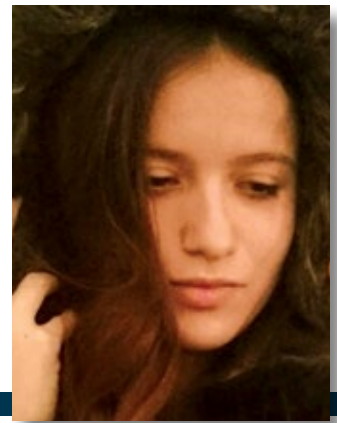


# Environmental Education:

## Esther Bogorov Interviews Gareth Thomson, Executive Director of Alberta Council for Environmental Education

By Esther Bogorov



**E**B: Let's start with the basics. What is environmental education?

GT: Environmental education is a process that seeks to help a student become environmentally literate. In a sentence, environmental literacy is an understanding of how the planet works and how to take care of it. How to care for the planet comes from developing critical thinking and action skills. One of my heroes David Orr says, "Hope is a verb with its sleeves rolled up." We owe it to students to give them the experience to help them make the world a better place.

Environmental education helps students with how to think, not what to think. In my experience, if we're doing a debate or simulation, they almost always choose conservation in the end. Without helping students take action the implicit message is that "there is trouble in the world, and there is nothing

you can do about it." That is wrong.

**EB: Tell me a bit of the history and development of Alberta Council for Environmental Education (ACEE).**

GT: A decade ago a colleague and I toured the province, asking the broad community of environmental education stakeholders, "What can we do together that we can't do alone?" One of the things folk said was that someone needs to 'wake up in the morning' thinking about this, and that is why ACEE was created. We are a non-profit registered charity and our mission is to work in collaboration with others to advance environmental education in Alberta.

This is important: we need to think about environmental education as the key strategic tool to create a sustainable future. Now we are three full-time staff as well as a few contactors.

**EB: How do you advance your mission?**

GT: We host an annual conference, where we put up a big tent and gather teachers and education programmers to compare notes, share best practices and successes, and grow together as professionals. We host an annual leadership clinic, where educators come with a goal, receive professional development training over several days, and leave with a plan to deliver on their goal. We run a program called Alberta Green Schools to provide groups of teachers from different schools an understanding of relevant teaching resources, and help them plan together to create a culture of environmental stewardship in their school. We have a searchable online database, which is an environmental education resource centre with over 500 programs currently listed. These tools can help in schools or non-formal settings, such as Cub Scout meetings.

We heard from one teacher recently who said: "ACEE adds a ton of value to our work. My team was amazed to learn that ACEE only has 3 staff!"

**EB: So you really try to create communities of practice or cohorts of teachers learning together. How do you build that successfully?**

GT: It's really important to us to gather people to get them pushing simultaneously in the same direction on something. We meet face to face, through our series of workshops and professional learning events, including the conference, to help educators or agency professionals become even better at what they are already doing. We try to orient them to opportunities to work together to create



Baba Dioum said, "In the end we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, and we will understand only what we are taught." CREDIT: ACEE

something. For example, we are calling for more environmental content in the new Alberta Programs of Study.

**EB: I have heard there are important opportunities for curriculum redesign in Alberta.**

GT: Curriculum is a three-legged stool, composed of the programs of study, which is what teachers must teach and students must learn; teacher resources, which is what they use to deliver the lessons; and assessment.

Many programs of study are due for a rewrite: for example, Elementary Science hasn't been updated in nearly 20 years. It is noteworthy that one of the proposed new criteria for pre-service teachers [who are university students currently taking a bachelor of education] is that they must be versed in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit issues.

There is much that is encouraging that is in the Indigenous way of knowing—including their land ethic and a relationship to the earth. I believe that the dominant culture has much to learn from those ways of knowing. I encourage students to look at the world through different cultural lenses. What environmental outcomes might occur if perspectives of different First Nations were brought to bear on 21st century decisions?

**EB: You promote energy education as well as environmental education. Why is it important to cover both sides of the issue?**

GT: We live in a province where the energy sector is an important reality and an economic driver. Energy supports our lifestyles and gives people work. At ACEE work very hard to deliver on our mission to advance environmental education – so long as we do that, it makes sense to advance energy education at the same time. This is true education, and the only way to truly help students understand the connections and how things are related. We have them see how the real world works, wrestle with the tension between “development versus protection,” and so understand a real-world point of view.

**EB: Tell us about your recent exploration around showing climate leadership in Alberta schools.**

GT: One of the tricks of our trade is to demonstrate how environmental education and conservation efforts are relevant to all Albertans. Half a year ago, in collaboration with the Centre for Global Education ACEE convened 3,000 students with virtual town hall online technology. They came from eight Alberta high schools to consider, “How can Alberta schools show climate leadership?” Rachel Notley attended the event, answered students' questions, and gave advice on how to proceed. The students have put together a series of recommendations for education leaders, such as Ministers and school board Chairs, on how they, in their different roles, could help schools show climate leadership.

Climate change has been described as the mother of all environmental issues, which is just a call to us, as educators, to do this one really well. One of the few solutions to the despair and anxiety that climate change brings is to take action, to help students and everyone else to do things. The student who is given the chance to do something no longer feels hopeless and helpless; instead they feel empowered, they have agency. There are all kinds of things that should be done on this issue and the government is pushing us to do something on it as a bunch of citizens, so this is a great time to engage the students. There are all kinds of actions that students can take, including personal lifestyle changes, recycling in their elementary school, participating in conservation and wild land protection through letter writing campaigns in junior high, and decreasing the carbon footprint of their high school by improving energy efficiency and starting renewable energy projects.

**EB: How can we spread these ideas beyond the classroom? How can adults and professionals also learn from the work you do?**

GT: Wouldn't it be lovely if climate leadership came home from schools, just like recycling did in the 1980s? We just

need to get those programs happening in schools to get that transmission and transfusion. Change is possible.

We have another program called Get Outside and Play, targeted at preschoolers. We've gathered almost 400 members to join this network, which seeks to ensure that more children have positive experiences in nature. Research tells us that time spent outdoors in the company of a caring adult helps create environmentalists and conservationists. Positive outdoor experiences are one of the big reasons that people “grow up green.”

I put great stock on what Baba Dioum said: “In the end we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, and we will understand only what we are taught.” We all need to create more opportunities for people to fall in love with nature, to fall in love with wild land.

**EB: What are some memorable take-aways from the work you've been doing?**

GT: I want to emphasize that everyone has the capacity to be environmentally literate.

Another of my heroes, David Sobel, said: “Teach no tragedies before grade four; help students understand how to love the earth before we ask them to protect it.” A key precursor to becoming a conservationist is spending time in nature. I would encourage everyone to find a way to be a caring adult who takes a curious child outside. You can be an environmental educator by doing the following with young people or with adult friends: go for a walk. Enjoy this gift of planet earth that we're given, and think of a way to share your love with someone near and dear to you. 🌱

*Gareth Thomson has over twenty-five years of experience in environmental education. He has taught high school, served on Canmore town council, and been a judge for the Alberta Emerald Awards. Gareth lives in Canmore, where he divides his time between parenting three exceptional young people and exploring little-known hiking trails and hidden valleys with his partner Kelly.*