Dr. Jack P. Manno says his relationship with the Haudenosaunee, the People of the Longhouse, has spurred a number of “aha” moments. One came during a conversation with an Onondaga Nation elder, Chief Irving Powless Jr., about early European settlers.

“He said, ‘We understood there was something strange when they thought they could go out into the woods to be alone. In the woods they are surrounded by thousands of beings,’ ” Manno recalled. That gave him a sense of the deep connection the Haudenosaunee have to their living environment.

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“We think about property as things we own and have a right to,” Manno said. “Traditional people view property as what they’re responsible for. It has to do with our place in the world as human beings and how we interact with it. It’s a relationship.”

Those insights about humans’ relationship with nature have become central to how Manno, as associate professor in the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry Department of Environmental Studies, views the world and teaches about the environment. It’s also a key idea of the Two Row Wampum Renewal Campaign. Manno is educational outreach coordinator for the program, which celebrates the 1613 agreement between the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy) and the Dutch, who were then newcomers to what is now the Capital District of New York state and other parts of the mid-Hudson Valley area. It stresses a commitment for the Haudenosaunee and the newcomers to share the river of life while respecting each other’s differences. Priorities include honoring Haudenosaunee sovereignty and protecting Mother Earth.

Manno is among at least four ESF faculty members and at least four students and alumni who participated in the yearlong campaign. The faculty group also included Dr. Robin Kimmerer and Dr. Karin Limburg, professors in the Department of Environmental and Forest Biology, and Janine M. DeBaise, an instructor in the Department of Environmental Science. Several members of the ESF community participated in the central event of the campaign: a 13-day enactment of the Two Row Wampum, commemorating the commitment to parallel coexistence by paddling 140 miles down the Hudson River from Albany to New York City from July 28 to Aug. 9. Along the way, members of both groups made friends, camped together and attended festivals and events to share their message of mutual respect for each other and the environment. Some paddlers carried signs calling for the closure of Indian Point power plant as they passed the nuclear facility south of Peekskill.

“Most important to me was to see the commitment people had to put their time, their energy, their body, their boats in the water for the ideals of honoring the Two Row,” said Kimmerer, a Distinguished Teaching Professor who teaches environmental biology and directs ESF’s Center for Native Peoples and the Environment. Kimmerer, a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation in Oklahoma, paddled a canoe for five days with a non-Native American friend who works as an ally to Native peoples in Oregon.

“One of the important messages we heard along the way was, people talk about treaties as if they are only for Natives,” Kimmerer said. “But a treaty is an obligation for both nations. They must mean as much to the newcomers as to the Native people. The renewal of our commitment to live well on the river of life is a powerful thing.”

The overwhelming support from allies along the way shows a commitment to advocating for the rights for indigenous peoples and working to save the environment, she said.
“If there isn’t going to be justice in the courts, what we need is a movement,” she said. “We need people calling for honor and justice even if the courts don’t recognize it. We want to do the right thing. We want to act with honor.”

DeBaise, instructor in the ESF writing program, paddled with her 18-year-old son, Bryan Sweeney, for five days, then greeted the group when it arrived at Pier 96 in New York City. “There were always people cheering and clapping for us,” she said.

The trip fostered trust, respect and generosity, she said. In Cold Springs, for example, a woman named Kate offered her a shower at her home. “There was that kind of community the whole way,” she said.

DeBaise expects to draw on the experience in her classes. This year’s ESF theme for first-year students is water. “This is timely,” she said. “We’ll be talking about it.”

Aya Yamamoto, EFB ’12, was drawn to the Two Row Campaign by its environmental message and ideas gleaned from Indigenous Issues and the Environment, a course she took from Kimmerer in the Department of Environmental and Forest Biology.

“I realize more and more to heal our relationships with one another, we have to heal our relationships with the land and to heal our relationships with the land we have to heal our relationships with one another,” said Yamamoto, who served as a volunteer and intern, then as a paid staffer.

Yamamoto spent much of the 13-day trip coordinating details on the ground, and she paddled when she could. She tried to plan for everything but soon realized that was impossible. “As soon as our first night passed, I knew everything was going to be OK,” she said. “Things just fell into place better than a lot of us had hoped. Everyone stepped up.”

She attributes the cooperative spirit to the campaign’s message. “Everyone there had the desire to make the world a better place,” she said. “Having that in people’s hearts helped the logistics because people were already thinking, ‘What can I do to help?’ ”

When Yamamoto’s job ended at the end of August, she planned to return to New York City, where she grew up. She hopes to continue a career in environmental activism, perhaps working with the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota.

Cayla Naranjo, a senior environmental studies major, volunteered behind the scenes, updating www.honorthetworow.org and the campaign’s social media presence. She, too, was influenced by Kimmerer’s classes.

“I learned about the history of new settlers coming in and taking land away from the Native people, and we see how that ended up,” Naranjo said. “I would describe it as degradation and loss of identity. When we’re concerned with other things like money and bettering the economy, we forget about the environment.”

Naranjo said she learned a lot working with the Two Row project. “There was really great communication,” she said. “I am taking that with me. I really like to work with grassroots groups.”

Rain provided another lesson. “We don’t control the weather,” she said. “It’s patience. Nothing should be rushed. It’s better that things go a little slower than too fast.”

Naranjo, who is from East Harlem, plans to apply to the Peace Corps, and she’d love to work in Fiji. “I don’t want to westernize other places, but I feel I can aid them in creating their own environmental ethics and making it more efficient,” she said.

Manno noted that the last few miles of the paddling trip were very difficult. “They had a strong current going against them. When they stopped to rest, they basically went backward. But they kept going.”

Native Americans are very resilient, he noted. “These are people who had been targeted for destruction, and yet they continue with great courage and determination. I think there’s a lot that our students can learn. But they also have to find it in themselves.”

As for the long-term impact of the Two Row campaign, Manno said time will tell. “We’re not going to know the results of what we’ve done here for another 100 years. But we can be confident there will be an effect.”

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