

## IS IT REALLY POSSIBLE TO BE IN THE WILDERNESS AND BE COMFORTABLE? (rough draft)

The C-word. It has wrecked marriages, driven people to madness, and even worse, it has cut short what would otherwise have been a great time in the wilderness. Some people can tolerate more discomfort than others. For others, discomfort is part of the macho-ego wilderness experience, and yet for others, discomfort is simply accepted as a necessary part of the outdoor experience. Let's take a look at the last point, for therein lies the answer posed in the title.

It is commonly accepted that if a person is going to spend a certain amount of time in the wilderness, that person has to tolerate a certain amount of cold, heat, wetness, bugs, dirt, etc. That person has to get used to it because that is just the way it is. There is no way around it. After all, Native People lived this way for thousands upon thousands of years and they somehow survived it. And our Ancestors apparently survived it.

Much of that is actually a myth based either upon our own amateurish experience in the wilderness, or on stories about the living conditions of Native People, who we most often see in a state of demoralization and disintegration because of their disastrous interface with Civilized People. In actuality all people -- all creatures, for that matter -- seek comfort; it is our natural and intended state of being. Native People, just like us, expend a good share of their time and energy in providing that comfort for themselves. And, they are just as successful at it as are we. Natives who are living in a state of Balance provide themselves with quite a pleasing degree of comfort.

Comfort in the wilderness is not a matter of luxury, but of necessity. You or I could go out for a weekend or a week and tolerate a certain amount of discomfort, but imagine bearing with it for a month, or having to live with it for your entire life. There is no way we would or could do it. Were it even possible, we would be merely surviving and not living. We would not be able to relax enough to enjoy the finer qualities of life. In fact, it could quite literally kill us, because we are not designed to handle the continual stress we would be subjecting ourselves to.

We evolved to function with short periods of stress interspersed with long periods of relaxation. Continual stress, even at a low level, eventually burns out our adrenal glands and we find ourselves no longer able to cope with even small stresses. So, unless you are the macho type or have penance to serve, seeking comfort and learning the skills that provide comfort would be a good priority for the wilderness trekker and would-be Native.

To be comfortable outdoors, we first need to understand what causes our discomfort. For most of us the main reason is that we are not attuned to our body, our feelings, or to our Circle of Life. Because of that, we are not able to appropriately take care of those things. For example, if I am not in good physical shape, I can easily chill or overheat. If I am not in a peaceful emotional state, a Deerfly might easily irritate me, which could attract many more. If I am not understanding of the world around me, I will not know how to take care of myself in relation to it. It will become my adversary and I will be in constant struggle with it--man against nature rather than man as nature.

Fortunately, there is often only a fine line between comfort and discomfort, and we only need to make a small adjustment to switch from one to the other. With a bit of knowledge and planning, a potential frustration can actually become flow. Following are some suggestions as to how that can be done:

1. **Perspective.** Or as some would more bluntly put it, attitude. If I have half a bowl of soup in front of me, it is my choice as to whether I am grateful, because I have a half bowl, or am frustrated because it is only a half bowl. It is my choice as to whether I curse the rain or look forward to the coolness it brings and the rainbow that follows. When I am outside, I might sit on the Earth and be fine with it--it is sand and grass and leaves. But when it gets tracked into my tent I then call it dirt. It is the same stuff; it is all a matter of attitude as to how I perceive it and how much I allow it to stress me.

2. **Physical Health.** When we are in good condition, our metabolisms can adjust to variances in temperature and humidity to keep our bodies warm or cool as needed, and supply reserve energy for whatever might come up. In our Civilized lives, we are accustomed to a controlled climate and physical demands that are fairly predictable. So many of us coast along without needing to be in physical shape. Not so in the wilderness.

But it is not just a matter of getting along. I like to feel the cold and the heat because it is part of the experience. If there is a blizzard and I can not savor the sting of the snow on my face, I do not feel I have met with the blizzard. If I am paddling across the Lake on a mid-summer afternoon I want to bathe in the full intensity of the heat and sun so that later I can fully enjoy my dive into the cool waters.

Being in good shape also adds to my passive comfort, such as when I am sitting. A rather common complaint from visitors to my wilderness camp is the lack of adequate reclining furniture around the campfire. We sit cross-legged Native-style on the ground, which is difficult for people with weak or inflexible legs and backs. They need at least a log section, preferably with some backrest, in order to be comfortable for any long period of time.

3. **Have a Plan B.** I have one or two options at the ready that I can easily switch to if the weather is not suitable for what I had planned, or if I run out of materials for the project I am working on. This is very important for keeping stress levels low. If we hit an impediment and have nothing to look forward to, discomfort magnifies itself.

4. **Keep dry and clean.** At the very least being wet and/or dirty is uncomfortable. Here are a few lesser known ways to accomplish that:

A. Carry along a pad to sit on. This could be as simple as a piece of canvas or as plush as a beaver pelt.

B. Shingle your clothing. This means to have your upper layers of clothing overlap your lower, footwear included. That way dirt and debris, and dripping water will not get in your shirt, pants, or shoes.

C. Move when it is dry, and sit and take shelter when it is wet.

D. When traveling in mild wet weather take your clothes and footwear off and stash them in your pack. When you get to your destination you will be able to don dry, warm clothing.

5. **Keep warm.** If you are dry, you have a much better chance of keeping, or getting, warm. Following are a couple of easy-to-implement, but very important guidelines:

1. Do not sweat. Do not allow yourself to overheat in cold weather, and above all, do not allow your undergarments to become sweat-saturated. The most practical preventative is to leave your heavy coat at home, and instead, dress in multiple layers of light front-opening clothing. Open, add, or remove layers as necessary to regulate body heat and allow for sweat evaporation.

2. Wear mittens instead of gloves. In gloves, fingers are isolated, so they chill easily. In mittens fingers are together, sharing warmth, and reducing heat-losing surface area. Everytime hands get deeply chilled they permanently lose some of their sensitivity

3. Wash socks. Dirty socks do not insulate well. On active feet they get compressed, thereby losing the integral air pockets that provide the socks' insulative property. Moisture and sweat contribute to filling the air pockets. Even if they look clean and feel

dry, they can be filled with salts from evaporated sweat, as well as dust from fiber breakdown. Carry enough pairs of socks so that you can change them daily, more if necessary. In most situations, they can be quite easily hand-washed and dried.

4. Get out of the wind. Water chills the body up to 5 times faster than air, but water and wind together can be deadly. One reason is that water takes a tremendous amount of heat energy to evaporate it. We take advantage of this when we cool ourselves by sweating or wetting ourselves. But we do not want to create this situation when we need to conserve heat. Seek shelter when necessary and if adequate shelter is not available build a simple lean-to out of whatever materials are available. This can protect you from both wind and wetness, and allow for an outside heat source (such as sun or fire) if it is properly situated.

5. Construct a reflector fire. A vertical wall behind the fire to reflect the heat back to you increases the heating efficiency of fire and saves on fuel. Even better, have a reflective wall behind you as well. Stone makes a good reflector, as do green logs preferably split so that the flat surfaces are facing the fire. If you have a lean-to, that structure will be your back reflector and will quite efficiently capture the heat.

6. Take a rock to bed. Heat a few rocks around the fire and warm your bedroll or sleeping bag with them. Be careful not to overheat them; you do not want to know what a smouldering sleeping bag smells like! In the wilderness, I like to sleep cool to keep my body toned for the outdoors.

6. **Seek comfort zones.** Native People live by the awareness that Earth Mother provides for all their needs, including comfortable locations. Following are a couple examples as to how you can partake of that gift:

1. When mosquitoes are heavy, choose a more elevated location. Mosquitoes dehydrate quickly, so they prefer the more humid air of low places.

2. In frigid weather, or if you wake up to a cold morning, seek a sheltered sunny exposure. It can be so much warmer that you might feel as though you have moved to another climate. And you have--a microclimate.

(Text Box Insert) **The Fine Line**

Someone who notices my comfort in the face of their discomfort will sometimes ask, “How can you be in the Sun all day without a hat? If I did that I would be burned to a crisp,” or, “Why aren't you cold? I'm wearing just as many clothes as you are, and I'm shivering.” They do not notice the small things I continually do to maintain or increase my comfort level. When I am hot, I will walk on the shady side of the trail or face away from the Sun, and when I am cold I will do the opposite, and stand broadside to the Sun to collect as much solar energy as possible. (End Insert)

If I mentioned at the beginning of this article that in my courses I teach comfort provision as an essential wilderness skill, on the same par as orienteering, shelter, and fire skills, some of you may have had trouble believing it. Now perhaps you can more easily see that, with awareness and trust, The Mother can give the comfort you once entrusted to camping accessories to provide, or just plain went without. To be able to travel lightly in the Bush and be as relaxed and cozy as in one's backyard or favorite easy-chair is quite a gift. With such comfort and belonging, one can truly feel at home in the wilderness.