

# **“I have to read the signs like you reads a book”: Examining Experiential Information through Non-fiction Accounts of Guided Trips into the Interior of Algonquin Provincial Park Ontario**

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## **Abstract**

Skill-based careers and remote rural settings are often overlooked in LIS research. Analyzing the content of two historical non-fiction accounts of extended canoe trips, this poster explores the information life world of old-time wilderness guides in Algonquin Provincial Park in Ontario, Canada. Analysis provides a glimpse into the unique ways they have of acquiring and sharing their particular brand of knowledge. Results suggest their life experience is rich with information behaviors and skills both similar to, and unique from, other contexts. They also support the advancement of information theory by further challenging the boundaries between formal and informal information systems and by conceptualizing information in terms of intangible, undocumented experiences.

*Keywords:* information behavior, life world, experiential information, wilderness guides, rural settings, content analysis

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## **Introduction**

For more than a hundred years, remote and rural Algonquin Provincial Park, Ontario has played host to an annual migration of people who wish to enjoy the great outdoors. In 2011 alone, over 245 000 visitors, mostly from Ontario, camped in the interior of the Park (Ontario Parks 2011). Although it is becoming easier to undertake such trips unaccompanied due to advances in technology, many visitors over the years have engaged local help. For a fee, the local residents have been asked to do what they do best: use information gained through experience to guide visitors safely through vast stretches of wilderness. This experiential information has typically been acquired over time, by hand, either in trial-by-error fashion or by spending time in the company of others who had previously learned the skills.

While experiential information is often described in both fiction and non-fiction accounts of different wilderness expeditions, it has not yet been the focus of attention in LIS research literature. This poster explores the information world of two historical figures who guided in Algonquin Provincial Park during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **The Information Problem**

“Guiding” is the act of leading visitors on trips through the bush for pleasurable leisure purposes, generally by canoe and on foot, over a period of time ranging from one day to several weeks. Guiding involves activities such as planning routes and itineraries, preparing food and supplies, and securing

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permits and transportation. It requires an intimate knowledge of the terrain, habitats, and weather patterns, as well as practical 'how-to' information like how to set up shelter and how to catch fish. It also often involves sharing information about the flora, fauna and folklore of the area with the visitors. While it has been a licensed occupation in Algonquin Park since the early 1900s, there is no school one can attend to learn how to guide. And so, while the occupation is regulated, the training is not credentialed in any way. It has historically been a hands-on skill acquired primarily through everyday life interactions and both private and social experiences.

From an information perspective, the guiding context presents a fascinating and difficult 'life world' (Savolainen 2008) from which to study information behaviors because of both the location and manner in which guides acquire their knowledge, and the fact that the researcher must have enough interest and physical stamina to participate in the voyageur experience itself in order to observe this population. Given these challenges, and the fact that the guide's workplace occupies over 7600 square kilometers (Ontario Parks 2011) of dense Canadian Shield, it is not surprising that this context has not previously been studied in LIS literature.

Nevertheless, there are accounts in the world of literature that provide a glimpse of the gap in our understanding. The following excerpt written by Bernard Wicksteed, an RAF pilot returning to civilian life after serving in WWII, describes the difference he found between his own credentialed background, and the experiential background of his guide (Joe Lavally) during a trip into Algonquin Park in 1945:

"Joe shrugged his shoulders. What could you do with a man who couldn't read the book of nature when it was spread out in front of him? Who saw ducks take off in alarm and didn't ask himself what had frightened them? Who watched frogs jump from a ten-foot rock and didn't look for the cause? He knew too much about city folks to think you could ever teach them to use their eyes and their heads. The best you could do was try to please" (Wicksteed 1948).

Studying this information gap is particularly interesting at this time in view of the emergence of a new breed of guide accustomed to a wider array of tools and technology. As the old-time guides who worked without this benefit retire and expire, we lose the opportunity to understand their 'old' ways of guiding. Thus, the characteristics of experiential information in this context, and the myriad ways of 'knowing' it, are at risk of being lost to us forever.

## Methodology and Theory

To study the phenomenon of experiential information among old-time wilderness guides, I examine two first-person, historical non-fiction accounts of guided trips into Algonquin Park centered around the geographic region of Whitney, Ontario (Wicksteed 1948, Corbett 2001). These accounts are written by visitors and contain frequent remarks about the information skills they witnessed during their extended excursions.

I justify using these monographs for several reasons. First of all, they represent historical accounts of guiding, meaning that the timeframe during which the two protagonists were learning about guiding and engaged in the activity for pay was a period in the Park's earlier years (early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century). This is significant because it was a time period when the Park was measurably less accessible to the masses. Further, tools used by the guides were often hand-crafted during this time period, and there were very few amenities available. Technical communication options (GPS, cell service, satellite service) did not exist. Consequently, guides of that time period developed unique information skills in response to the environment in which they worked. This poster describes the role of information in the historical act of guiding, which I believe is significantly different than the guiding experience of today.

Secondly, there are very few people alive today who earn a living in this geographic area guiding in the traditional sense. Attrition and urban migration are diminishing the number of local young people who choose guiding as a profession, thus reducing the number of guides available who learned how to guide as part of their everyday life experience. Consequently, there are very few sources from which to obtain primary accounts of the guiding experience. In the absence of primary sources and without evidence questioning the truthfulness of the monographs I've chosen, the books are essentially part of a limited number of historical records available to us about this information activity, and they are the only first-person accounts. During the course of my doctoral research project involving interviews with more

than twenty local residents, several interviewees recommended these books as a way to better understand the local residents' way of life. They are considered authoritative even among the local population.

Perhaps the most compelling reason to use these data sources is that the information is observed and presented by outsiders to the community. These people are in a unique position to observe, identify and comment on behavioral idiosyncrasies that may never come to light during interviews with primary subjects, either because the primary source doesn't recognize their significance, or because of self-censoring.

I examine these texts through content analysis focusing on both the characteristics of what the narrators tell us the guides know, and also suggestions about how they come to know it. Data are then analyzed according to grounded theory using the constant comparative method, whereby "incidents that are found to be conceptually similar" are given "the same conceptual label" until each emerging theme is fully elaborated (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Themes are analyzed primarily from the theoretical perspective of Elfreda Chatman's studies into life in the round (Chatman 1999) and Reijo Savolainen's studies of everyday life information seeking contexts (Savolainen 2008, Savolainen 2009).

## Conclusions

For the guides of Algonquin Park, the information gained from their life world is natural, commonplace, and often socially derived (Savolainen 2008) from the community in which they live. It is also largely absent from LIS literature, which has focused primarily on information behaviors of urban, often professional, populations. This poster outlines how experience-based information behaviors and skills found in this particular life world are both similar to and different from those described in the literature. Behavior similarities include evidence of secrecy and deception as described by Chatman (Chatman 1999), and the concept of way of life as described by Savolainen (Savolainen 1995). It also describes unique information skills including the ability to observe and interpret environmental signals, store and recall vast amounts of information about diverse wildlife species, as well as foraging and caching skills.

For information behavior theorists, a glimpse into this life world presents a valuable opportunity to improve our understanding of a previously unstudied, less accessible population and life world, as well as the unique ways they have of acquiring and sharing their particular brand of knowledge, most of which occurs without documentary support. It also supports the advancement of information theory by further challenging the boundaries between formal and informal information systems and by conceptualizing information in terms of intangible, undocumented experiences.

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