

CONNECTING YOUTH TO NATURE AT THE PALISADES CENTRE

BY NIKI WILSON



I have caught James Bartram on a rare day – the grounds and classrooms of the Palisades Centre aren't the usual frenzy of teens donning snowshoes, prepping cameras for a scavenger hunt, or meeting with Parks Canada scientists. Bartram is the Education Director at the Parks Canada Palisades Stewardship Education Centre. The Centre runs accredited, curriculum-based courses designed to engage youth from Canada and around the world in week-long interactions with the wilds of Jasper National Park. In its fifth year, the Centre is now taking bookings three years ahead of time.

Bartram takes inspiration from the "Love, Not Loss" campaign spearheaded by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). In a video to promote the campaign, the IUCN says "the single most important factor behind taking action is our childhood experience. The well-spring behind our commitment comes from the emotional high we reach when in contact with nature."

The Palisades Centre facilitates these connections by immersing youth in outdoor recreation, wilderness-inspired art, and natural science projects. For example, this summer one group hiked along a trail to set up a motion-triggered camera at a bear rub tree. After testing the camera with photos of themselves, a national park scientist met with the students to show them pictures of a grizzly bear rubbing on that very tree the day before. Jeanine D'Antonio, Stewardship Program Coordinator, says that many of the students are in awe, almost shocked when they realize they've stood in the same place as a grizzly bear. "It's like watching an awakening in some of these kids. It's very rewarding."

The programs are free for Alberta kids. Says Bartram, "We are trying to advantage all kids that come through the system."

In addition to building a sense of stewardship for natural places in general, Bartram hopes the program works toward fostering an interest in national parks. "[Last

year], the average age of a visitor to a national park was 52. We're running towards a cliff. People aren't visiting national parks as families anymore."

Bartram admits that many more students need to be reached for national parks to become relevant to their generation. "We seek to be transformative, and reach a small audience in a profound way" says Bartram. "But a few thousand kids isn't enough. We need to be reaching many, many more."

Bartram says one of the biggest challenges in reaching youth is that programs like those offered at the Palisades are disappearing. "Ten years ago there were probably 20 programs like ours [across the country]. Now there are about three." Bartram points to the North Vancouver Outdoor School and the Arundel Nature Centre in Quebec. "They are the only ones that have a component of formal education, are accredited, and doing multi-day programs."

Bartram is working with leaders at those schools to come up with funding to train

others to run the programs. “We’re trying to grow capacity across mountain parks and North America.” Parks Canada has also started to run mobile programs in partnership with Outward Bound and Robert Bateman’s “Get to Know” program. Mobile courses have been offered in Mount Revelstoke/Glacier National Park, Waterton Lakes National Park, Gulf Islands National Park, and Fort Rod Hill. Bartram hopes to run a program in Toronto next year.

In the meantime, the Palisades continues to provide strong nature-based educational programs for school groups each week and attract dignitaries from around the world (Britain, China, Scandinavia) who are interested in developing similar programs. “We have a winning formula,” says Bartram. “Some of the approaches we are applying are being seen as really effective for a broad cross-section of students.”

Several years ago a group of students paddled down the Athabasca River and camped on Athabasca Island as part of their experience with the Palisades Centre. The students are now grown and attending university. But because of that first experience, they return as a group each year to repeat the paddling trip. “This is how we measure success at the Palisades” says Bartram, adding “ideally some day Parks Canada will get so good at this kind of engagement that I’ll be out of a job.”

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