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LIVING

Pupils, staff keep magic alive

Edmison Heights natural area has grown . . . and spread to other city schools

In my last column, I described the early history of a schoolyard naturalization project that I headed up at Edmison Heights Public School, starting in 1990. Over the course of about six years, a half-acre corner of the schoolyard was transformed from simply lawn to a small oasis of trees and meadow. This week, I'd like to focus on some of the guiding principles behind the project and how staff and students make use of the "Habitat Area."



**DREW
MONKMAN**

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

From the beginning, the staff at Edmison Heights has endeavored to involve the students themselves in the planning and maintenance of the Habitat. For example, all of the classes participate in spreading wood chips along the area's many trails as part of Earth Day celebrations. For a number of years, we also had a Habitat Club that met at noon hour or after school to do hands-on work such as planting, weeding, making signs, putting together Habitat field guides and building bird boxes and bird feeders. Cathy Dueck, the well-known founder of the GreenUp Ecology Park, often came up to the school to work with the group, advising us on what to plant and how to do it properly.

'SCHOOLYARD MAGIC'

In 1993, Cathy compiled a helpful guide called "Schoolyard Magic: A Green-up Guide for Outdoor Classrooms in Peterborough County." The guide included descriptions of not only the Edmison Heights' project but also similar school projects at R.F. Downey, St. Paul's, Armour Heights and especially Kawartha Heights, where Inge Buchardt headed up a very impressive wildlife habitat garden. I should add, too, that Kevin Adams has also been a pioneer in the naturalization movement, overseeing the planting of trees on 50 acres of land near Scott Young Public School in Omemee. Over nearly 20 years, students at Scott Young have planted more than 16,000 seedlings. In doing so, they have created an inspiring forested area featuring large fruit trees and maples, as well as shrubs, pathways and benches.

A second guiding principle at Edmison Heights has been to plant only native species. Not only do native trees and shrubs help to develop a sense of place, but they are often better adapted to the local climate than are non-natives. Many of the species were selected for their wild food value (e.g., Black Cherry) to birds and insects, while others were chosen for the cover they provide (e.g., Eastern White Cedar). From the outset, we also made a point of following organic gardening principles such as using fish emulsion fertilizer and spreading leaves under the newly planted trees in order to create a natural mulch. Since our budget was limited, we also chose to take advantage of donations wherever possible. These included donated plants, tools and, most importantly, time and labour from parent volunteers. Sometimes parents even came during the school day to take students - one small group at a time - outside to work in the Habitat. This proved to be much more manageable



DREW MONKMAN Special to The Examiner

The quarter-acre that was once just another sparse piece of playground at Edmison Heights elementary school is now a place for children to draw during recess (top) or take a sketchbook on a snowy December day (above).



than a teacher taking the entire class out to work.

USE OF THE AREA

In addition to providing much needed natural habitat for birds and insects (e.g., milkweed for Monarch butterflies), a primary role of the Habitat is to serve as an easily accessible outdoor classroom for environmental education and other curriculum-related activities. Teachers regularly bring their classes to the area to do activities such as nature observation, sketching, silent reading and drama. The area is particularly popular during the often intense heat of late spring and early fall. I am always amazed by how much cooler the wooded part of Habitat is than the surrounding schoolyard. This, of course, is thanks to transpiration cooling. As trees release water into the atmosphere from their leaves via transpiration, the surrounding air is cooled as water evaporates from liquid to a vapor.

When I taught "Diversity of Living

Things" in Grade 6 science, it was wonderful to have an on-site outdoor classroom where the students could experience species diversity first-hand by seeing and hearing the huge variety of insects that are active on a September afternoon. I always found, too, that being in a cool, green, natural setting like the Habitat had a calming effect on the children. For many students - and especially some of the boys - going outside to do learning activities was a much welcomed departure from the regular classroom routine.

Another particularly memorable activity I started each fall was to have my students "adopt" a specific tree or shrub in or close to the Habitat. The students would give their tree a nickname, learn its key characteristics and record and sketch the changes they noticed (e.g., fall leaf colour, leaf-fall date) over the course of the school year. Even years later, many students still have fond memories of their adopted tree.

In addition to serving as an outdoor

classroom, the Habitat is also a popular destination at recess - or nutrition break, as it is now called - especially for kids who aren't interested in playing sports. When in the Habitat, students are encouraged to do quiet activities such as reading, sketching, doing scavenger hunts or simply sitting and talking with friends. However, proper supervision of the children has always been a challenge, since the teacher on yard duty isn't necessarily close to the Habitat all of the time. I therefore came up with the idea of having student "Habitat Helpers" whose job it was to facilitate activities during recess and to remind the more rambunctious students of the Habitat Area rules.

FOOD AND SHELTER

The Habitat has been successful, too, in meeting its original goal of providing food and shelter for birds and insects. When I was still teaching and would often visit the area at quiet times such as before or after school, I was always

Climate change talk and rally

On Thursday, September 12, at 7 p.m. Guy Hanchet will speak at the Peterborough Public Library on the science, causes and impacts of climate change.

Guy is a local resident who has been trained by Climate Reality Canada in a session led by former U.S. Vice President Al Gore. The talk will look at climate change at the global, national and regional levels. He will also present an overview of recent extreme meteorological events and explain the linkages between human activities and the intensification and frequency of events such as floods, droughts and storms. To conclude the presentation, solutions to help mitigate climate change will be presented.

This free event is sponsored by the Peterborough chapter of For Our Grandchildren (4RG), an organization working to connect and empower grandparents and prospective grandparents who are concerned about the impending effects of climate change.

4RG is also organizing a Climate Change Rally at Millenium Park on Sunday, September 22 at 11 a.m. to kick off the annual Purple Onion Festival. There will be speakers, entertainment and children's activities.

amazed by how many different bird and butterfly species I would see. Almost from day one, we had a number of birds nesting in the trees and bird boxes, including Black-capped Chickadees and Tree Swallows. One winter morning, I even found a shrew impaled on a thorn - the tell-tale sign that a Northern Shrike had passed through. Clearly, even small pockets of natural habitat such as this attract far more wildlife than you would ever imagine.

CHALLENGES AND SUCCESS

Despite challenges such as occasional vandalism, student supervision at recess, convincing more teachers to take advantage of the area and especially the on-going maintenance of the site, the Habitat project has proven successful. This is primarily thanks to the interest and support provided by the many principals over the past 23 years (including present principal Stephen Fisher), the financial assistance from school council, the on-going volunteer time provided by the teaching staff (especially Stephanie Benn, Lysa Boutin, Luc Labelle and Martha Hunter who have now assumed much of the responsibility for the area) and the wonderful support shown by so many parents in the Edmison Heights school community.

When I visit the Habitat Area now, I have trouble imagining that it was once just an empty expanse of sterile lawn. Now, you would think that the Habitat has always been there. The project shows that most any area can be naturalized - even a schoolyard - and that an oasis of nature can be brought back once again to do its magic. For students, staff and parents alike, this represents an important symbol of hope for the future and shows how we can all make a difference.

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