



Bella Coola Trip SD73
International Student Program
Sept. 23-26, 2022



15 students from 5 countries and some chaperones left Kamloops at 7:00 am on Sept. 23, 2022. We travelled west and then north at Cache Creek to Williams Lake. Here, we stopped at a large grocery store and bought food for supper that night and breakfast the next morning. Then we turned west again and headed towards Bella Coola. The total distance from Kamloops to Bella Coola according to google maps is 736.5 kms and this took us roughly 9.5 hours of driving time. The road from Williams Lake to Bella Coola is known as Highway 20. It is paved up until just past Anahim Lake where it turns to compact gravel. Just after Anahim Lake, the road descends “the hill” down into the Atnarko River Valley. This is not a road for the faint of heart as the elevation drops from 1530 m to sea level in 30 minutes. The grade is advertised as steep as 14% but who is really measuring? This section of the road was built by Bella Coola residents using a couple of bulldozers in the 1950s and is affectionally known as “Freedom Road”. Photos below show the road in, a rest area, and the Grizzly bear viewing platform at the bottom.



After descending the hill, we arrived at the Belarko Grizzly Bear Viewing Platform just before 5pm. We waited for quite a while before a single Grizzly Bear showed up. This one walked a distant shore for a while before grabbing a large salmon and heading into the forest (out of view) to eat it. It was most likely being wary of other larger bears in the area and doing its best to not run into a larger one. There was also a different single Grizzly that was seen multiple times behind the platform but never really showed well. The Belarko Grizzly Bear Viewing Platform is a reverse zoo → The humans are enclosed by an electric fenced enclosure, while the bears have free range to move around. The platform is located in an area with high bear traffic and the bears know that the humans will always be in that one spot. The platform is only open from September 1-30 each year as this is when the most salmon are in the river, attracting the most bears. The predictability of human movement in the area seems to put the bear at ease and they move around as they would without anyone there. Visitors are marshalled from the parking lot to and from the platform by BC Parks staff, many of whom were local Nuxalk Nation members. It was a treat to be there three times in our 4 days in the Bella Coola valley. After our time there, we headed the last 55 minutes west to the town of Bella Coola on the territory of the Nuxalk First Nation. We checked into our accommodations (Bella Coola Motel Cabins) and fell asleep after a long day of travel.



The single Grizzly Bear that caught a salmon and then did a disappearing act.

Our Accommodation (photo taken on the previous trip)

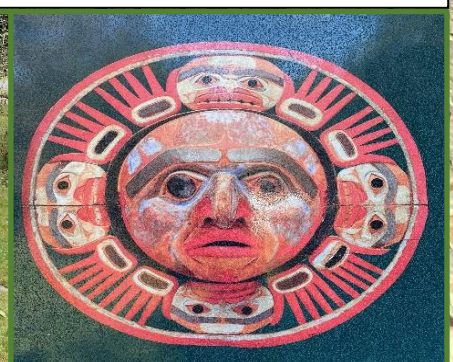


The next morning, we met at 8 am and travelled the short distance to the ocean. Bella Coola, though far inland on a map, is at the end of some very long saltwater fjords. You can take a BC Ferry from Bella Coola to Port Hardy on Vancouver Island which takes around 10 hours. At the ocean, we watched a large amount of harbour Seals in the water. There were also Dippers and Bald Eagles around as well. We also walked around a grassy beach area and took in the scenery. A short walk also brought us to Clayton Falls where a Pine Marten was spotted and photographed.





After our time by the ocean we met up with Andrew Andy, who arranges most of the activities when we are there. Our first activity was the short hike to see the ancient petroglyphs. This activity included a Nuxalk guide who was very helpful in helping us understand the area, the petroglyphs, and other cultural and historical elements of where we were. The hike in is gorgeous and the small river there is drinkable.



Our Nuxalk guide was able to contribute stories, personal reflections, and other information. He also sang a song for us at the top of the trail. This was the beginning of the many learning opportunities the students received on this trip to further their understanding of the role and place of Canada's First Nation people historically but also currently. There were many of these opportunities on the trip, most of which organically arose. The petroglyphs are a sacred place for the Nuxalk Nation.



After the petroglyphs, we went to Andrews brother's house to watch, learn about, and participate in Salmon cutting and smoking. The students enjoyed seeing different ways that salmon is prepared and enjoyed eating some of the finished product. We were offered both dried and candied salmon and both were delicious!



After these two activities we had a late lunch in Bella Coola. Many students had brought food from Kamloops or William's Lake so they cooked in our cabins. The chaperones purchased the necessities for a campfire that night including hot dogs, smores, and cans of coke. We had some free time in the mid-afternoon and students rested, shopped for more food, ate, and caught up on sleep. We met again at 6:00 pm at the cabins for a hotdog supper over the fire. This was followed by smores 🍪. Unfortunately it rained for most of the afternoon and evening. The hot dog condiment table was set up on the covered deck of one of the cabins. We still had a good time despite the rain.





Two students decided it was a good idea to go for a quick swim in the Bella Coola River after the fire. It was surprising to see both of them actually follow through with this idea! The water temperature could not be much above freezing, probably in the 2° range. The next morning we met at the bus at 7:00 am and drove the 55 minutes to the Grizzly Bear viewing platform again. It took around 2 hours for a male Grizzly Bear to appear and walk directly past the viewing platform. It tried several times but didn't catch any fish.



After the bear platform we stopped at a cracked rock pull off for a group photo. Rocks must be climbed... After this we stopped at a new roadside turn off in Tweedsmuir Provincial Park called Stupendous Viewpoint. It sure was stupendous! We then made the 55 minute trip back to Bella Coola for lunch and more free time. Some boys enjoying the stupendous view below.



Our next activity was cedar barking weaving. We were led by a master weaver and her sister. Some students made flowers and others made bracelets. The flowers were either attached to stems or pens. It's amazing to see what can be woven using cedar bark.

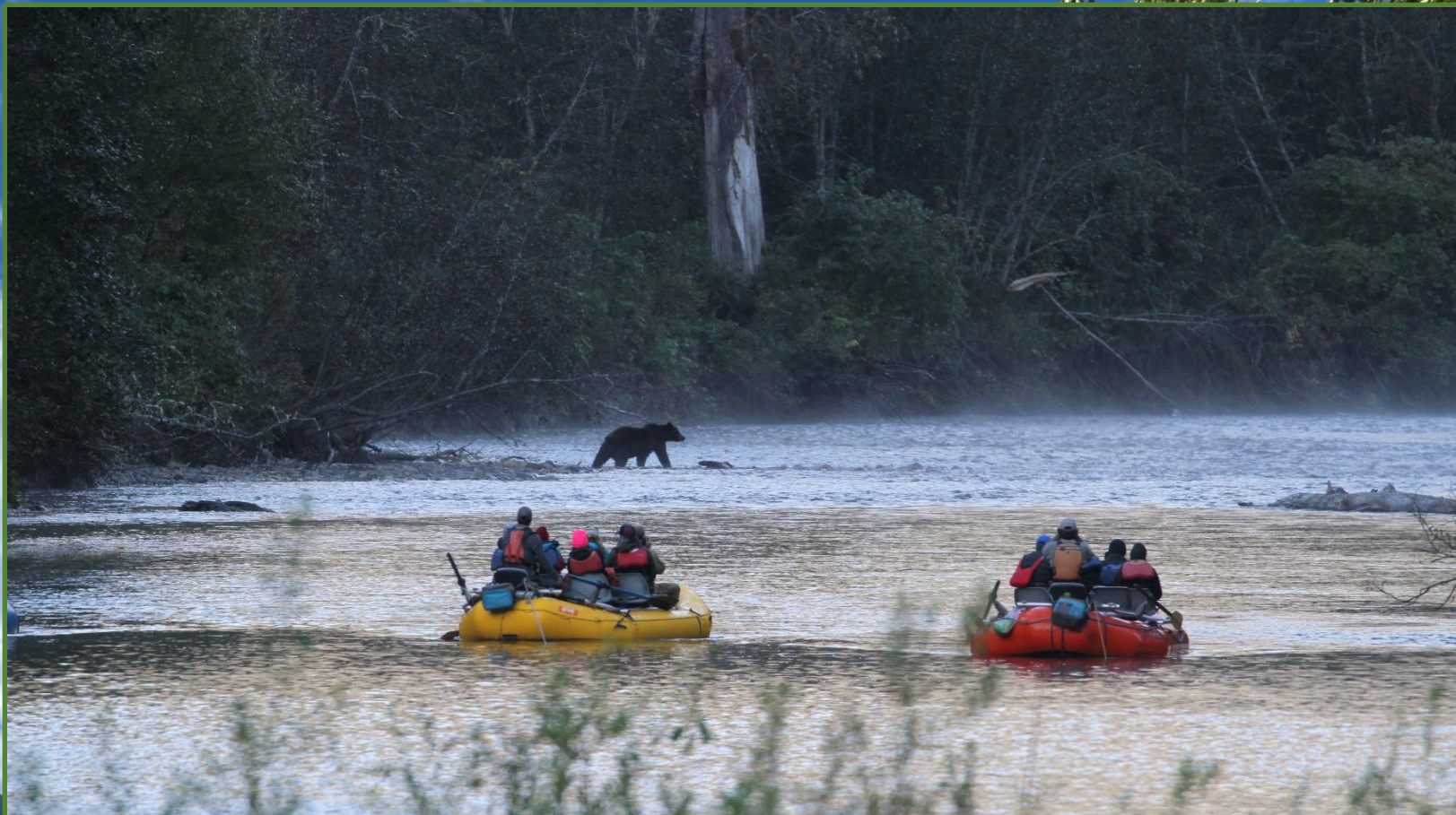


After weaving we had some more down time before our traditional feast in the church basement at 5:00. It certainly was a feast with barbequed salmon, Bannock, and other goodies. What a treat to have such great food and hospitality during our stay! We had another campfire that evening with more smores after a replenishing of our chocolate supply.



After supper, Hereditary Chief Noel Pootlass said a few words to the group. We also photographed Jupiter and four of its moons through the telescope after dark that night.





The next morning there was quite a bit of demand to stop at the bear platform again on the way out so we stopped for an hour. A distant bear was seen and photographed above. Several companies offer drift tours to photographers to get even closer to the bears there. This picture was taken from the viewing platform looking down river at a couple of very fortunate drift boats. Photos below show fall colours on the Chilcotin Plateau on the way home. The bridge over the Fraser River just west of William's Lake signals the return to civilization on the return trip.



Mammal List:	4 Mule Deer	25 Harbour Seals	1 American Marten
	1 Coyote	1 Red Squirrel	4 Yellow-pine Chipmunk
	4 Grizzly Bear	5 Black Bear	

Andrew Andy, a Nuxhalk resident of Bella Coola, was instrumental in setting up many aspects of this trip including the cultural components and accommodations, etc... He can be reached at cedarbowconsulting@gmail.com or 250-378-7823

Favourite Moment of the Trip

Cato – All the first times. Seeing a bear, rock climbing, and the campfires.

Josephine – the long bus ride, grocery shopping, the cabin, having our meals together, smores, learning about the Nuxhalk people, the bears, the petroglyphs, and the seaside.

Cecile – the beach area because I liked the view and we saw glaciers from there. The Eagle there was also very impressive.

Sofia – When we saw the Grizzly Bear very close.

Nicole – The views, mainly the Stupendous Viewpoint, and having fun with my friends. Also seeing all the animals.

Bruna – The ocean, the smores, the campfire, and free time in the cabins.

Bela – Seeing the Grizzly Bears, swimming in the Bella Coola River, the salmon tasting and the guy who prepared them, and the campfires.

Justus – Seeing the Grizzly Bears and the campfires. The ocean and the views.

Connor – Seeing the bears, the campfires, and the ocean.

Julian – The seaside and the view of the mountains near the sea. Also see the bears.

Julia – the ocean and all of nature.

Jan – the campfires because it was new with the marsh mellows and it was nice talking there.

Anais – Seeing the bears and the rain on the second day. The rain made nature beautiful.

Jannika – When we went out of the cabins for the first time after we arrived. Seeing the view from the cabins.

Fiona – Eating the dried salmon.

One Thing I Learned on the Trip

Cato – A lot about bears. What they eat, why they sleep in winter, and why you should not feed a bear. “A fed bear is a dead bear”. Also about the Nuxhalk people and cedar weaving. I also learned the phrase, “this will change your life.”

Josephine – I really enjoyed learning and talking with the Nuxhalk. I also really enjoyed weaving with cedar.

Cecile – Salmon are very important for the animals, nature, and trees. Salmon are a keystone specie.

Sofia – Some people have different stories and ways of thinking about how the earth was created.

Nicole – Cedar weaving, the difference of the bears and how they live, and the culture of Bella Coola.

Bruna – About the bears. Black Bears can climb better and Grizzly Bears can run really fast. A lot about a different culture. The Creator and the petroglyph stories.

Bela – About the Nuxhalk creator and their beliefs. Also about animals and that the animals are usually not the problem if the humans are doing the right thing.

Justus – How to make bracelets and roses from cedar bark.

Connor – that the carvings in the stones have different meanings and that they are thousands of years old.

Julian – Much about the culture of the Nuxhalk people, their stories and their beliefs.

Julia – the culture of the Nuxhalk people. How they live. How to make bracelets and the stories and symbols of the petroglyphs.

Jan – Stories of the Nuxhalk people. Bigfoot (Sasquatch) might be real.

Anais – There are traditions and culture of the Nuxhalk people. How they live with nature.

Jannika – How important salmon is for the region and that you can cook pasta in a microwave.

Fiona – You can make candy out of salmon.