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LIVING

School in the outdoors

In its recent report on environmental education in Ontario, an expert panel headed by Trent University chancellor Roberta Bondar, recognizes that schools have a vital



OUR CHANGING SEASONS
Drew Monkman

role to play in preparing young people to become informed and engaged citizens who will shape the future of our global environment. The report also emphasizes that outdoor education is a distinct and vital component of environmental education, and highlights the need for hands-on, experiential learning

in order to foster a personal connection to the natural world.

Outdoor education (OE) can be defined as education in, for, and about the outdoors through an experiential approach to learning. It relates the curriculum to real-life situations. There is also a growing body of studies suggesting that OE contributes to lifelong physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. In other words, contact with nature is as important to children as good nutrition and adequate sleep. OE also promotes marked improvements in behaviour, especially in children — boys in particular — who may easily become distracted and uncooperative in classroom settings

Most importantly, however, regular outdoor environmental education helps to develop strong, personal ties with nature. I believe that connections of this kind are essential for the protection of the natural world and to assure a sustainable future. It is important that these experiences begin early in elementary school, that they continue into the high school years, and that they be provided to all students.

Peterborough and area residents are very fortunate to have an excellent outdoor education centre right on our doorstep. Camp Kawartha, near Young's Point on Clear Lake, is a not-for-profit, charitable organization dedicated to teaching children to become positive stewards of their environment. Camp director Jacob Rodenburg and his enthusiastic, talented staff accomplish this through creative, outdoor programming linked to the curriculum. The 30-plus nature-based programs focus on teaching children about the many animal and plant species that make the Kawartha region their home. Nearly all of the programs address basic concepts of ecology such as the myriad connections that exist among species. The programs are delivered during a two- and a-half day residential stay at the camp. Camp Kawartha also operates the new Trent Nature and Environment Centre on the wildlife sanctuary at Trent University.

Having taken classes to Camp Kawartha for nearly 15 years, I can attest to the excellence of its programs. My students have enjoyed everything from Wetland Wonders, in which kids learn about the diversity of species in wetlands (while having a huge amount of fun scooping them up in nets!) to It's a Bug's Life, which capitalizes on children's innate love of catching and observing



Jordan Graham (left) and Noah Houpt, Grade 6 pupils at Edmison Heights, participate in a tree identification activity at the Warsaw Outdoor Education Centre in September.

invertebrates in order to introduce them to the science behind these amazing creatures.

Camp Kawartha believes that in order to build a foundation of environmental knowledge and literacy, younger children need repeated and rich immersion time in nearby natural spaces. Establish this first and foremost, and a sense of commitment and advocacy for the Earth will follow. Environmental sensitivity research tells us that today's committed environmentalists were yesterday's explorers. They tramped through marshes, they visited cottages and outdoor centres, they hiked, they canoed, and they discovered. In short, they engaged with their natural surroundings.

In a far-ranging conversation that I had with Rodenburg in preparation for this article, he expressed to me how alarmed he and his staff have become at the amount of time kids spend indoors these days, much of it spent in front of a luminescent TV, video game, or computer screen. He went on to say that "children these days are simply not going outside. Even worse, many school administrators, because of the threat of litigation, regard the outdoors as unsafe. This argument, to my way of thinking, should be turned on its head. It is unsafe not to let children engage with the natural world. As a developing human being, it is every child's right to feel connected to the life systems surrounding and supporting

humanity. Not to provide opportunities for children to engage with the natural world is far more dangerous in its implications than the small risk associated with going for a walk or exploring a natural area. By that logic, children should be tied up and placed on a bench. Then indeed, they would be safe."

Rodenburg is also disturbed that "many environmental educators seem to want to rush headlong into teaching issues such as global warming, pollution, species extinction and overpopulation, without recognizing that for younger children, not only are these issues complex and multidimensional, they are also profoundly scary. Children simply don't have the cognitive ability to process and fully understand these issues. Their thinking is in the here and now."

Therefore, in planning programs, Camp Kawartha strives to offer experiences that are developmentally appropriate. The programs try to create a sense of awe and wonder for the natural world through exploration, hands-on activities, stories and dramatic movement. "We want to develop a positive relationship between children and their natural surroundings before we presume to ask them to protect it," as he explains it.

Rodenburg is also somewhat disheartened at how few teachers coming to Camp Kawartha actually select nature-based programs for their class. Most opt for Canadian history programs such as A Day in

the Life of a Voyager or some of the very popular adventure and leadership programs. "We wonder if this has to do with how people generally view nature education. Perhaps they believe that learning about the natural world is inherently boring and uninteresting. This we know...if children have the opportunity to hold a salamander, hear the haunting wail of a loon, or watch a dragonfly catch a mosquito on the wing, they become more captivated and enthralled than they ever would be behind the controllers of video game. As parents, educators and community leaders, we should give each child a chance to know, love and care for their natural surroundings...before there is nothing left to care for." For more information about Camp Kawartha and the programs it offers, go to www.campkawartha.ca

Although many Kawartha Pine Ridge schools take advantage of the programs at Camp Kawartha, KPR also provides its own outdoor education opportunities for students. The board operates four centres, including the Warsaw Outdoor Education Centre, located just north of the village of Warsaw. Each centre is staffed by a qualified naturalist who, in co-operation with the teacher, provides programs in which hands-on exploration and discovery are central. Peterborough area students are especially fortunate to be able to learn from Kim Dobson and Sharon McGee, the talented and

experienced staff naturalists at Warsaw.

As at Camp Kawartha, the programs are directly linked to the expectations of the Ontario Curriculum. They also introduce or reinforce many of the attributes that are part of character education, such as responsibility, respect, and initiative. There are programs designed for each grade level from senior kindergarten to high school. Grade 4 classes, for example, can do habitat investigations, learn about the sounds of nature, discover rocks and minerals, and even improve map reading skills through orienteering.

Unfortunately, there is no requirement that a teacher must take his or her class to a KPR centre, so many students end up missing out. It is also disappointing that the PVNC Catholic District School Board does not operate any outdoor education centres. PVNC is, however, beginning an association with Camp Kawartha's Trent University site for interested teachers from SK to Grade 4.

For the past 15 years, the Ecology Park on Ashburnham Drive has been providing a slightly different type of outdoor education. It differs from a traditional OE program in that it focuses on urban settings and how students can be environmental stewards in their own daily lives. Curriculum-linked elementary class visits are half-day outings which explore topics such as backyard habitat, soil stewardship, native trees, renewable energy, stream studies and water quality, food gardens and composting. Children's programs are subsidized by the City of Peterborough and Peterborough Utilities, which reduces the cost for schools to \$3 per student. These popular programs take place on Tuesdays and Thursdays in the spring and fall, and usually have a waiting list, so interested teachers should inquire early at 745-3238.

The Peterborough Field Naturalists, too, offer outdoor experiences for children. Once a month, the junior members visit a local nature area such as Camp Kawartha, Miller Creek Conservation Area or Mark S. Burnham Provincial Park, where they take part in activities ranging from night hikes and snowshoeing to wetland studies and bird migration. Contact Judy Hyland at 652-8473 for more information.

Outdoor education is a powerful learning methodology that addresses the pressing need right now for education in and for the protection of the natural environment, while at the same time enhancing a child's overall wellbeing. However, it needs to be supported by adequate provincial funding so that every school board can ensure students receive at least two full days of OE experiences a year. In Grades 4 to 8, at least one, two-night OE experience at a recognized outdoor education centre should be mandated as well. As children become increasingly isolated from the natural world, outdoor education is more important than ever.

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