Praise for *Paddling Pathways*

Paddling Pathways is rich with advice for canoeing Canada's diverse waterways. There are introspective essays (by different authors) about classic canoe trips; obscure Indigenous origin tales, canoeing etiquette (it can mean "survival"!), and riveting history of routes paddled. Wonder how Virginia Falls on the South Nahanni River got its name? Or how to boil water in a plastic soda bottle? This book tells all.

Nobody writes books like this anymore!

—Cliff Jacobson, author of *Canoeing Wild Rivers*

The canoe is the quintessential Canadian vehicle, not only conveying us through water but also in and out of adventure, natural phenomena, self discovery, history, the future and much more. What does canoeing mean to you? Take a look inside, graze it for the pieces that catch your curiosity and maybe even take you down another exciting channel...

—Neil Hartling, founder of Nahanni River Adventures, author of *Nahanni: River of Gold…River of Dreams* and *Alaska to Nunavut: The Great Rivers*

This treasure trove of paddling tales is as rich and diverse as the waterways, ecosystems and cultures across the land. Moving beyond a vacationer's sensibility, and away from sensationalized heroic accounts, *Paddling Pathways* rekindles our relationship with the land, waters, each other and ourselves. This inspiring collection calls for a return to waterways big and small, each chapter a beckoning to get your paddle back in the water.

—Scott McCormack and Sarah Hrdlicka, Cape LaHave Adventures, Nova Scotia

We all know that canoeing offers plenty of time for contemplation. This book provides us with many different paths for our thoughts to travel as we paddle. Importantly, it brings forth stories of other paddlers who are considering the legacies and possibilities of canoeing. We know that canoeing can give us insight into other ways of being in this world, ways that seek to address environmental change and colonial histories. Some of those ways can be found in these pages as the authors share their insights and experiences. A rewarding read!

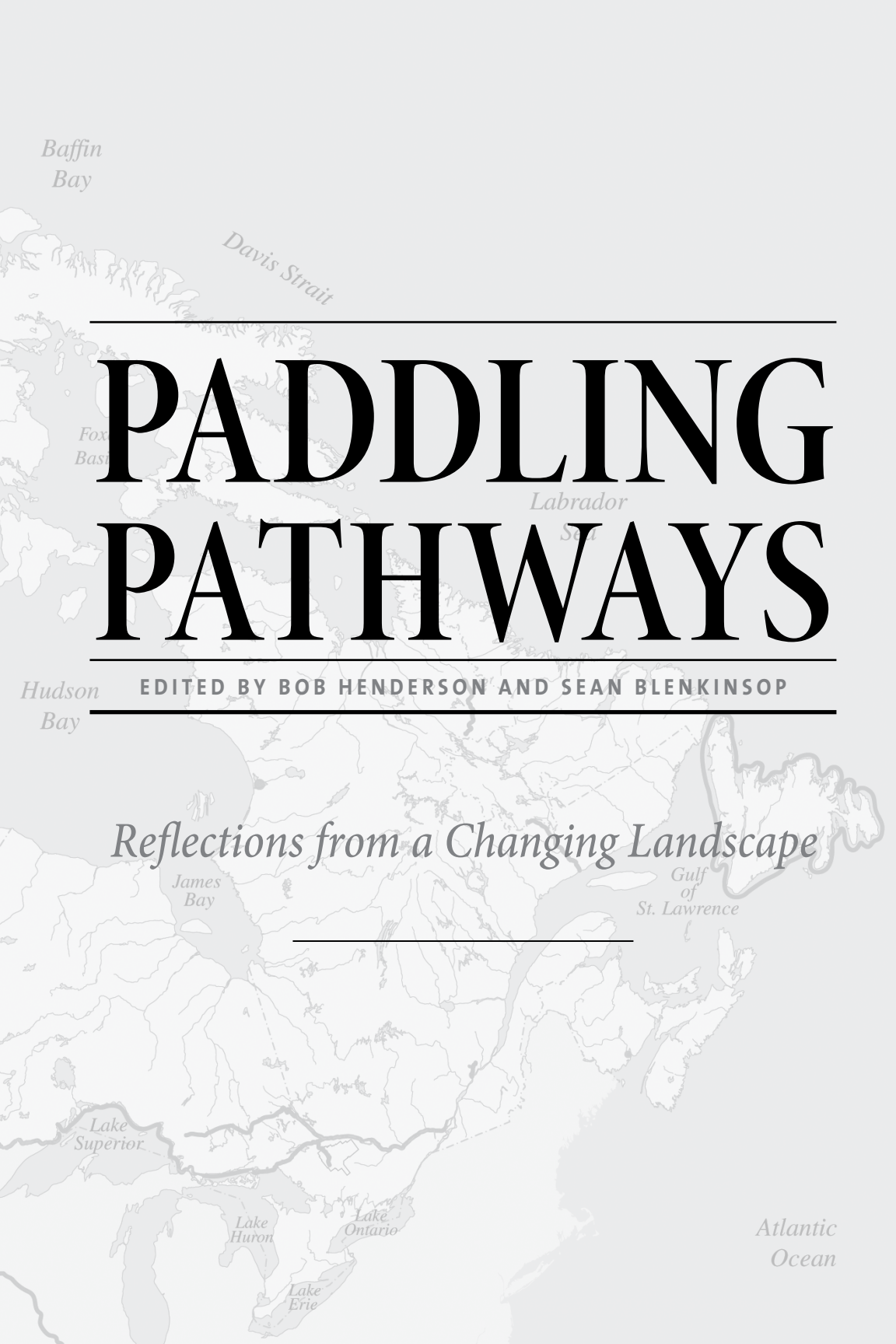
—Bruce Erickson, author of *Canoe Nation,* co-editor of *The Politics of the Canoe*


Arctic Ocean
Beaufort Sea
Great Bear Lake
Great Slave Lake
Lake Winnipeg
Pacific Ocean
0
500
scale in km

PADDLING PATHWAYS

EDITED BY BOB HENDERSON AND SEAN BLENKINSOP

Reflections from a Changing Landscape



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INTRODUCTION

Paddling Pathways: Re-thinking Canadian Waterways as Teacher

Sean Blenkinsop and Bob Henderson

We are ten days into a Barren Lands canoe trip and the wind is starting to drop, which we know means that the bugs will inevitably, inexorably, inescapably begin to rise. But by now we have our systems. Shirts tucked into pants, pants into socks, and bug jackets at the ready. We are lucky because we have been through this before, and with our big dining tent and carefully selected sleeping tents there is always escape and respite, no smoky smudge fires or animal grease for us. This is not a massive struggle to be overcome so much as an environment to be adjusted to, respect to be paid, locals and their ways to be recognized. And when stress levels rise in spite of ourselves, we can turn to Innu scholar Tommy Akulukjuk's comment about how, after a few years in southern Ontario completing a graduate degree then returning to the north and going onto the land with his family, it was the bugs that firmly repositioned him in place and in the food chain.[1] This buzzing, stinging reminder of how humans are fragile but also an integrated part

of the environment comes in many forms: a grizzly bear walking through camp, nesting terns dive-bombing approaching paddlers, a gathering cloud bank heavy with moisture. It is easy to carry on with the myth of humans as the most important, most powerful, most significant beings when you live in environments created, in some ways, to tell that exact story. Much harder to maintain such hubris in a place where life plays out more on the terms of the local beings and the place itself.

The point here is that, with just a few small boats, a little bit of gear, some flowing water, and a whole lot of locals (including bugs, bears, birds, and blizzards), there is the possibility of having "cross-cultural" experiences—experiences that allow paddlers to see themselves in ways that are different from the possibilities offered by built environments; that open new doors for how we can *be* in the world. Paddling trips are good that way, and the many returns are measured in more than just paddle strokes.

* * *

For us, there has always been something paradoxical, literally unresolvable, in spending time on trail. For instance, we feel both significant and insignificant at the same time. But often this feeling of significance has little to do with our ability to reason or twiddle tools with our opposable thumbs—instead, it might, as in this buggy case, arise out of the realization that we are an excellent source of protein. And the feeling of insignificance is not one that wounds the psyche—instead, it comes with the realization that "out here" we are just a part, often minor, of the full staging of life, and are of little concern to the locals.

We can illustrate this with another scene from that Barren Lands canoe trip: as we're paddling one day, we see that some distance upriver there is a herd of muskox grazing the flats by the river's edge. They note our presence but pay us little heed. That changes as we approach: herd members sort themselves based on size, experience, and role, but we are still a mere annoyance that has disturbed a morning feed. The

Jane and Sean meeting a muskox on the tundra. Photo credit: Bob Henderson

muskox, communicating amongst themselves and letting us know their frustration, turn inland, gallop a short distance, and disappear over the lip of the esker above. We are likely soon forgotten, but the message that we are the unusual outsider is clear, and we consider, even embrace, it.

Being on the land and on the waterways has taught us—continues to teach us—humility. It has helped us to understand that our cultural desire to "find the answer" (to be right, to be the centre of attention), to always progress (to complete the trip, to finesse the rapid), to reach synthesis (to resolve the paradox, to find the truth) is in fact just that, a *cultural construct*. It is not how the natural world operates—nor, for that matter, how other human cultures function.

What might it mean, then, for us to shift pathways and create narratives that no longer focus on *competing*, *completing*, and *conquering* as central motifs for how we understand the natural world or wilderness travel? To stop seeing the relationship between wolves and caribou as an eternal struggle between predator and prey? Or human journeys

into the back country as a constant process of struggling and surviving epic challenges thrown at us by a harsh world? To undo some of the anthropocentrism and human elitism that haunts the modern West and is incongruous with many Indigenous cultures?

What might it mean if we were to begin to notice, instead, how the health of the ecosystem (for example, the growth of the Arctic willows and black crowberries, and the success—dare we mention it—of the biting insects) benefits when both caribou and wolves are communally at their best? What if we were to notice that there are more reasons for being on trail than testing and proving ourselves against the elements or overcoming continuous challenges?

Shifting our perspective and creating new narratives requires that we think about language—the words and metaphors we use when describing our experiences and the implications those choices might have. Are we conquering or encountering? On whose terms are these trips happening? Are we learning about, or with, or even from the local beings, the traditional caretakers, the contested politics and histories of these places? Is the natural world nothing more than a beautiful backdrop for our experience, or is it an agential cultural place where we are the respectful visitors—or is it something entirely more complex and fluid than either of those?

Language and metaphor *are* important. We have, for example, over the last fifteen years, noticed the emergence of the phrase, "the portage trip." This is, of course, a canoe trip that involves some portaging. Now, folks can call their trip whatever they want. Why should we care? But language matters. What does it mean when one's "blue lake and rocky shore" lake-hopping canoe trips are being called "portage trips"? How do these descriptions land in the ears and hearts of the uninitiated paddler or the quiet veteran? How does the natural world get positioned by a phrase like this? Does this language continue and sustain cultural concepts of and orientations towards the natural world and its waterways that are, in fact, limiting?

* * *

This notion of needing to shift perspectives and create new narratives for ourselves and for the larger culture is certainly in keeping with the interesting times in which we live. At long last, many of us are beginning to recognize how important it is to notice, question, problematize, and act in response to the stereotypes and systemic constructs that have led to the prioritization of particular people and beings, while others have been marginalized, ignored, or worse. These stereotypes and constructs are created—and perpetuated—by our narratives, by the stories we tell about ourselves, and others, and the world.

At its inception, we imagined *Paddling Pathways* as an opportunity to begin a similar project with regards to some potentially problematic outdoor narratives (for example, nature as red in tooth and claw, or outdoors people as superhero-esque, or the natural world as apolitical, ahistorical, and romantic)—to ask the difficult questions that might lead us down new, more equitable, and diverse pathways.

To that end, we invited two dozen or so "average" paddling people who engage with waterways in accessible, thoughtful, challenging, complex, informative, meaningful, imaginative, adventurous, philosophical, and educative ways. Many are old friends whom we called "out of the blue"; in some cases, the idea for a chapter arose out of a regular update chat. Two authors were approached based solely on previous writings and endeavours, and it was wonderful to make new friends in this way. (We've thought that it might be fitting to call this anthology, "friends old and new gathering for a meaningful campfire paddling storytelling workshop.")

We asked each contributor to pick a special paddling place/route and a personally significant theme. As you will see, these special places take us to every region of the country, and their chosen themes, while diverse and unique, all lead us towards questioning those familiar competition, completion, and conquering motifs, at the same time as they point out the possibilities for new pathways.

We grouped these diverse essays under four larger ideas: Pathways to Perspective, Pathways for Communities, Pathways to Identity, and Pathways to Understanding. Together, these thoughtful essays guide us in reflecting on what it might mean to consider waterways as teacher, as community builder; the natural world as provider, friend, confidant, colonized other; the salmon and beaver as equal and of moral worth; the moss, rocks, and fireweed as agential and ancient; the ocean as healer and culture; and the caribou and wolf as questioner and seeker. They guide us in contemplating how we might be more reciprocal in our relationships with water, land, heritage, and the wide community of beings. And they open up the possibility for shifting our focus from the more familiar narratives in order to create new pathways, new stories, new understandings for our interactions with nature that are based instead on community, care, and cooperation, and which are more resilient, sustainable, and equitable.

* * *

We chose the subtitle "Reflections from a Changing Landscape" for a number of reasons. First, "reflections" suggests our affinity with a particular type of literature, represented by, for instance, Sigurd Olson's *Reflections from the North Country*, Bill Mason's *Song of the Paddle* film, Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain,* and others. Okay, so we've set our sights high. But we are hopeful that this collection will in some small way revive and encourage this more contemplative paddling pathway.

The phrase "changing landscape" encompasses social change and ecological change and so much in between; and the call is "from" this changing landscape, an invitation for all of us to see and embark on these new, more equitable pathways we have been discussing—because maybe what modern humanity needs in these times is more connection, more attentive listening to a diversity of others, more critical consideration of the possibilities for change. Consider what life might be like if there were less competition and more community, less asserting and more relating,

Lake Superior on a special calm day in July. Photo credit: Bob Henderson

less shouting and more listening, and maybe even less human and more more-than-humans. Perhaps paddling and Canada's waterways can contribute to this cultivation of cultural change by supporting budding ecological consciousnesses, nurturing decolonizing processes, and expanding people's imaginations, relationships, and possibilities.

* * *

Our goal for this edited volume is to entertain, enlighten, and challenge readers in a good way, taking them to the edge of their thinking and imagining about places and paddling while at the same time opening up further avenues to ponder. We will have achieved our goal if readers think of *Paddling Pathways* as an interesting and important read; if it is the writing about paddling they have been looking for; if they perceive it as a way of thinking and talking about place and paddling they never knew existed; or if they've felt the same way, but haven't yet been able to put it into words. We sought to go beyond

the expected, the cliché, and the obvious—fun, relaxation, serenity, beauty, the need to struggle, the desire to complete—to explore more diverse and unique answers to the age-old question, "Why paddle?" Indeed, our contributing writers have offered us all plenty to take in and think about. Their varied, insightful, subtle, profound, thoughtful, challenging, marvellous reflections affirm that paddling and being immersed outdoors is not only as important as ever, but even more so in today's changing and deeply fragile world.

We invite you into the questions and into a spirit of contemplation. For just a moment—or, better yet, for the rest of our lives—let's drop some of that human hubris, learn from muskox, fire, and crowberry, let these waterways teach us how to move the paddle, relax into both windboundedness and headwindedness, seek ways to change—and embrace being part of the food chain.

Note

1 Derek Rasmussen and Tommy Akulukjuk, "'My Father Was Told to Talk to the Environment First Before Anything Else': Arctic Environmental Education in the Land of the Dead," in *Fields of Green: Restorying Culture, Environment and Education,* ed. Marcia McKenzie, Paul Hart, Heesoon Bai, and Bob Jickling (Hampton Press, 2009).