

# Toronto and Region Conservation Authority Outdoor Education Task Force

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## *Draft Statement*

In 2019, Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) convened the Outdoor Education Task Force (Task Force) to develop a framework for the long-term provision of out-of-classroom learning experiences related to natural science, conservation and the environment that meets the needs of the student population to the year 2040.

As part of a series of working group activities, the Task Force was asked to imagine a future where outdoor education is accessible to all and hold an important role in students' learning experience; a future where outdoor education is held to the highest standard of what it means to learn outside of the classroom and brings to life natural science, conservation and the environment. The Task Force proposed the enclosed for TRCA's role in bringing this to life.

It is also worth noting that we are having these conversations in a transformative time as Covid-19 has changed our daily habits and disrupted how we learn, work and live. The global pandemic brought into sharp focus the importance of access to the outdoors for our individual and collective well-being. In our context of K - 12 education, it has also highlighted some misconceptions about what outdoor education<sup>1</sup> is.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms environmental education (EE), outdoor education (OE), and outdoor experiential education (OEE) have often been used interchangeably and have lost their distinction in common language usage. While we are using the term outdoor education throughout this framework, it is our intention to shift the language *to out-of-classroom learning* to better represent the full inclusiveness of the learning experiences we are promoting: natural science, conservation, and environmental.

## We envision a **future** where...

The students of Ontario have consistent access to quality outdoor education. Educators have the confidence and self-efficacy to make environmental stewardship a pillar of their classroom pedagogy.

Trustees, in partnership with parents and guardians, and in cooperation with TRCA, advocate for system change in how funds are allocated for outdoor education. Advocacy is targeted towards an ecosystem of funders, like the Ontario Ministry of Education, School Boards, and organizations like the OPSBA, OSTCA, and OSTA, and industry, with the goal of consistent funding to support long-term planning and a breadth of actions that will ensure flexibility for classrooms and whole boards in their delivery of outdoor education.

Community comes together to create a system of support ensuring impactful out-of-classroom learning related to natural science, conservation and the environment.

Environmental stewardship is rooted in a global, interconnected understanding that is introspective: building an appreciation for Indigenous knowledge and communities, and understanding the role of colonialism on our understanding, behaviours and relationship with the land.

Generations of environmental stewards are fostered, sparked, nourished and sustained with outdoor education experiences; contributing to a citizenry with a life-long appreciation for nature and land, and the agencies required to take actions that ensure a viable future for ourselves and the environment.

## Where TRCA is the...

Catalyst that brings stakeholders together to foster environmental stewardship that is rooted in equity and anti-oppression, and access to out-of-classroom learning related to natural science, conservation and the environment is a reality for all students.

Convener of important conversations and facilitator of taking actions that will link school boards to school boards, organizations with school boards and school boards to organization and to TRCA - based on valuable input from council members, community liaisons and educators. This work shifts the culture of the education community - with students, parents, guardians, classroom educators, administrators and central staff - to one that champions the importance of outdoor education.

## With our school board partners, TRCA can **bring this vision to life by...**

### **Stepping into a leadership role**

As TRCA we have a leadership role to play. A history of doing good, impactful work has made us a leader in conservation and outdoor education grounded in science. We will leverage our power to influence how the outdoor education community fosters environmental stewardship rooted in equity, anti-oppression and cultural appreciation.

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### **Leading with student voice**

If outdoor education is going to be equitable, anti-oppressive and reflective of student identities, students must lead the way in imagining, influencing and informing possibilities. As an organization with power, we will centre the identities and lived experiences with students to be accountable in our work.

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### **Convening and building the collaboration ecosystem**

Shifting culture requires stakeholders to collaborate. TRCA is the connector for groups, creating the wrap-around support for educators, students and communities to engage in outdoor education. It is this collective that will build momentum to advocate for system change in funding outdoor education and creating the budget flexibility needed to allow individual schools and school boards to engage in outdoor education. As collaboration grows in the system, new partnerships will emerge, for example the school boards sharing land for out of classroom learning experiences.

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### **Setting the standard for outdoor education programming, together.**

As a collective - with students, school boards, educators and organizations-, we will identify the guiding principles that outdoor education should be designed with. It is these principles that will set the standard for experiences that are safe, rooted in equity and anti-oppression; accessible to all and affirming to student identities, regardless of socioeconomic and geographic proximity. Collectively we will set standards and guidelines that recognize the risks associated with outdoor education to create outdoor experiences that are accessible, enjoyable, and safe. Equity guiding principles will be jointly created with this collective to use in designing outdoor education experiences and promoting environmental stewardship. This is how we build capacity in community to look for quality experiences in outdoor education.

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### Co-creating the entry points

TRCA supports students, educators, school boards, senior staff and community organizations in bringing outdoor education experiences to life. There is no single right way to start developing as an environmental steward. The TRCA and organizations will leverage their unique assets including land, educators, technology and community, to create experiences. TRCA will collaborate with organizations and educators to co-design outdoor education experiences that are rooted in cultural knowledge and appreciation and embedded within inquiry-based learning that amplifies the learning and experiences.

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