

The Wilderness at Work

An essay by Sarah Gaulke, Age 18

I am standing in water up to my knees with an 80-pound and 16.5 foot canoe on my shoulders. I glance down and I am unable to see my boots through the mud-churned water that I just walked in. I have carried this canoe for the better part of a mile through a trail barely wide enough, up and down hills, through mud puddles, and over rocks that really should just be called boulders. I am tired beyond belief and can't wait to get this huge hunk of metal off my shoulders. With a quick pop of my hand and a Minnesotan exclamation of 'Oofta', I gather my last strength and carefully lower the canoe from my shoulders on to my squatted legs before placing it in the water with a slight splash. I stand there in the water for a peaceful moment, taking in the freedom that my shoulders and back feel and the pristine lake that looks as if no man has ever paddled it. In that moment I am perfectly happy.

I have just portaged the canoe between two lakes. Soon I will get in and paddle away on to another lake, another campsite, maybe even another portage. In this moment, I am reminded of why I love the Boundary Waters. During that portage, I was suffering and doubting my own strength, but now I have successfully completed my mission and I live to see another day. For just that moment, I can stop and appreciate what I have done. Putting my body through both mental and physical stress and pain, and yet I still came out for the better. I am stronger for this and I can now appreciate my body and mind's own endurance. All these ecstatic feelings rush through me and I am bolstered from the empowerment I feel from the adrenaline. It gives me the energy to turn around and repeat the whole process, but this time with an 80 lb. pack of food or equipment.

I am living off of my own back. Because of the canoe and packs that I just carried, I am living freely and thriving on my own. There are no distractions, no internet or phones, no decisions to make, or social norms to think of, just beautiful wilderness in front of me and behind me. In this moment I am sure of who I am and what I want to do. This experience of a month in the wilderness as a canoe guide-in-training gave me clarity into what I wanted to do with my life. I want to save this wilderness and show others this same beauty.

Having the time out there to think my own thoughts and see beautiful nature and wilderness all around me at the same time has cemented my values and my future. It led me to become confident in my decision that I wanted to be a wildlife biologist and to work to preserve the wildlife I have seen in the wilderness. Not only has it cemented my future plans, but I have also grown so much more as a person. I am confident in my physical abilities to push me through. I am stronger than I think and I can push through the pain to continue on. I have also become confident in my mental abilities. Positive thinking makes a hard process much easier and if I can think positively with a canoe on my back, then I can think positively about anything. The wilderness has changed me and defined me. It showed me what is important in life and taught me lessons in its stillness and quiet that no person could ever explain.