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Healing journey for elders on the land

Emotional time spent at early outposts in Queen Maud Gulf

by Michele LeTourneau
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Ikaluktutiak/Cambridge Bay

Sixteen people, with history and healing on their minds, headed out by boat from Cambridge Bay Aug. 8 on a planned one-week trip to sites where their ancestors lived.

It was an epic voyage, said Pamela Gross, the Kitikmeot Heritage Society's program director.

"(The Kuukyuak area) was one of the biggest community settlements for Cambridge Bay's population," Gross said. "One of the biggest outpost camps was Kuukyuak, Perry Island and Flagstaff Island. They're all in the same vicinity in the Queen Maud Gulf. There are, I think, seven main family groups and a couple of those family groups are from Kuukyuak."

Everyone who participated on the trip except Gross had connections to Kuukyuak.

The trip lasted 16 days due to bad weather on the return trip. Everyone arrived home safely.

The objective was to bring people back to put closure to the residential school experience, which had a pivotal impact on families who lived in the Kuukyuak area from the 1920s on.

"We were approached by somebody in the community who was eligible to use those credits," said Gross, referring to the $3,000 Indian Residential School Settlement education credit. "They said we could use those credits to do this kind of trip."

The heritage society was one of two Cambridge Bay organizations with the qualifications to help eligible survivors use the credits in ways most appropriate and meaningful to them.

In all, six people approached the heritage society. With additional funding, the society was able to organize the trip, which included eight elders, six adults, one youth and one child.

NORTHERN Lights

"A lot of the elders had moved away from there when they were young adults," she said. "For some of (the travellers), their kids went to residential school and for some of them, they went to residential school. Some elders had to send their kids to residential school and had to move to Cambridge Bay and some moved to Cambridge Bay for other purposes. For some people it was their first time there and, for some people, they grew up there and basically were forced to come to Cambridge Bay. "

Graves visited

Gross said the trip was emotional.

"There's a lot of history in the Kuukyuak area. There are a lot of graves there. These are smaller outpost camps that were around for a long time. Naturally, there's a lot of personal family history. People's grandmothers, mothers, and other family members – we went to visit their graves, as well."

Renowned Inuk trader

A highlight was time spent at renowned Inuk trader Angulalik's trading post on Perry Island – once on the way out and once on the way back.

Colin Amagainik was the camp guide. His father, David Amagainik, travelled with the group, as well.

"Colin spent a lot of his years growing up there. His mother was Lena Angulalik, who was Angulalik's daughter. So he knew a lot of the history of the area, and spoke about his grandfather's trading post, and how it got moved. I've only seen it from pictures so it was very nice to go there and see a piece of our history."

Gross explained there are two main sites on Perry Island.

"There's the place where there's Angulalik's house, which was also his last fur trading post. Then there's a nursing station and a Hudson's Bay Company storage place. On another bay there are about five or six houses. Some of them had remnants of things in there and some of them were bare."

Angulalik's Perry Island trading post was established in the 1920s, after years of trading on Flagstaff Island. Gross described what remains of the homes and the trading post with some awe. Angulalik was not only a trader, but a hunter and leader.

"It makes your mind wonder and wander on how life would have been, how life was for our ancestors. This era for Angulalik and their family back then was totally different than today, but they still had a lot of modern amenities," she said.

There is evidence of grizzly bear damage and, sadly, there is also evidence of vandalism.

"There were names on some of walls of people from 2011. They're white names, so I'm not sure who they are. But they kind of vandalized the space and wrote their names on the wall. Seeing that kind of thing from people that are going and looking at these sites isn't good. People should show some respect."

From an archeological and historical perspective, Gross says those sites should not be disturbed.

"Looking at these sites, for example, Angulalik's trading post, you see some papers that talked about quantities of furs and the Hudson's Bay Company and that kind of stuff. Seeing those types of things in their natural element was very exciting and almost a little bit sad in the sense that that way of life is no longer and the reason behind why it's no longer is the government basically forced people to move into a larger community to send their children to residential school. That was a big shift for our people.

"I think this is one of those last places where you can actually see that time frame when people changed from living off the land to modern communities."

Gross says people are still approaching her, weeks after returning home, to express gratitude about the trip.

"A lot of people felt lighter upon returning. I'm still hearing back from people about how much better they feel and how light they are and they just feel overall that it was a great trip, despite some of the circumstances we faced because of weather."

More detailed information on Angulalik is available on the heritage society's website.

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