

Eco-Literacy 101: Taking the Fear out of Nature-based Learning.  
October 22, 2010

The **Gulf Islands Centre for Ecological Learning** presented this unique, hands-on opportunity to teachers of the Gulf Islands School District as a provincial professional development workshop. It was facilitated by two of GICEL's experienced members—**Michael Dunn and Briony Penn**. This workshop was an exciting opportunity for primary and elementary teachers to explore ways to create learning experiences across all subject areas using the natural environment. The course had both indoor and outdoor components.

The purpose of the workshop was to provide participants with a selection of nature-based, outdoor activities that could be used to demonstrate ecological themes, build foundational skills in innovative ways and to create options for exploring home place. The whole day was designed to assist in the use of the **constructivist** learning model being implemented by the Gulf Islands School District. As such, the facilitators chose activities that were place-based, ecological, and outdoor focused. The other purpose was to remove thresholds that tend to prevent teachers from taking their classes outside. First and foremost, was demonstrating activities that could be undertaken in school grounds or the local neighbourhood to remove the notion that these could only be done using field trips. The other threshold was that many teachers are uncomfortable doing lessons outside; feeling that they are not knowledgeable enough to do outdoor experiential lessons.

It was a wonderful fall day on Salt Spring Island in which 14 participants learned about and explored the Salt Spring Elementary School grounds, a neighbourhood vacant lot and a hidden suburban stream. The morning was dedicated to the outdoors and GICEL's two facilitators led participants through a series of activities. Michael focused on activities that can be done in a schoolyard, while Briony took the group to a local vacant lot and nearby hidden stream.

A sampling of these includes activities to:

- expand the sensory experience outdoors,
- use simple mapping techniques,
- walk "concept paths" used to explain ecological processes,
- learn wildcrafting arts,
- learn the value of free exploration as a learning tool, and
- learn about ecosystem or Nature's services

The process was an open interactive session whereby facilitators

pointed out how each of the activities or components of activities can serve as a basis for a learning plan or to measure of a learning outcome.

The afternoon session was designed for the participants to use the results of the morning session to discuss or design relevant activities or programs for their own classrooms. This was an open session with the facilitators acting as resource people. The participants organized themselves into either small groups or individually for this purpose. Extensive resource and reference materials were available for this session. At the end of the day, participants described what they had created or planned to create for their classes.

A workshop evaluation questionnaire was used to receive feedback on the day's events and their value to the participants and their needs. The overwhelming consensus was that this sort of workshop was valuable and that more should be held within the district.

### **Further Readings**

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Michael J. Cohen, 2007. *Reconnecting with Nature: Finding wellness through restoring your bond with the Earth*, Third Edition. Ecopress. An imprint of the Finney Company. [www.finneyco.com](http://www.finneyco.com).

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Steve Van Matre, 1999. Earth Education: a new beginning. Institute for Earth Education. West Virginia, US. [www.eartheducation.org](http://www.eartheducation.org)

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