Environmental & Forest Education in the Classroom

Summary of Key Workshop Findings November 2019
Acknowledgements

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Introduction

The long-term wellbeing of our forests is dependent upon fostering future environmental stewards.

In recognition of this, Forests Ontario, Project Learning Tree Canada (PLT Canada), and the Canadian Institute of Forestry/Institut forestier du Canada (CIF-IFC) each actively work to connect youth with natural resources through a variety of in-class and interactive outdoor forestry-related educational initiatives. Utilizing strong partnerships with educators and leaders in the forest sector, these organizations offer programs designed to inspire youth to take action and make choices in support of healthy, natural ecosystems – both today and in the future.

However, reaching youth through the school system is becoming increasingly challenging, and many organizations across the province and country have noted barriers in delivering meaningful and sustainable education programs.

In response, Forests Ontario, PLT Canada, and CIF-IFC facilitated a workshop in April, 2019 to discuss the state of environmental and forest education in Ontario, explore the barriers to program delivery, and uncover opportunities to increase participation and impact.
Workshop Development, Delivery, & Results

Workshop Development

Forests Ontario approached Gesner & Associates Environmental Learning (GAEL) to assist in the coordination and facilitation of a provincial workshop.

Together, Forests Ontario, GAEL, and Sprout Educational Consulting scoped out potential participants who would be able to contribute to discussions around a series of driving questions. These participants included representatives from non-profit organizations, industry associations, municipalities, school boards, university faculties of education, conservation authorities, provincial ministries, teachers’ associations, and individual schools.

A survey was developed and distributed to potential participants with years of outdoor and classroom teaching experience, with the intent of gathering preliminary data to inform the workshop. The results, which were used to help set the agenda for workshop discussion, were distributed to all invited participants prior to the workshop. Some notable findings included:

- Approximately 60% of respondents thought that there is too little environment and/or forestry education in the curriculum. Notably, approximately 26% were unsure.

- 63% thought that there is not enough time to incorporate environmental and forest education into everyday lessons. Again, 21% were unsure.

- 94% of respondents thought that it is very to extremely important to teach environmental and/or forestry education. The same results stood for the importance of teaching about environmental careers.

- Only 11% of respondents said they thought teachers were confident in delivering environmental and/or forestry education.

- 50% of the respondents like to get their educational resources by downloading from a website.
Workshop Delivery

The workshop was held on April 25, 2019 in Toronto and was attended by 30 participants.

The workshop began with icebreaker activities intended to establish connections between the participants. The most prominent connection found was the interest in identifying opportunities to facilitate and grow forest and environmental education. Icebreaker discussion also identified that many of the participants had impactful experiences connecting them to the outdoors and a driving passion for sharing this with youth.

The participants were then divided into two breakout groups: barriers and opportunities. The ‘barriers’ group were tasked with assessing the barriers they have faced regarding environmental and forest education delivery, and the ‘opportunities’ group were responsible for discussing what in their experience is working as well as the mechanisms that may further enhance environmental and forest education delivery.

Following breakout discussions, both groups reconvened to provide summaries of their findings. A wall chart with accompanying illustrations was used to convey key discussion points. The participants were then broken up into subgroups once more to explore the following targeted questions which stemmed from the key discussion items:

- What is needed to deliver more environmental and forest education?
- What potential partnership can be explored?
- What boundaries can be pushed?
Discussion Results

Barriers

Throughout the workshop, several barriers to delivering environmental and forest education were discussed, including limited resources; lack of buy in from administration, teachers, and educators; and the perceptions of value of environmental and forest education. The following barriers and sub-barriers were identified as being important:

- **How our preconceptions about environmental and forest education impact learning outcomes**
  - Fitting forestry into a learning situation with limited resources (funding, time, logistics, etc.)
  - The knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences of teachers and their administration
  - The knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences of students
  - The knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences of parents and the community

- **Not knowing what materials reflect accurate forestry information**
  - Users may be unable to determine what content in environmental and forest education resources is accurate
  - Large volume of resources currently available that lack transparency on individuals or organizations who developed them
  - The narrow context that is represented in existing forestry education resources

- **Logistical barriers associated with affordability, access, and risk**
  - Transportation and release time costs can be prohibitive reducing opportunities for immersive out of classroom trips
  - Limited near-by nature opportunities, especially for urban schools
Opportunities

Several opportunities such as using local champions for promotion, leveraging technology and virtual learning, integrating forestry into other learning objectives, place-based learning, and expanding audiences were discussed throughout the workshop. The following opportunities and sub-opportunities were identified as being important:

▲ Reach new audiences and broaden existing ones
  • Finding and forming relationships with local organizations and individuals to reach new audiences
  • Building a virtual community and/or leveraging technology to broaden niche environmental audiences

▲ Change the approach from “push” to “pull”
  • Using forestry as a context to meet another societal need or learning outcome

▲ Collaborate to be better than the sum of each part
  • Collaborating with other organizations to offer unique experiences that may otherwise be beyond capacity
  • Finding and forming relationships in the community to reach new teachers, administrators, and students
  • Providing space for environmental and forest education practitioners to share best practices and ideas
Future Directions

This workshop revealed that while there is still a great deal to learn about the effective delivery of environmental and forest education in Ontario, there are many stakeholders at the table with valuable experience and a desire to share. Collaboration and knowledge transfer allow this collective knowledge to be put to use in the form of actions to overcome barriers and act upon existing opportunities.

Next steps discussed during the workshop include:

▲ Find one voice and a relevant, common message to enhance clarity
  • Consider who plans and delivers a common message. It was suggested that PLT Canada act as a core network for messaging
  • Develop and deliver relevant messages, which connect to current issues

▲ Revisit how we work with schools and teachers, and what we offer them
  • Understand the point of view of schools and teachers. This could involve demonstrating more clearly the connection between environmental and forest education and curriculum, and providing more and new opportunities for professional development
  • Create a curated list of stakeholders, activities, and opportunities
  • Consider what channels organizations are using to connect with stakeholders

▲ Initiate broader collaboration-combine capacities to offer more together
  • Consider fundraising as a collective to deliver larger-scale programs which will impact a greater number of students
  • Partner to leverage the expertise of others; expertise at the local, provincial, and national level are unique and equally valuable, and can be optimized when working together
The following potential partners were identified:

- Forest sector
- Environmental learning centres
- School boards and schools
- Libraries
- Local businesses
- Cities, municipalities, and conservation authorities
- Influencers, advocates, and champions
- Intergenerational groups (i.e. Rotary Club)
- Professional tech education companies
- Local forestry operations/landowners
- Outdoor groups

Conclusion

Participants of the workshop agreed that in order to continue pushing the boundaries of environmental and forest education, focus should be placed upon combining organizational capacities to craft and convey common messaging, as well as upon identifying opportunities to understand how schools and educators view environmental and forest education and how programming can be made more valuable and impactful.

It is incredibly important to overcome the challenges regarding outdoor education program development and delivery, as doing so is instrumental in developing a meaningful relationship between youth and our natural resources. Truly, the long-term wellbeing of our environment is dependent upon fostering future environmental stewards.
About the Organizations

Forests Ontario

Forests Ontario is a not-for-profit charity dedicated to re-greening the province through the support of forest restoration, stewardship, education and awareness. We promote Canada’s greatest natural resource – our forests – because healthy forests sustain healthy communities and healthy economies. Forests Ontario is the voice of our forests. Visit www.forestsontario.ca or follow us @Forests_Ontario to find out more.

Project Learning Tree Canada

Project Learning Tree Canada (PLT Canada) believes in a society that values and benefits from sustainably managed forests and the great outdoors. PLT Canada is committed to using the outdoors to engage youth in learning about the world around them—in rural, Indigenous and urban communities—and using trees and forests as windows on the world to inspire action and grow the next generation of future forest and conservation leaders. Project Learning Tree Canada is an initiative of the Sustainable Forestry Initiative.

Canadian Institute of Forestry - Institut Forestier du Canada

Established in 1908, the CIF-IFC is the oldest forest society in Canada. The Institute serves as the voice of forest practitioners representing foresters, forest technologists and technicians, ecologists, biologists, educators and many others with a professional interest in forestry. The Institute is dedicated to; providing national leadership in forestry, promoting competency among forestry professionals and fostering public awareness of forestry issues. Visit www.cif-ifc.org or find us on social media @CIF_IFC to discover more.