

Items for the Information of the Outdoor Education Task Force

TO: Chair and Members of the Outdoor Education Task Force
Meeting #01/19, Monday, October 07, 2019

FROM: Darryl Gray, Director, Education and Training

RE: **SUMMARY REPORT ON OUTDOOR EDUCATION CENTRES**
Overview of Toronto and Region Conservation Authority and School Board
Operated Outdoor Education Centres

KEY ISSUE

Overview and history of Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) and local school board operated natural science and conservation out-of-classroom learning centres.

RECOMMENDATION

WHEREAS at its Meeting #16/2018 TRCA Board of Directors approved the establishment of a multi-stakeholder Outdoor Education Task Force for an eighteen (18) month term comprised of elected officials from local school boards and TRCA's Board of Directors;

AND WHEREAS the Outdoor Education Task Force has been convened to study, develop and recommend strategic future directions related to out-of-classroom learning within the areas of jurisdiction of TRCA and participating school boards;

THEREFORE, LET IT BE RESOLVED THAT the following information report on the history and current state of conservation authority and school board outdoor education centres be received.

BACKGROUND

Commonly referred to as *outdoor education*, the learning programs of Toronto and Region Conservation Authority and local school boards that occur in the out-of-doors are rooted in the philosophy that education about conservation, the environment and natural science is strengthened and enhanced through out-of-classroom learning. In many cases "outdoor education centres" are referred to as natural science schools, environmental education centres, conservation field centres or nature centres, however, they all share one trait in common: they provide curriculum-linked natural-science based out-of-classroom learning opportunities.

History of Toronto and Region Conservation Authority Out-Of-Class Learning Programs

Conservation education has been viewed as an integral part of the work of conservation authorities since the inception of the conservation authority movement in Ontario. At the London Conference in 1944, delegates from across Ontario, which included representatives and officials from municipalities, federal and provincial governments, the education system, the agricultural sector, and representatives of naturalist and conservation organizations, convened to study and propose a response to a range of pressing issues related to natural resource management.

In addition to resolutions related to land acquisition, flood control and conservation projects, delegates at the 1944 London Conference identified the need to improve the engagement of students throughout the educational system in Ontario, specifically:

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- R.1 (g) Fostering the direction of adequate attention to all phases of the conservation of natural resources in all the educational work of the province of Ontario.

In 1953, in partnership with York Memorial Collegiate Institute, the then Humber Valley Conservation Authority delivered the first “camp school”, a three-day excursion to Camp Kneale in the community of Bolton to learn about weather patterns, wildlife, natural systems, agriculture and soils conservation, and the local environment. Following the success of the camp school which had continued annually under the stewardship of York Memorial Collegiate Institute and Humber Valley Conservation Authority staff, planning by the newly formed Metropolitan Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (MTRCA) for a permanent education school began in 1958, with Albion Hills Conservation Area being selected as the preferred site. At the groundbreaking ceremony for the Albion Hills Conservation School in 1962, The Honourable William G. David, at the time the Minister of Education, noted that “conservation is more than a subject, be it taught in or out-of-doors”. It is this philosophy that has guided the work of conservation authorities in delivering out-of-classroom learning in the fifty-five years since.

Throughout TRCA’s history, conservation education programs at TRCA have been developed in collaboration with a wide range of partners, including school boards, municipalities, federal and provincial governments, non-government organizations (NGOs), social service agencies and others. These programs are designed to not only develop environmental knowledge but provide opportunities for students to translate this learning into conservation action at home and in the school, community and workplace. These learning programs are responsive to an evolving curriculum within the formal education system, as well as shifts in industry, immigration and demographic trends and are grounded in the Conservation Authorities Act, which enables conservation authorities to provide for “the delivery of watershed-based programs and services that further the conservation, restoration, development and management of natural resources”. Today, TRCA’s education activities reach over 150,000 learners annually and are delivered at TRCA’s education sites, conservation areas and in the school.

Since the inaugural camp school in 1953, TRCA has continued to develop new and innovative education programs and facilities across the region’s watersheds through both formal and informal partnerships with area school boards. These include formal land leases for the operation of school board outdoor education centres, the joint construction and operation of shared education facilities, or service delivery partnerships for the provision of natural science out-of-classroom learning.

History of School Board Out-Of-Class Learning Programs

At the same time the then MTRCA was delivering camp schools, and subsequently planning for a new conservation school at Albion Hills, the Schools Administration Act was being updated to reflect an emerging interest in educating students in and about natural systems and the environment. In 1954, the Ontario Department of Education included in curriculum documents that direct exposure to the local natural environment be given to students through outdoor learning to facilitate lessons related to conservation and natural science. Further amendments in 1960 to the Schools Administration Act enabled school boards to establish school facilities for the purpose of natural science or conservation learning, or to fund opportunities for students to participate in similar programs at a natural science school. Changes again to the School Administration Act in 1965 further enabled school boards with enrollment of 10,000 students to purchase land (not to exceed 200 acres) in any municipality and operate a natural science

school.

Throughout the 1960s, the Ontario Department of Education, through enabling regulations, continued to encourage school boards to develop outdoor education centres with the belief that natural science-based out-of-classroom learning and conservation education was an effective response to the pressing environmental concerns of the era. This movement in support of outdoor learning was reinforced through recommendations contained within the 1968 Department of Education report *Living and Learning: The Report of the Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools of Ontario*, known as the Hall-Dennis Report, which encouraged school boards, conservation authorities and others to cooperate in providing “natural science schools for outdoor education and the development of conservation principles”. Further facilitating the growth of the outdoor education movement in Ontario was the relative economic prosperity of the period. School boards were experiencing significant growth through this period and had available resources for the establishment of outdoor education centres.

It was with these changes to the School Administration Act and pedagogical approaches to educating students that local school boards began to develop natural science schools both locally and on properties outside of the Greater Toronto Area. The first school-board operated centre to open was the Island Natural Science School on the Toronto Islands in 1960, which provided, and continues to provide, multi-day learning experiences for Toronto students. In 1967, the Toronto Board of Education purchased property north of Orangeville that would become the Boyne River Natural Science School. This was followed by a number of day-use education centres, including the Forest Valley Outdoor Education Centre (Toronto Board of Education, 1967) in North York, the Burlington Outdoor Resource Centre (York Board of Education, 1968) in Vaughan and the Jack Smythe Field Centre (Peel Board of Education, 1969) in Terra Cotta.

Central to the development of school board-operated centres in this era was the perspective that students developed a stronger understanding and appreciation of nature and natural environments through the direct exposure to, and experience within, diverse ecosystems, and thus could better contribute to the goals of conservation. From a curricular perspective, the learning programs delivered to students at outdoor education centres focused on providing access to the natural environment, while also developing skills related to natural resource management. There was also a further recognition at the time that students from a then urbanizing city-region faced an increasing disconnect from their natural environment and outdoor education centres sought to create opportunities for urban students to experience nature.

While school board outdoor education programs continued to develop through the 1970s and into the early 1980s, Provincial budget constraints in the late 1980s and 1990s slowed development of new natural science schools operated by school boards. By the early 2000s, further constraint led to the closure of one TRCA overnight centre (Boyd Field Centre), operated under a partnership agreement with local school boards, in 2001, followed by three Toronto District School Board overnight centres (Pine River Outdoor Education Centre, Noisy River Outdoor Education Centre and Boyne River Natural Science School) in 2003. However, during this time the York Region District School Board established the Sibbald Point Outdoor Education Centre within Sibbald Point Provincial Park in Georgina in 2004 and the Swan Lake Outdoor Education Centre in Richmond Hill in 2016 in partnership with TRCA.

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Inventory of Conservation Authority and School Board-Operated Outdoor Education Centres

The following is an inventory education centres operated by TRCA and local school boards. Centres in *italics* are either located on, or adjacent to, TRCA-owned greenspace.

Outdoor Education Centre	Operated By	Location	Type	Opened
School Board Operated Centres				
<i>Duffins Creek Environmental Education Centre</i>	DDSB	Claremont	Day	1989
Nonquon Environmental Education Centre	DDSB	Greenbank	Day	1977
Durham Forest Environmental Education Centre	DDSB	Goodwood	Overnight	1978
Old Britannia School House	PDSB	Mississauga	Day (Seasonal)	1982
Brittania Farm Field Centre	PDSB	Mississauga	Day (Seasonal)	1988
GW Finlayson Field Centre	PDSB	Orangeville	Day	1975
Jack Smythe Field Centre	PDSB	Terra Cotta	Day	1969
<i>Forest Valley Outdoor Education Centre</i>	TDSB	Toronto	Day	1967
<i>Hillside Outdoor Education School</i>	TDSB	Toronto	Day	1975
Toronto Urban Studies Centre	TDSB	Toronto	Day	1978
Warren Park Outdoor Education Centre	TDSB	Toronto	Day	1972
<i>Etobicoke Outdoor Education Centre</i>	TDSB	Caledon	Overnight	1982
Island Natural Science Centre	TDSB	Toronto	Overnight	1960
Mono Cliffs Outdoor Education Centre	TDSB	Orangeville	Overnight	1986
Scarborough Outdoor Education School	TDSB	Kearny	Overnight	1978
Sheldon Centre for Outdoor Education	TDSB	Alliston	Overnight	1982
<i>Swan Lake Outdoor Education Centre</i>	YRDSB	Richmond Hill	Day	2016
<i>Milne Outdoor Education Centre</i>	YRDSB	Markham	Day	1990
Sibbald Point Outdoor Education Centre	YRDSB	Sutton	Day	2004
<i>Burlington Outdoor Education Centre</i>	YRDSB	Kleinburg	Day	1968
Vivian Outdoor Education Centre	YRDSB	Ballantrae	Day	1972
Conservation Authority Operated Centres				
<i>Kortright Centre for Conservation</i>	TRCA	Vaughan	Day	1979
<i>Tommy Thompson Park Education Programs</i>	TRCA	Toronto	Day (Seasonal)	2004
<i>Bruce's Mill Maple Syrup Programs</i>	TRCA	Whitchurch-Stouffville	Day (Seasonal)	1968
<i>Claremont Nature Centre</i>	TRCA	Claremont	Overnight	1970
<i>Albion Hills Field Centre</i>	TRCA	Caledon	Overnight	1963
<i>Lake St. George Field Centre</i>	TRCA	Richmond Hill	Day	1979

RATIONALE

Under S.197 of the Education Act (RSO 1990), conservation authorities and school boards are enabled to enter into an agreement for the use of lands, buildings and personnel for the purposes of providing natural science, conservation or other out-of-classroom programs. The following sections of the Education Act outline the various mechanisms available to school boards for the provision of out-of-classroom programs.

OUT-OF-CLASSROOM PROGRAMS

Dealings with land for out-of-classroom programs

197 (1) *Where a board acquires a school site under subsection 195 (1), (2) or (3) for the purpose of conducting thereon a natural science program and other out-of-classroom programs, the board shall obtain the approval of the Minister before it erects, adds to or alters buildings on or makes other improvements to the school site for such purpose. R.S.O. 1990, c. E.2, s. 197 (1).*

Idem

(3) *A board may, with the approval of the Minister, acquire by purchase or lease for the purpose of conducting a natural science program and other out-of-classroom programs a school site in Ontario that it does not have the authority to acquire under section 195, and the board shall obtain the approval of the Minister before it erects, adds to or alters buildings on or makes other improvements to the school site for such purpose. R.S.O. 1990, c. E.2, s. 197 (3).*

Agreement between boards

(5) *Two or more boards may enter into an agreement for a period specified therein for the shared use of a school site in Ontario for conducting natural science programs and other out-of-classroom programs but, where under such agreement one of the boards may acquire or is to acquire by purchase or lease a school site for such purpose or is to erect, add to or alter a building on or make other improvements to such site, the agreement is not effective until it is approved by the Minister, and a school site situate outside the jurisdiction of the boards that are parties to the agreement shall not be acquired without the prior approval of the Minister. R.S.O. 1990, c. E.2, s. 197 (5).*

Agreements with conservation authorities, etc.

(7) *A board may enter into an agreement with a conservation or other appropriate authority under which the board may, with the approval of the Minister, construct and maintain on lands owned by the authority the necessary facilities for the purpose of conducting a natural science program or other out-of-classroom program. R.S.O. 1990, c. E.2, s. 197 (7).*

Idem

(8) *A board that conducts a natural science, conservation or other out-of-classroom program may enter into an agreement with a conservation or other appropriate authority for the use of the facilities and personnel of such authority for the purpose of conducting such a program as directed by the board. R.S.O. 1990, c. E.2, s. 197 (8).*

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Idem

(9) One or more boards may enter into an agreement with a conservation or other appropriate authority to provide for the construction, furnishing and equipping by the authority on lands owned by the authority of facilities for the purposes of conducting a natural science, conservation or other out-of-classroom program as directed by the board or one or more of the boards and, where under the agreement a board is required to pay all or part of the cost of the facilities, the construction of the facilities shall be first approved by the Minister, and the amount paid therefor by the board shall be deemed to be an expenditure made by the board for a permanent improvement. R.S.O. 1990, c. E.2, s. 197 (9).

Board and lodging for courses in conservation

(10) A board may provide or pay for board and lodging for a pupil for a period not exceeding two weeks in any year while the pupil participates, with the consent of his or her parent or guardian and with the permission of the board, in a natural science, conservation or other out-of-classroom program. R.S.O. 1990, c. E.2, s. 197 (10).

It is through the above enabling legislation that much of the conservation authority and school board operated outdoor education system has developed to respond to student needs related to learning in the out-of-doors. The above clauses specific to conservation authorities and school boards recognize of the value of partnerships as a model for delivering outdoor education, and provide mechanisms for efficient and effective future collaborations that maximize the potential of public assets while enhancing access for students to natural science, conservation and environmental learning opportunities in the out-of-doors.

Relationship to Building the Living City, the TRCA 2013-2022 Strategic Plan

This report supports the following strategies set forth in the TRCA 2013-2022 Strategic Plan:

Strategy 3 – Rethink greenspace to maximize its value

Strategy 5 – Foster sustainable citizenship

Strategy 7 – Build partnerships and new business models

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