

Q&A with Dianne Whelan

When and how did you first come up with the idea to travel the Trans Canada Trail?

It is a story with many beginnings. But I would have to say my mother was the one who planted the seed. She made a donation to the trail in the early 1990s and said it was something she would love to do. Over 20 years later, that seed sprouted. I had filmed on the world's highest mountain and near one of the world's most northern coastlines so the longest trail seemed like a natural fit. And as a storyteller, the trail was the perfect metaphor for this story, an umbilical cord that connects us all.

For you, this journey isn't an athletic achievement, but rather an ecological and reconciliation pilgrimage. Can you tell us more?

The pilgrimage is my Grandmother's medicine. I grew up with a story of a miracle that happened in my mom's family in the 1930s. The healing happened on a pilgrimage in the 1930s to a place she considered sacred, Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré in Quebec.

Similarly, for me, nature is sacred; the ancient forests are my cathedrals. When I left six years ago, I thought everything we need to know, we had forgotten as a culture, that we had lost our connection to the web of life, to the future. So I made this ecological pilgrimage to find hope and wisdom.

The reconciliation was to pay my respects to the ancestors of this land and was a journey guided by a morning smudge and a silent prayer for the Murdered and Missing women. What I did in silence shaped my journey and evolved into a companion series called The Beacon Project, a three-part series of films made with other artists and with Indigenous communities along the way, engaging youth, artists, Elders and Grandmothers in a collaborative process of listening and sharing, and asking the questions, "What has been lost?" and "What do we need to know?" The films emerged out of this shared reflection and dialogue.

Two episodes are currently on CBC Gem and can be accessed through the www.beaconprojectfilms.com website.

Similarly, you have said that you "dropped your rabbit suit for a turtle shell," and "didn't attempt to break time records for the trail." Why did you decide not to "race" the trail, and what benefits have you found in slowing down?

It's actually kind of funny. When I left, I had set a schedule and by day 10, I had not even completed what I thought I could do in one day. So I lit a small fire and burned it. And I stopped measuring my journey by how many kilometres I did in a day. That's the day I dropped the rabbit suit for the turtle shell.



Not everything of value can be measured numerically. I left shortly after turning 50. How fast, how long or how strong—none of that matters to me anymore. That race feels manic to me now. In the old tale of the rabbit and the turtle, the turtle completes the journey, the rabbit burns itself out. I knew I needed to heed that wisdom if I was going to survive and complete this epic journey. Again, it is not about the fastest way, it is about the most meaningful way.

You're on your own in the wilderness. You have camping supplies, your camera gear, and your own company. Can you begin to describe what that feels like?

Solitude reveals what a mirror cannot. It is a very grounding experience to be in nature alone for weeks at a time. Also, in accepting that no one will rescue you if things go sideways, you have to accept the responsibility to save yourself if something goes wrong. It is a very humbling experience to be a fragile being alone on the vast waters of Lake Superior or deep in the woods on an old fur trader trail in Quebec. But then something ancient wakes up in your DNA, and you feel more connected to life than you ever have. You are not *on* the water paddling, you are *with* the water paddling. You are not *on* the earth walking, you *are part of her* and every bird, plant, tree, animal, dragonfly, butterfly, with all life, except the ticks and the black flies—I never did develop a love for either of them.

By travelling East to West you chose the more difficult direction for the trail. Why?

I have often been asked, “Why did you leave from the East instead of the West?” I chose it because I wanted to follow the sun. I like to make people laugh telling them I didn’t realize that meant I would have a head wind the entire way, or that there would be more uphill than downhill. But the truth of the matter is, the question I asked myself before I left wasn’t, “What is the easiest way?” It was, and remains, “What is the most meaningful way?”

What are some of the most profound experiences you have had on the trail? (also answers, How does this concept of slowing down relate to your philosophy about travelling without extracting? How can we travel in, and appreciate, the wild without a colonial perspective or self-centred perspective of personal achievement?)

There have been so many of those moments, and many of them have been on the water trails. They are the most ancient. For the sake of brevity, I will share one of them. My first solo paddle was the Bras d’Or Lake in Cape Breton called Pitu’pok by the Mi’kmaq people who have lived on the lake’s shores for 10,000 years. Pitu’pok means “long salt water.” It is the largest inland sea in the world. I was near a Mi’kmaq community called Eskasoni, about 12 days into the journey, when a wind off the water blew me into shore to these sand cliffs. I got out of the canoe and the sun reflected off a ruby red rock embedded in the cliff. It was the size of a Robins egg. I chipped it out, washed it off, put it in my pocket. I had a moment where I thought, put it back, but another voice, somebody like Gollum from *The Hobbit*, said, “My precious stone.” So off I went with ruby red in my pocket. Ten minutes later another strong wind hit me again, this time an onshore wind which began to blow me out into open water. Not my intended paddle route. I resisted and tried to paddle against it. But grew tired and realized I had no option but to point the canoe into the direction of the wind, I had to go with it.

It was harrowing, waves picked up and started coming at me from two directions, and I thought I might die.



And in that moment all I could think about was, “I should not have taken that stone.”

I made it to a shore and I returned the rock to the water, gave it back to the land. I left on this journey to pay my respects to the ancestors of this land, and to find wisdom. And yet here I had done what explorers for centuries had done, take something and leave. And in that moment I experienced a shift in the approach to the concept of exploration, exploring through listening as opposed to wanting to extract something.

How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the later stages of your journey?

Yes, because of COVID I have more support than I ever have. But first, to give it context, I want to acknowledge that I have always been helped by cousins, strangers and friends. When I left in 2015, I was assisted by friend and filmmaker Ann Verrall. Together with other artists we made the Beacon Project films and her work is a big part of the *500 Days* film as well. She came to help for 10 days, and helped me when she could for four years. Since COVID became a worldwide epidemic in March 2020, my partner Louisa Robinson, has been supporting the journey, living in an off-grid support van, helping with logistics, getting supplies. Her love and support made it possible for me to finish the journey and have the strength to continue to film it as well.

For the first five years, I was able to reach out and spend time with people, listening, learning and creating art with people. Sadly, that has not been able to happen for this final year. But the beauty of nature, the time to sit quietly with the animals, birds, plants, trees and all life we share these lands and waters with has continued and in that way the journey has not changed.

As an artist, what is it about being close to nature that feeds you?

Nature is going home. If you are alive today, you have an ancestral connection to the beginning of humanity. We are a part of a living ecology on a living planet. When I was researching Everest, I read a quote by Italian mountaineer Reinhold Messner: “I climb high to go deep inside.” Well, I go out into nature to go deep inside. That feeds my art. In cities, we live within a world we constructed. In nature, there is still a connection to a world we did not create but that created us. That is where I find my inspiration.

Were there ever times when you thought you wouldn't be able to finish what you'd started? What motivated you to continue?

No. because of the way I travelled, if I was tired, I stopped, rested a day, week or whatever I needed. I also took days off to film, write, connect and work with other artists. On a journey this long, home is something you carry within yourself. The trail is your home. And you won't make it on a schedule because you can't control mother nature and you can't conquer her either. I have loved this journey and I know it's time for it to end, but I shall deeply miss it.

What are you looking forward to the most upon completing the trail?

The creative experience of writing the book and making the documentary, self-care and time with my family and the people I love.

How has the journey changed you?



In many ways but probably most profoundly, it shifted my understanding of the word “sacred.” Few of us can trace our family tree back more than a few generations. Perhaps because of this collective amnesia about our past, we now have lost our connection to the future. We don’t know where we have been, so we don’t know where we are going. Our survival depends on not breaking the continuum, the connection between us and future generations. Resource extraction economies are not thinking about seven generations. We don’t owe the future an economy, we owe them clean water, clean air and clean food. That is what is sacred, the things we need for survival. I will spend the rest of my life trying to protect those things. We are tomorrow’s ancestors.

Given the extreme conditions and remote locations you’ve shot in, is it fair to classify your work as adventure films?

I have made films on Everest, in the High Arctic and now on the world’s longest trail. On the surface they are adventure films, but in their essence they are about traditional Indigenous wisdom and science and technology working together to take us through danger to safety.

Science without wisdom is like a child with no parent to help teach and guide them.

The heart needs to lead the mind.

Making independent art is increasingly difficult. How have you managed to retain creative control of *500 Days in the Wild*?

Since the beginning of this journey, I have been incredibly fortunate to receive financial backing from a number of donors, including a group of women at PowHERhouse. Their [Mothers of the Film Campaign](#) invited Canadian women to make a tax-deductible donation of \$1000 that would support the film and the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society.