

FROM THE FOREST TO THE SEA - A WATERSHED JOURNEY

Barbara Moore, Galiano Conservancy Association

“To interact humbly with nature we need to be free and undomesticated in it.”

(Julia Whitty, “Thie Thirteenth Tipping Point - 12 global disasters and 1 powerful antidote” Mother Jones 2006)

I watch a group of excited Grade 5 Students from Queen Alexandra School in East Vancouver scrambling off the ferry and clambouring onto the bus at Sturdies Bay on Galiano Island and I feel the tingle of transformation in the air. This will be a memorable day of firsts for most of these children as they explore the rich intertidal life at Montague Park. The colours of sea stars, the slimy texture of a sea cucumber, the deceptive beauty of an anemone – nothing in ‘Finding Nemo’ or ‘Sponge Bob’ has prepared them for the reality which may be a bit daunting and much more exciting than cartoons.



Ever since the Galiano Conservancy Association was created in 1989, land conservation, ecosystem restoration and education have been the three cornerstones of our work because they go naturally hand in hand.

Since our inception, we have been offering environmental education to the public on a wide variety of issues. Our goals are to take people outdoors to experience and appreciate the natural world. There they have an opportunity to realize their connection to their environment, and the impacts of their activities on it.

Beginning at home, we have worked with the Galiano Community School who provide the foundation of our education work with youth. Our goal is to augment the curriculum by providing outdoor exploration, learning and projects. The Galiano children have been our ‘test case’ in piloting program ideas. They continue to also be our greatest challenge since they have a relatively high level of eco-literacy.

In 2000 we began our education Outreach work to schools in Greater Vancouver and Victoria with the goal of offering Galiano Island as an outdoor classroom to city children, especially those from densely urban areas. With green space shrinking in the city, there is less and less opportunity for children to simply ‘play in the woods’ or go to a clean beach. What precious green space there is, is often heavily used, impacted and compromised. Galiano offers children

relatively pristine ecosystems, closely juxtaposed to one another providing human scale examples of how the ecosystems are interconnected. Our 'From the Forest to the Sea' programs are designed to be a 'Watershed Journey'.

We also manage the Floating Nature House at Montague Provincial Park from May to October. Last summer our staff hosted over 4800 visitors, engaging them in conversations about marine life and environmental issues, and conducting interpretative programs. This hands on 'please touch' approach keeps all ages engaged for hours - simply watching creatures interact up close is fascinating.

Over the past six years, our programs and participant numbers have gradually grown. Most schools or groups come for just a day trip and choose one of the five program locations, but some come for two or three days and are able to take in several, giving them a deeper and fuller experience as well as more time to disconnect from the city. Our off island visitors have steadily increased from 13 in 2000 to 456 in 2006! It is a challenge for many schools to find money for our modest program fees plus transportation costs, so we offer bursaries to almost 50% of these students, many of whom have never been to a Gulf Island or even on a ferry.

Our goals are really very simple and based largely on our educators' own childhood experiences. Give children a chance to play outside, explore, inquire, connect and fall in love with deep textured natural and magical places. Then they will be more likely to want to ensure that there are still such places for future generations. People need to see, feel and understand a mature forest (the template), to compare it to a plantation and to see what restoration can do. The life filled beaches here are eye-popping surprises to children who have only read about the creatures or seen them on TV. They quickly bond with tiny shore crabs, learn to gently replace rocks on the shore, and learn that every niche is habitat for something.

Our approach is as much as possible to allow for discovery and to engage the kids themselves in the

learning and teaching. By creating a 'teaching train' with many learning stations, all the students have the chance to be learners and teachers. They enjoy sharing their new information. They remember the facts and share insights more readily when they play an active role.

We have recently taken these simple truths to a new level with a project called EnviroMentors. Recognizing that our future health and survival is largely dependent on the environment, we need to educate kids

to be literate in the language of 'air, water, soil and place'. We began a pilot project with the Galiano Grade 5-8 students to empower future environmental leaders. The EnviroMentors researched and created program ideas and activities, in this case about wetlands. Then they became teachers and leaders for a visiting group of Grade 1-2 Vancouver pupils. It seemed a natural success. The EnviroMentors 'owned' their knowledge, gained a new appreciation for their own community and largely enjoyed sharing it all with the younger kids who regarded them with a certain awe. One of the visiting Grade 2 boys had what may be regarded as high praise for the day's expedition - 'Mom, it was better than Disneyland!'



Children explore marine life near the small floating school house at Montague Provincial Park Photos Barbara Moore

Environmental educators intuitively know there is a connection between experiencing nature and protecting it. A recent article about global warming called "The Thirteenth Tipping Point" by Julia Whitty, analyses why many current decision makers are still 'naysayers' when it comes to climate change. "A study of urban American adults by Nancy Wells and Kristi Lekies of Cornell University sheds some light on environmental attitudes. Wells and Lekies found that children who play unsupervised in the wild before the age of 11 develop strong environmental ethics. Children exposed only to structured hierarchical play in the wild - through, for example, Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts or by hunting or fishing alongside supervising adults-do not. To interact humbly with nature we need to be free and undomesticated in it. Otherwise,

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we succumb to hubris in maturity. The fact that few children enjoy free rein outdoors anymore bodes poorly for our future decision-makers.”

So how do we know if we are effective in instilling attitudes and behaviours that will lead to more informed and intelligent environmental choices for the future? The fact is we don't know precisely. The effects are long term and subtle. They may not show up for years. The evidence of the effectiveness of Environmental Education is increasingly positive and measurable but still subjective to a large extent. The best indicator for us is in the enthusiasm of the kids and teachers, the artwork, letters and feedback we get that reminds us of how transforming it can be for a child to have that exciting opportunity to explore part of the natural world unfettered and safely. It is a leap of faith! This is a leap that is supported by our many generous funders who include, NSERC, Nature Canada, WorkSource, the Victoria Foundation, BC Hydro, TD Friends of the Environment, Galiano Parks and Recreation Commission, and the Capital Regional District.

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