are in, to learn how to facilitate an authentic land acknowledgment from the heart that is integral and respectful to the land, water and its original peoples.

There is protocol to being on the land and water. We can approach Indigenous folks in a good way and learn what this protocol is, and follow it diligently out of respect for them, their colonial histories of having their land stolen, and to respect the land and water.

## 2. PRACTICE TRADITIONAL INTRODUCTIONS

Outdoor leaders can consider introducing themselves in a traditional way that honours their own roots, as well as the roots of the land they were born on and presently reside on.

## 3. ADVOCATE FOR ADEQUATE TRAINING IN HOW TO WORK WITH INDIGENOUS FOLKS

This may include training on decolonization, intergenerational trauma, privilege and entitlement, social-emotional skills training, and diversifying staff to include BIPOC folks. They will come if they are being represented—if they can see themselves in the leaders of organizations, and not just in a tokenistic way where there are a few diverse photos on the organization’s website, with no deeper reflection of that diversity in the staffing and programming. It would be effective to have a BIPOC advocate on each journey and tour, who can support the BIPOC participants specifically. BIPOC folks feel comfortable and open around people who look like them, and with whom they have shared experiences.

Outdoor leaders can research and share the Indigenous history of the land and water they are on with their participants. The history of colonization should be a part of outdoor journeys and outdoor leadership training. This should extend to tour operators and participants.



Create programming that is in *Right Relationship* to the Indigenous peoples of the land. Invite Indigenous folks to be a part of the development and facilitation of outdoor programs, tours, etc.

#### 4. GIVE BACK TO THE LAND AND WATER

This is an invitation for outdoor leaders, participants, tour operators and their participants to give back, and not just take from or collect, an experience from the land and water.

How are we showing up on the land and water? What are we giving back to the land and water? Because we are receiving so much, we can donate to causes that support Indigenous issues in the area.

What actions can we take now to repair the harm already caused due to racism and colonialism? We are receiving so much from being on stolen lands. How can we give back?

We can offer land reparations. We can research reputable Indigenous-led organizations in the regions we are journeying and touring through, to donate to. These could be local bands, councils, community organizations, land and water conservation and stewardship initiatives, etc. We can also invite conversations with local Indigenous folks in the region and find out what they need support with.

We can also ask ourselves, “How do we take our experience of being in the outdoors, the wilderness, the wild (whatever you call it) into our day-to-day life? How does our experience out in nature integrate and translate into our daily living? How can we share this knowledge of being in *Right*

*Relationship* with the land and water with those around us, in our communities and in our work?

How do we take the wisdom of the land and the elements—including its colonial history—back to our workplace and in our community conversations?

We are gifted with so much from the land, but what are we going to give back? We need to build a healthy, sustainable relationship based on reciprocity; both receiving and offering. We must learn how to practice reconciliation in our daily lives. This is an invitation to be authentic in a way that we can be in *Right Relationship* with the land and water.

Specifically, it is important that we are not practicing tokenism, but authentically being in *Right Relationship* with Indigenous folks that is respectful and long-lasting; ensuring that we are being good outdoor leaders, participants, and tourism operators, in a way that is empathetic and compassionate to Indigenous folks and their colonial histories. By doing this, we are practicing being in *Right Relationship* with the land and water in a good way.

“  
KNOWING YOU LOVE THE EARTH CHANGES YOU. IT  
ACTIVATES YOUR WILL TO DEFEND, PROTECT AND CELEBRATE  
IT. BUT WHEN WE FEEL THE EARTH LOVES US IN RETURN,  
THE FEELING TRANSFORMS THE RELATIONSHIP FROM A  
ONE-WAY STREET TO A SACRED BOND. YOU DO NOT WANT  
TO HARM WHAT LOVES YOU. THE ULTIMATE RECIPROCITY;  
LOVING AND BEING LOVED IN RETURN.  
”

-Robin Wall Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass

# EJ LANGE

(HE/HIM)



*EJ is passionate about making the outdoors more accessible and inclusive.*

*He is the General Manager and School Director at the Jericho Beach Kayak Centre in Vancouver, BC, where he loves working, playing and learning with a fantastic team of 60 seasonal staff members.*

*He volunteers his time with Paddle Canada where he is the BC Director; serves on the Sea Kayaking Program Development committee; and is the initiator and founding member of the EDI committee.*

*EJ does not drink coffee or like anything coffee flavoured—and is fully aware that this is highly controversial. He recently started learning how to play the drums (which he has wanted to do since he was a child) and, while he may never be great at it, he absolutely loves it. In completely unrelated news, he has been told that he makes a pretty legendary cranberry cheesecake!*

*EJ lives with his partner and three kids in Vancouver, BC. When not being on the water as part of his job, you can still find him on the water with his friends or family.*

# OUT THERE: EJ'S STORY

BY EJ LANGE

The outdoors were my refuge. As a kid and teenager I felt like something didn't fit, like something wasn't right, but I couldn't name it. I was fortunate to be able to access the outdoors, to spend time hiking in the woods and sleeping under the stars. This was my happy place, my refuge, the place where I could just be.

It took me until I was 36 years old to come out to myself (and shortly after to the world) as trans.

I was always drawn to work in outdoor education, but I ended up working in traditional corporate desk-based jobs. Taking the bus to work in Vancouver and looking out at the ocean and the mountains on my commute, I was frustrated that I was going to sit behind a desk when what I really wanted to do was “to be out there.” So I started working as a part-time kayaking instructor in the evenings and weekends. I called it my “fun job,” but I also had my “real job.”

After working in a particularly toxic work environment, I was ready to give up on a traditional career and when—in 2018—the opportunity came up to run the kayaking school at Ecomarine in Vancouver (where I was working part-time as an instructor), I took it. I also took on the role of Operations Manager and, when Ecomarine closed down, I worked with the wonderful folks at Deep Cove Kayak to re-launch the location as the Jericho Beach Kayak Centre; taking on the role of the General Manager and School Director.

Life was good. I had a great job, finally in the outdoor industry, as I had always wanted; a fantastic community and friends; a wonderful partner and three amazing kids.

In the Fall of 2020, I came out to myself (and shortly after to my community) as a queer trans guy. I remember the first time I said the words “I am trans.” It was in the Fall of 2020 on a kayaking trip with a good friend. We had a great day on the water, challenging ourselves in some rough conditions, connecting with other paddlers and watching wildlife.

“  
WE WERE CAMPING ON A SMALL ISLAND, IT WAS A  
BEAUTIFUL EVENING, THE WATER WAS LITERALLY GLOWING  
WITH BIOLUMINESCENCE ALL AROUND US, AND WITHOUT  
PLANNING IT OR EVEN SAYING IT IN MY HEAD BEFORE, I SAID  
IT OUT LOUD: “I AM TRANS.” I WAS IN THE OUTDOORS, MY  
SAFE SPACE, MY REFUGE.  
”

The moment I came out, memories came flooding back, and in retrospect I wonder to myself why it took me so long to realize I was trans. Friends have told me that maybe it was because my subconscious self was waiting until I was ready and in a safe space in my life to do so. I guess I was in that safe space now...

Unfortunately, often the outdoors—in particular, organized outdoor activities—are not a safe and welcoming space for marginalized communities including the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. I consider myself incredibly lucky and fortunate to have a community in the outdoor industry that has been so accepting and supportive of me. I know this is not the case for everybody.

While a lot has changed over the past few years, and amazing individuals with diverse backgrounds and perspectives (like the wonderful people whose stories are featured in this book) are now actively changing the outdoor industry, a lot of the industry continues to be dominated by white cis men.

As a queer trans guy of European descent, my presentation is that of “just another white man.” I regularly experience how what I say now gets perceived, acknowledged and respected more than it was 5 years ago when I was female-presenting. I have experienced discrimination working in the outdoor industry, both when I was female-presenting as well as a trans person. While this is infuriating and disappointing, I am fortunate to have a lot of privilege (I am white, able-bodied, have economic means, had access to a good education, and—now—am male-presenting). So I am trying to use the privilege that my male presentation gives me to try to do my part in trying to make the outdoor industry and organized outdoor activities more inclusive by working towards justice, accessibility, equity, diversity and inclusion.



My goal is to make the outdoors inclusive and accessible to everybody. So, in the last few years, I have worked and will continue working to educate myself, to listen and to learn. I am so grateful for all those who have shared their stories, who (knowingly or not) have taught me, who have challenged me and have helped me gain a deeper understanding of the true diversity and beauty that everybody brings to this world and to our community.

I am working towards creating more opportunities and safe spaces for communities that have traditionally been marginalized in the outdoors. I do this through actively creating a positive, encouraging and enabling work environment for my team of about 60 staff members. I am a mentor and a mentee; I am a coach while also being a learner myself; I try to commit myself and support my team in continuously learning, listening and improving. We all learn from each other and with each other, and we grow together.

As an organization, Jericho Beach Kayak School strives to provide accessibility in our programs, to support our participants and to encourage different user groups to join us. As of 2024, we are running various programs (often at sliding scale pricing) specifically for: Women, BIPOC folks, 2SLGBTQIA+ folks, with programming in different languages, and we continue to expand on these offerings.

To try to reach beyond my own community and geographic area and to contribute to systemic changes and education, I also joined the Board of Directors of Paddle Canada (the national organization for recreational paddling and paddlesports instruction) in the Fall of 2021 and am the first openly trans board member.

My vision for the future is an outdoors where everybody can be accepted, welcomed and celebrated for who they are. I was lucky that the outdoors were my happy place, my safe space, and that I have a supportive community. I hope that through my work I can contribute to making the outdoors safer and more inclusive for everybody; and that, together, we can work to break down both conscious and unconscious biases and barriers. That the outdoors will soon be a space where everybody can thrive.



# ARIANA LOUWE

(SHE/HER)



*Born and raised in Vancouver, Ariana has always lived in a city, but never far away from nature. Family camping trips on Vancouver Island sparked a lifelong curiosity and enthusiasm for wildlife and the outdoors. After obtaining a B.A. in Philosophy, Ariana entered a career in the federal public service.*

*During her eight years serving the strategic communications team at Environment and Climate Change Canada, she developed a deep appreciation for everyone working to preserve and protect the environment in Canada. Motivated by a desire to spend more time in nature, Ariana went back to school to study Outdoor Recreation Management at Capilano University, where she currently studies. She is also working seasonally as a sea kayak guide and instructor at Jericho Beach in Vancouver. After graduation, Ariana hopes to share her love of the outdoors with others in her community who face barriers to mainstream recreational opportunities.*

# TAKING A CHANCE ON A CAREER OUTDOORS

BY ARIANA LOUWE

When I was 25 years old, I was diagnosed with Relapsing Remitting Multiple Sclerosis or RRMS, an incurable autoimmune disease that damages the nerves of the brain and spinal cord. I still remember reading the brochure I was given on the day of my diagnosis that started, “Multiple Sclerosis is a progressively disabling disease.” Even though my neurologist was fantastic and reassuring about my prognosis, when I left her office that day, I couldn’t help but feel overwhelmed with anxiety. I had always been active, playing soccer, skiing, running, dancing, doing yoga, and going on my first few backpacking trips. Now I had to grapple with the idea that one day soon I might not be physically capable of doing all the things I wanted to. I felt severely limited in what I could take on, especially when it came to making big decisions like my career path.

I had just started a salaried office job in the federal public service. So, thankfully I had access to the medical benefits I now needed like prescription drugs, physiotherapy, massage therapy and psychotherapy. Not to mention, benefits like paid sick time, paid time off for my many medical appointments, and the ability to work from home as needed. MS can cause unpredictable flare-ups of symptoms like fatigue, brain fog, muscle weakness, and other physical ailments that can prevent me from working. I couldn’t imagine managing that without paid sick time and extended health insurance.

For years, I gratefully relied on these benefits to help me get healthy again. I found a medical treatment that really worked for me and, by appearances now, you’d never guess that I have a serious medical condition. There’s no doubt that I’m incredibly fortunate to have responded to the treatment so well, and to have enjoyed these past years of good health.



Another huge part of my recovery has been removing stress from my life and staying active. Yoga has been a big part of that journey, and so has spending time outdoors. I've learned that there's more to health than just the absence of illness; it takes actively fostering wellness. These days I get a profound sense of peace when I spend time in nature, even if it's just while taking my dog to the park. There's nothing like being outdoors to focus on the present moment and let go of life's stresses, and I love sharing that with people. Throughout my journey with MS I've continued to pursue spending time outdoors and being active. Not only do I believe it to be important for my health, but it just makes me happy. I began to wonder how I could recentre my life so that the outdoors was a bigger part of it, but I would often come up against the practical difficulties in the way of a career change. It seemed too irresponsible to walk away from the benefits and stability that my office job afforded me. I felt tethered to my job even though I was interested in pursuing other passions.

“  
EVENTUALLY, THE DRAW OF A CAREER OUTDOORS  
OUTWEIGHED MY FEARS OF IT BEING INCOMPATIBLE WITH  
MY MS. ”

I took an educational leave from my job and enrolled in Capilano University's Outdoor Recreation Management diploma. I started building up my skills and pursuing a job working as a sea kayaking guide and instructor. I have loved spending so much time outside in nature, especially out on the water kayaking. It feels like I'm finding out where I belong, and I can really envision a future for myself in outdoor recreation. So far, my health has been great and I haven't felt limited by my disease much at all. I can only hope that this

good fortune lasts and my body continues to cooperate with my plans.

However, there are still some major challenges for someone with a chronic illness in this industry. Medical appointments and treatments are much harder to fit into my schedule as a kayak instructor than they were as a public servant; and when my symptoms do flare up, it's harder to manage a work day at this job than in the office. I had to be brave in accepting a position without extended health insurance or paid sick leave. I know that it's possible for my disease to worsen and take away my earning potential for a time. So, even though I love working out on the water everyday, it takes a high risk tolerance on my part to do this work and I wouldn't fault anyone with a chronic illness for thinking that this industry isn't meant for them.

There's not much visibility of chronic illnesses or disabilities in the world of guiding and outdoor recreation. I usually choose not to disclose my diagnosis in work or education settings at the risk of it being misunderstood and affecting my professional brand. However, maybe it's time to be more vocal about my health challenges so that others might feel more welcome in these spaces or seen in their struggles. I hope that the outdoor community can become more accommodating to not just guests with health challenges, but employees also. Perhaps, maybe one day soon, people like me won't have to be in the precarious position of working without the supports that they need. I do feel incredibly lucky to do the work that I do, and I'm very happy and proud of what I've accomplished so far. I just hope that it won't always feel like such a gamble.

# CARLOS NEWTON

(HE/HIM)



*Carlos Newton is a renowned figure in mixed martial arts (MMA) history. Known for his diverse skills and strategic acumen, he began his career in the late 1990s and quickly rose to prominence in the sport. In 2001, Newton became the UFC Welterweight champion – he was the first Canadian ever to hold a UFC title. Beyond his UFC career, he competed in various MMA organizations worldwide, leaving a lasting impact on the sport's evolution. He continues to mentor young fighters and advocate for fair competition and compensation for fighters. After retiring from professional sport, Newton founded a design and construction business; one of his first projects was a home for seniors in Newmarket, Ontario. For his newest venture, Carlos will turn his eye for design on campervan conversions. He hopes to make van life accessible, inclusive and fun for everyone.*

# OUTSIDER IN THE OUTDOORS

## BY CARLOS NEWTON

I was born in Anguilla, which (for those of you who don't know) is a British overseas territory, and a teeny, tiny, Caribbean island that no one had heard of in the 1980's before I came to Canada at the age of 8. I was lucky to have grown up in a diverse community in northwest Toronto, but that didn't stop the teachers at my elementary school from holding me back a school year because they couldn't understand my accent. As an 8 year old, I didn't have the words to express how deeply that hurt me. Being a year older than my classmates made me feel even more like an outsider than my accent did.

The rest of my life in a nutshell? Owning the “outsider” moniker.

People who know me well will often hear me say “they’ll never see me coming”. I don’t make a point of it, but I have routinely found myself existing as the only Black person in the room. In 1993, the year I got hired as a lifeguard for the City of North York, there were exactly three Black lifeguards on the entire staff. The city management decided to place all three of us at the same pool for the whole summer. What about my outdoorsy adventure life? I had to borrow gear the first time I went snowboarding. Coming from an immigrant-experience meant leisure time was viewed mostly as “a waste of time.” We forget that escaping urban life is such a privilege – to have the time and resources to spend hours

away in the outdoors; birding, rafting, cooking on an open fire. In those days, cost was prohibitive. Mine was a “*why-would-I-pay-money-to-live-without-electricity?*” household.

But that was then. Now I am a comfortable middle class person who owns a business and has a fancy championship belt in storage. Just before the pandemic, I rented a camper van and took a trip out to Tofino with a friend. When we rolled into campsites with the van, we both had a general feeling like we weren't doing it right (like we needed to be “less conspicuous), but she didn't want to ask anyone for help in case it made us look like we didn't know what we were doing (umm... we didn't!).

“  
NO ONE HAD TO CALL ME A WEIRDO AND TELL ME I  
WASN'T WELCOME – MY LIVED EXPERIENCE HAD ALREADY  
DONE THAT. THE SUBTLE WAYS THAT RACIALIZED PEOPLE  
ARE SOCIALIZED TO STICK TO CERTAIN SPACES AND KEEP  
CERTAIN COMPANY IS THE RESULT OF UNCONSCIOUS BIASES  
THAT SHUTS DOWN OPPORTUNITIES FOR DIVERSE VOICES  
TO BE HEARD.  
”

All the Black lifeguards at one pool? Can't decipher my British English? No helmet wide enough to cover my hair? What other barriers are out there? As a person of colour, the cost of having to blaze trails and modify everything because your norm isn't *THE* norm simply outweighs the benefit of doing the thing in the first place. That is probably the number one reason why people like me aren't enjoying the outdoors as much as they should.



In 2021, I bought an old motorhome and started using it on weekends. I just loved the freedom to be everywhere I wanted to “be” and to be able to stop at any time to take a nap – because I am also a middle aged man. I started imagining this as a lifestyle, not only for myself, but for others who, like me, haven’t always felt welcome or invited in outdoor spaces. I thought about how much easier it would have been to prepare for fights if I had had a camper van in which to cook and sleep between training sessions. You don’t actually know what you are missing until you get out there.

My campervan company was born out of these related ideas: freedom, accessibility, and naps. My hope is that when people who identify with people like me see me making it look easy, the fire will catch. *They won’t see us coming.*



# HERSHARON SANDHU

(SHE/THEY)



*Hersharon Sandhu is a writer, community organizer, and outdoor enthusiast who believes that nature should be accessible to all. Born in Mumbai and raised in Edmonton, she brings a unique perspective to her work, blending her cultural heritage with her passion for Canada's wild spaces. Through storytelling, she explores the intersections of nature, community, and belonging; hoping to inspire others to embrace the outdoors without limitations.*

*Hersharon has over eight years of experience in community engagement and project management and is a dedicated leader in fostering inclusive spaces. When she's not on the trail, you'll find her hosting tabletop gaming sessions, building connections, and publishing her next story on [www.hrshrn.com](http://www.hrshrn.com).*

# BREATH BY BREATH: FINDING BALANCE AND BELONGING IN THE OUTDOORS

BY HERSHARON SANDHU

The trail ahead stretched steep and winding; its rough terrain twisting through towering evergreens, patches of granite, and scattered wildflowers that bobbed in the breeze. I tightened the straps on my pack, feeling the weight settle across my shoulders, pressing against my back. My breath was already shallow, a familiar tightness building up in my chest. In a world where mountain-ready bodies often dominate outdoor culture, my wider hips and slower pace don't quite fit the mold, but each step forward staked my claim for the right to explore, enjoy and belong here.

In 2020, after my exercise-induced asthma diagnosis, I finally understood why hiking always felt like an uphill battle both physically and mentally. Even the most straightforward path felt filled with invisible hurdles. While others were content walking for hours on end, I needed frequent breaks to catch my breath, drink a large gulp of water, or fiddle with my pack or pants that were falling off my body. Finding gear that worked with my shape has been nearly as tough as summiting the peaks I've loved over the past 16 years of adventuring in the Rocky Mountains. These experiences have left me feeling like I just don't fit in. The industry's culture often values speed, endurance and technical gear over a slower, more personal connection with nature.

The challenge of fitting in began shortly after I immigrated to Edmonton, AB, from Mumbai, India, at age 12. Inspired by the stories my welcome-buddy shared with me about making lean-to's and playing "Survival" with fellow campers, I joined my middle school's outdoor pursuits program. As I grew older and out of my clothes and backpack, I quickly realized that outdoor stores were no longer designed to fit and support my body and experience. Over the years, I have made-do by shopping in the men's section and tailoring clothes to better fit my shape. Employing this tactic of customizing clothing and patching old gear has worked well for me, but still leaves me feeling like I don't quite fit in with my peers as we hike together.

“  
ON THE TRAIL, EVEN WHILE PANTING AND TUGGING AT THE STRAPS OF MY EVER-LOOSENING BACKPACK, I FEEL A DETERMINATION THAT CONNECTS ME TO NATURE'S BEAUTY AND CALM.”

My love for the mountains has taught me resilience; a value that we should nurture rather than enforce on others. I envision a world where most people – of all body types, backgrounds, and abilities – can access the transformative experience of outdoor adventure without the added barriers of inadequate gear or feeling out of place. Workshops on 'How to Adventure in the Rockies' and 'Picking the Right Backpack' taught in community leagues would help to bridge the gap for new immigrant families and those looking to engage their children in outdoor activities. Diversifying the outdoor industry is likely to lead to more innovation; clothing

that fits all bodies, adventure-ready wheelchairs to help everyone summit mountains, and knowledge shared with the community to empower more people to engage in their right to explore, enjoy and belong.

Before my diagnosis, I cursed my legs and lungs for being unable to keep up with the rest of my group. My frequent breaks and pace left me feeling guilt for slowing the group down, rather than enjoying the journey up the mountain. Since 2020, I've grown to accept that a slower pace lets me see details others miss; like the shy bloom of a wildflower or the delicate intricacies of a spider weaving its web in the afternoon light. I'm grateful that I can enjoy these small wonders instead of constantly pushing towards the summit.

As I've come to find my place on these trails, I recognize that my journey is just one among countless others that has traversed these paths for generations. Indigenous peoples have a deep, enduring relationship with this land; one that

began long before settlers arrived. Their stewardship and cultural practices have shaped these ecosystems, and it's vital to honour their history by educating both newcomers and seasoned adventurers about the land we walk upon.

True inclusivity in the outdoors must acknowledge and integrate Indigenous voices and wisdom, as they are central to the stewardship of these natural spaces. The responsibility for sharing these stewardship practices lies in the hands of non-indigenous settlers. A few ideas include organizing guided hikes that share how to truly leave no trace, workshops that promote learning the history of the lands we walk upon, and facilitating communities to develop a personal land acknowledgment.



This is the change the outdoor industry needs – a shift toward accessibility and inclusivity over competition. Making space for diverse abilities and experiences not only invites more people into nature, but it also transforms how we relate to these spaces. For me, nature has been a source of grounding and resilience, and I believe it can offer that same healing to others; provided they feel welcome and equipped to explore it.

Reflecting on what a truly inclusive outdoor industry could look like, I see a community that celebrates all who seek connection with nature. I imagine trails filled with people of all body types, abilities and paces, and families who have never felt welcome in these spaces alongside newcomers experiencing their first taste of adventure without the fear of not belonging. If outdoor brands invested in inclusive gear design, portrayed a wider range of diversity in their marketing, and cultivated a culture that values connection over competition, we could foster a community where everyone would feel free to explore.

“ MY DREAM IS TO CONTRIBUTE TO THIS CHANGE BY BUILDING A CAREER IN ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT. ”

My dream is to contribute to this change by building a career in environmental conservation and community engagement. Although my idea for using traditional Indian wear as inspiration for outdoor clothing is still in its early stages, my commitment to environmental equity for outdoor spaces

has never been more clear. Nature is for everyone, and I am dedicated to making this vision a reality.

My journey with nature has shown me that true inclusivity means valuing diverse perspectives and empowering people of all backgrounds to find belonging in nature. As I pursue my next steps, I'm committed to bringing my leadership skills and vision of inclusivity to the work that I do; creating pathways for others to experience the outdoors without limitations.

To those reading, I hope my story encourages you to look differently at the trails, mountains and rivers you love. Whether you're a seasoned explorer or a newcomer, we each have the power to help shape what we currently have into a more inclusive outdoor culture. Together, we can grow a movement that reflects nature's beauty, diversity and resilience in the communities we build, and ensure outdoor spaces are welcoming to all.

If you need a hand in organizing an interactive workshop or an informative guided hike, send me an email at [hersharon.sandhu@gmail.com](mailto:hersharon.sandhu@gmail.com); we can swap community organization tactics.

# LESLIE SOLOMONIAN

(SHE/THEY)



*Leslie Solomonian lives, works and plays in the Great Lakes region. She is the descendent of settlers on this Land, and seeks to honour the Dish with One Spoon treaty that covers this area.*

*Leslie is a mother, a doctor and professor of naturopathic medicine; an author; and a human who aims to leave the world better than she found it.*

# HEALING THROUGH THE OUTDOORS

BY LESLIE SOLOMONIAN

Awareness of being part of nature is a core part of my identity and promoting that perspective is a big part of my mission. I have spent my lifetime exploring the outdoors under my own propulsion—by bike, foot, or canoe. As a doctor and professor of naturopathic medicine, I have always sought to emphasize and make accessible the reciprocal benefits between human and planetary health. Environmental justice advocacy forms a large component of my activities, both academic and on the street, and in my garden. Life has been meaningful and rich.

On a beautiful autumn day in 2022, I was hit by a truck while biking to work. Life changed in an instant.

Thanks to good health, good luck, and a good helmet, I walked away from the crash with my body largely intact. However, my brain was injured. Nearly two years later, it is unclear if I can expect much more improvement. I have been unable to continue with the volume and intensity of physical, cognitive or social activity that I was accustomed to. With lawsuits and disability claims looming over me, I find myself uncertain of what the second half of my life will hold—personally or professionally.

In the midst of this confusion, I became aware of the Outward Bound Canada Training Academy. I knew of Outward Bound's terrific reputation in the outdoor industry, and I was impressed by the effort to fill perceived gaps. Being largely unable to work, I had the time to participate, but I wasn't sure if, (a) I checked enough "diversity" boxes to be eligible, and (b) if I had the capacity to do the program. But this middle-aged, over-educated white mother of two with a brain injury was offered a spot.

Although I had plenty of previous tripping experience, the journey was the first expedition I had taken since the crash. I was worried about holding the group back, and there were certainly moments where my symptoms flared up due to the complexity of the moment. Transparency and honesty—with myself, the facilitators, and my peers—was helpful to ensure all our needs were met.

“  
THERE'S NO HIDING IN THE WILDERNESS. IT WAS EVIDENT  
THAT THE MOTION OF EFFICIENT PADDLING WAS DEEPLY  
WIRED IN MY MIND AND BODY, AND THAT MY BRAIN IS HAPPIER  
AND HEALTHIER BEING IMMERSSED IN NATURE. IT WAS ALSO  
EVIDENT THAT I COULD NO LONGER POWER THROUGH  
PORTAGES, OR COPE WITH COMPLEX RIVER NAVIGATION,  
OR ADD TO COLLABORATIVE DECISION-MAKING WITHOUT A  
SIGNIFICANT NEED TO RECHARGE.”

It was a raw and humbling exercise in vulnerability and community; both are gifts in this world that needs so much healing.

The framing of the Training Academy also allowed space for that vulnerability and healing to occur. The foundational domains that anchor the program strongly parallel the work that I have done and continue to do in the realm of anti-oppression. By elevating diversity, equity, inclusivity and justice; by emphasizing Indigenous perspectives of Land and our reciprocal relationship with it; by approaching facilitation and coaching with a trauma-informed lens, Outward Bound Canada's Training Academy is leading the way in the changes that are needed to transform the outdoor industry in Canada—one that was initially built on a foundation of colonialism, militarism and patriarchy. By actively creating space for folks who have not historically been at the forefront of the industry, an opportunity exists for different worldviews to emerge and re-shape how we collectively relate to the more-than-human world. By removing obstacles and empowering people of varying degrees of lived experience

and ability to “be” in the outdoors, there is hope for a gentler, more collaborative and reconciliatory relationship. This too is a necessary component of planetary healing.

I'm still unsure what the future holds. Lawsuits and disability claims still loom. I can't do as much, and so I have to be more discerning of how I use (and protect) my limited energy. Participating in this program showed me that I don't necessarily need to practice as a “doctor” in order to promote health and the well-being of people and the planet. Centering my reciprocal relationship with the natural world—of which I am a part—is a priority. Advocating for Planetary Health for all is a priority. Whether that's as a guide who brings a health lens, as a doctor who uses nature as medicine, as a teacher who co-leads with the natural world, or simply as a human who does her best to leave the world a little better than she found it.



# URVIL JAMES VILLARUEL

(HE/HIM)



*A Martial Artist, Yogi and veteran world traveller, I currently work for Outward Bound Canada's Training Academy for Outdoor Professionals as its Marketing Specialist. I joined the Training Academy during its early inception in 2022 because I believed that it would be a meaningful opportunity to help broaden diversity within the outdoor sector. By enhancing representation within the outdoor sector, we can further build a more meaningful and understanding sector where all walks of life can live, work and play.*



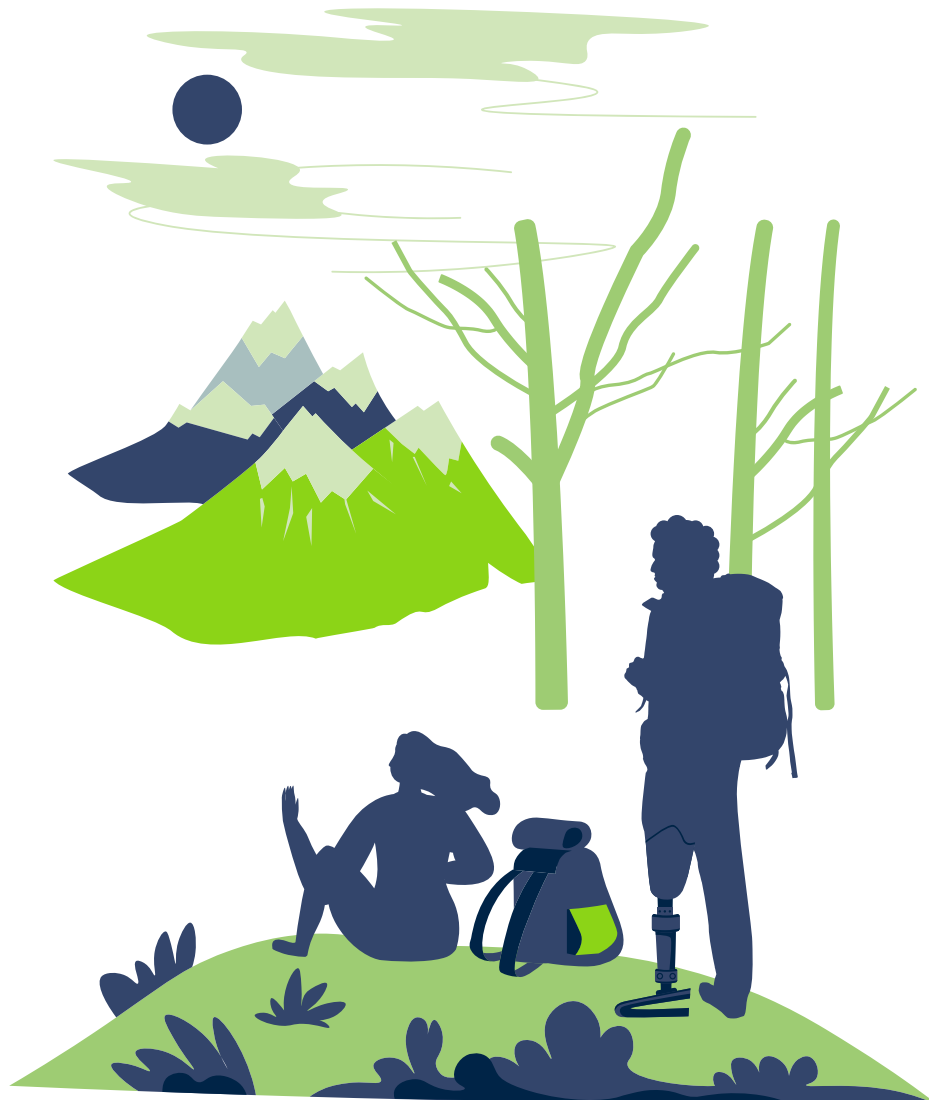
# A CATALYST FOR ADVENTURE

BY URVIL JAMES VILLARUEL

I grew up in Port Union, right at the border of Toronto and Pickering in Scarborough, Ontario, Canada. Being located next to the Rouge National Park and the Port Union Beach (and now the Port Union Waterfront) meant that I had a lot of access to nature.

Growing up in that area, I recall a strong sense of being different from my peers starting from Kindergarten up until around Grade 6; often being asked “what’s a Filipino?” to which I didn’t really have an answer for. It wasn’t until Grade 6 that immigration had really taken off in my area and more diverse students had joined the school (and thankfully, more Filipinos).

At home, it was a different story. A lot of my aunts and uncles had immigrated to Canada when I was very young, and that meant my household was filled with love, community and (most of all) culture. Thankfully, outside of school, my street was starting to fill up with more and more first-generation children and playing outside was a way for us to not only learn more about life, but also learn how to get along with different races and cultures. I would often spend time inside each of my friends’ homes, being immersed in different norms dissimilar to my own; getting to know Indian culture, Guyanese culture, Iranian culture, Jamaican culture and, yes, even “Canadian” culture (though that’s starting to get redefined as immigration continues to this day).



When not outside playing basketball, manhunt, or wrestling my friends just for fun, or inside watching movies and playing video games in these diverse households, my friends and I were always out in nature trying to see how far we could push our limits for adventure—and this is where the fun (and real learning) began!

Adventures to Twyn Rivers in the Rouge first consisted of taking the traditional hiking routes around the park. Now, if you've ever been to Port Union, you know what a mission it is getting to Twyn Rivers in the first place; biking down (and eventually back up) such a steep hill as a young child can be pretty harrowing—and without cell phones at the time to save us in case of an emergency, it can be even more so. After getting bored with the traditional hiking routes, we would often go “off trail” just to see how daring we could make the day's adventure. There was even a time while off trail when I was practicing how to shoot photography that we encountered a pack of coyotes and took off running (perhaps that's why they tell you to “always stay on the trail”).

When not adventuring through the Rouge, we would spend time at the beach and even try taking the (at that time, “less defined”) Waterfront Trail from the Port Union Waterfront all the way to the Pickering Waterfront; further immersing ourselves in nature without a GPS to guide us.

All that being said, it's really those adventures while out in nature that really helped shape my sense of adventure to go out and see things beyond the confines of the urban-park setting, and even beyond Canada itself. To date, I've

ventured to 20 different countries, 16 as a photo-blogger, and I'm always trying to add more countries to my list; all of this, stemming from my time out exploring in nature.

I started my career as both a martial arts instructor and freelance marketer just so I could continue these adventures. However, there came a point where it was time to “settle down” and I decided that I would pursue things that provided a deep, positive impact towards things that I cared about. This is what led me to my first professional job working for Ontario's Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation, and eventually Outward Bound Canada, and now OBC's Training Academy. I felt that, out of all of the things that I could do, working for a non-profit in support of nature, which gave so much to me, was my way of giving back to it.

Now, I didn't grow up camping extensively or am a camping-aficionado; nor do I particularly like camping in my free time (as my friends who love to camp will often make fun of me for, especially because I work in the outdoor sector). It's not that I never went as a child, I did go a few times in my adolescence, but both of my parents weren't the biggest fans of it, despite my aunts and uncles really taking a liking to it.

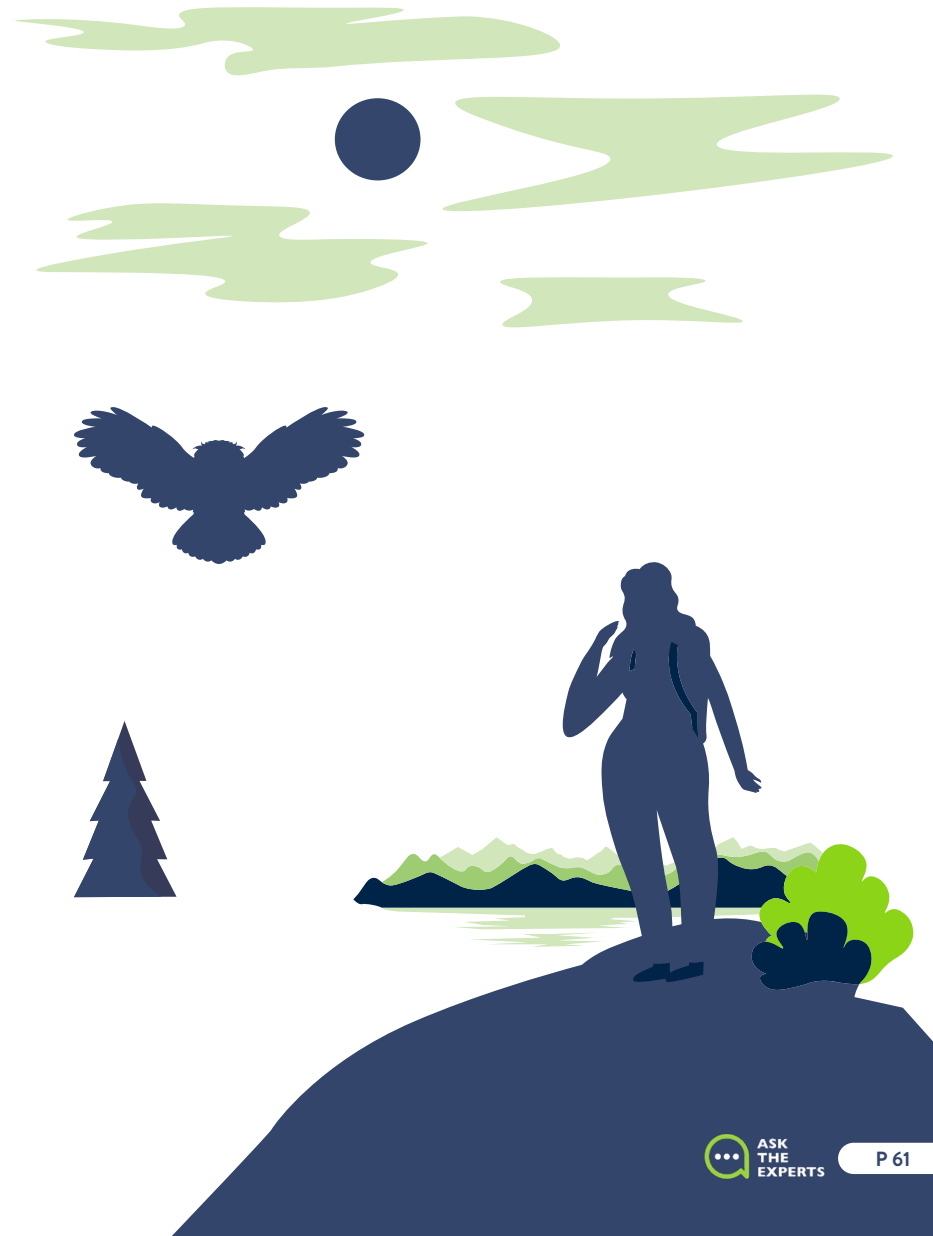
“  
TO ME, THIS IS THE BIGGEST BARRIER OR MISCONCEPTION  
THAT I FEEL IS FACING THE DIVERSITY SEEN WITHIN THE  
OUTDOORS. HAVING WORKED IN THE OUTDOOR SECTOR FOR  
THE DURATION OF MY “PROFESSIONAL” CAREER, I THINK THE  
BIGGEST HURDLE AND QUESTION WE HAVE YET TO FACE IS:  
WHO DEFINES “THE OUTDOORS”?  
”

I like hiking and being immersed in nature for a time, but I also like coming home to a clean bed. Is nature not for me, then? Do I not qualify under a specific standard? I like to fish, but I'm not interested in spending countless nights sleeping under the stars in a tent with no access to a bathroom for miles. Should I be excluded from the demographic of folks who can be marketed to or not considered as someone who enjoys the outdoors? If you bring me into the jungle with a camera in my hand, I'm all for it as long as I have a hotel room that I can rest in afterward. Because of that, do I not make the cut on the "Outdoor Explorers" list?

Having been to so many countries now, I've come to realize that we all have different perspectives and different ways of doing things, and it's the cultural folkways and mores that really set the precedent for how people in that region inherently see the world.

So, with that, I ask again: who defined what it means to be a lover of the outdoors, and does that definition apply to BIPOC folks of differing past-experiences and cultural upbringings as well—or is this all just a "Canadian" way of seeing and defining things?

If it is, then perhaps those are just the outdoor sector's current cultural folkways and mores; ones that I think are worth changing.





**OUTWARD BOUND  
CANADA**

The Training Academy is an initiative of Outward Bound Canada.