



G★ICEL

GULF ISLANDS CENTRE FOR
ECOLOGICAL LEARNING

Awareness · Affiliation · Advocacy · Action



CELEBRATING
25 YEARS
2001 ★ 2026



Introduction

This issue of the Gulf Islands Centre for Ecological Learning (GICEL) has been compiled to provide a snapshot of the 25 years our programs have been offered on the Southern Gulf Islands. We have endeavoured to select articles and reports from past years that represent what GICEL is and has become over this time. We also have asked past leaders of our programs for their thoughts on what GICEL had meant to them. These are further enriched by accounts of relatives and participants in our programs. And, of course, we have reports on our last operating year.





As the founder of this organization, I look back at the 25 years that have passed since I created the feasibility study for the Gulf Islands School District. I am humbled by what it has become, what it means to participants and its importance to the many families both on the islands and elsewhere. GICEL has become larger than the sum of its parts and I believe continues to make a positive impact on those who attend.

“I have been attending GICEL/Seedlings since I was four and have always loved the environment and community!”

This is so important now with the pressures of growing up in the current situation is daunting to say the least. We know that the foundation of our programs - to provide participants a safe place to explore and connect to Nature and all its wonders - are so vitally important to children's self awareness and development. This foundation allows us to be creative and hopeful even when we know we are competing with the overwhelming diversity of virtual experiences and information that is available instantly. Working in nature slows one down and heightens all the senses. This has always been GICEL's strength. It provides and creates for children visceral , real experiences, not virtual.

Michael Dunn

Saturna Experience through the years

Saturna Grandmother, 2026

I never walk past the bent cedar on the back Winter Cove trail without thinking of the kids my own included who used it as their special place, their hide away during the program and still remark on it when we walk by. Our eldest granddaughter loves Saturna and loves walking about and looking in tide pools. For many of our grandkids they have never had the experience of being in a group of littles to big. It always touched my heart to see the warmth of the interactions grow between the different ages. The depth of listening, making space for each other over the week. You can see as the parents and grandparents drop of the kids the in the morning their confidence grows, wanting to share with their big buddies what happened or what they are wearing.



Living in the Gulf Islands many of us have a passing knowledge of marine biology or plants- what we don't have is the joy of playing in the forest, of imaginary animals that showcase the various adaptations of animals. So many engaging ways to learn about wildlife with teachers who teach songs, games, running, imagination!! Our kids as they attended faithfully year by year with their other "summer buddies" went on to be junior councillors. This was a big step for them that they were very proud of. They knew how they had felt and learned in the program and they had the chance to teach, be with and have lots of fun. In my experience with my grandkids the day was just long enough to have the kids exhausted each day and ready to roll out the next morning plus the bonus of the last day presentation for all the families. I know the work it takes to create a teaching program and keep it rolling for years. For our kids to be at home and for the week to be surrounded by new kids to be hugely active and outside with doing creative and stimulating things together is invaluable. To say we treasure this opportunity is an understatement - you know when you have "lucked out"! All the best, to the staff. Last grandchild is three and we have two four year olds and a set of two year old twins, keep up the splendid work you are a big part of Saturna Islands happiness!

"I've always loved going to camp and playing outdoor games with my friends"



Leadership Development through GICEL

By Jess Willows, Long time Program Coordinator 2026

As a program coordinator and being involved with GICEL for almost 23 years, two observations have surprised me the most: the culture and community that has developed and been maintained by the participants and leaders over the years and how humbled and honoured I have felt in the joy of watching our campers become leaders and beyond. It was the participants who started seeing the pathway from camper to leader as a right of passage and opportunity to carry on the legacy of the program. Even now with our recent interviews for leadership positions this year, almost all were former participants. When asked why they want to be a leader for our summer program, they consistently answer that they “want to make the program as good as it was when I was a camper.” They often speak about how important this program was to them when they were younger – being outside all day and learning about nature first hand. One applicant said that they had found a place where they felt they belonged.



We often have more leaders than we need to run the camps, but because leadership has become such an important part of the community and culture the participants have developed, we have come up with some creative ways to include as many leaders as we can. This way many campers get an opportunity to be leaders and continue to feel a part of the community. As someone who has been organizing the GICEL programs for over 20 years it has been a privilege to witness campers grow into leaders; some I've known from the time they were 6 until their 20s. Through this time, I've noticed a few similar characteristics as they have navigated moving from camper to leader.



Before they take on the mantle of leader, they often start this transition by being “helping” participants, this is when they are not yet leaders but are thinking about how they would like to be a leader the next year or year after. They often take initiative and demonstrate their growing leadership skills by helping with some of the younger participants or encouraging someone to join in a game, etc. Then they become leaders in training! I sometimes refer to the time when our leaders are 12-13 (or 14) as “investment years” as this is where we see the most growth in their leadership skills. We know that developmentally this is one of our most important times as we are transitioning between child and adult. Many cultures celebrate and honour this time in some way, acknowledging that it can be a difficult, but necessary part of our development and maturity. As adults, we can sometimes recall how awkward we felt at these ages and are sometimes irritated by the behaviours we see out in public with young teens. I think it’s because it reminds us of how we felt and we don’t want to be reminded of this!





Our leaders in training work hard during these years. I've watched some work through an expectation that being in a leader role would mean that participants would listen to them. Where they started to learn a deeper understanding of leadership as relational and reciprocal, of having positive influence, not power over. Once they are in the junior leader role there is often a sense of growing confidence in themselves. Their sense of themselves as role models is apparent and they conduct themselves with respect and maturity (for the most part!). I find their time as senior leaders is the most rewarding. I think it might be because I know this is the last year or two that we will have them be a regular part of the leader team and community. When they are a senior leader, they often fall into regular routines, for example, they always run a certain activity that they have been working on perfecting the past few summers, often something they have a lot of interest and passion in. They take the time and care to mentor the junior leaders and leaders in training.

My favourite part of this whole process is seeing how each leader finds a niche each summer and how the community comes together to include and support everyone (with the usual bumps and bruises on the way). We try to always address any conflict with conversation, understanding, and opportunity for learning. We are always learning together as a community, every summer!

“I’ve made so many good friends at this camp and together we have always fantasized about being one of the awesome camp leaders”

It has been an honour and a privilege to get to know and observe our participants as they transition through these years. We always hope they will stay on after they graduate from high school, and some come back for a summer or two, but then we know it’s time for them to move on to other amazing opportunities and experiences. Our organization is better for having them as part of our camps and our leadership teams.



Personal reflections on GICEL

By Amy Kamarainen, Coordinator 2026

Before moving to Mayne Island, I worked on a team in an education department at a major university. Our team was trying to design innovative approaches to engage youth in environmental learning. We aimed to connect kids to outdoor spaces in their own communities, increase their understanding and interest in the natural environment, integrate things like arts to ensure diverse learners had entry points into the content, and create a sense of community among learners, which research showed should support engagement and buy-in for the learners. A major national foundation invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in the effort and funded collaborators from seven different organizations to spend over five years creating and testing a model that would meet all these goals. We developed an exciting and innovative program that reached many young women in rural communities and encouraged them to see connections between the natural environment, their own lives and potential career pathways. Yet, we struggled to keep the program going beyond the initial funding, and five years later the work was relegated to a “past projects” byline on our organizational websites.



When I moved to Mayne Island and Kelly Nordin sat down with me to share what GICEL was all about—I was amazed. Here was a program meeting all the goals our big-budget, academic program had tried to reach, and GICEL had been doing it on a shoestring budget for over twenty years. I jumped in to supporting the program as a coordinator during the summer of 2023 and worked side-by-side with Kelly, Jess and Michael to learn the ins and outs of the program. I enrolled my son during the first summer he was eligible, and after a slow warm-up at the start of the week, he came home that Friday saying that he wanted to be a GICEL leader when he grows up. This is a common feeling. I've had the pleasure of offering practice interviews for the youth leaders, and during the interviews youth often talk about positive experiences they had with GICEL leaders and say they want to help create that kind of experience for younger kids in the program. The opportunity for campers to have positive role models and then be supported as they grow into deeper forms of leadership is one of the most powerful pieces of the GICEL program.



GICEL arose from the passion and experience of local community members and, through thoughtful design and sustained commitment to its core values, has created an engagement model that exemplifies the highest standards of outdoor education practice. GICEL demonstrates the value of immersing kids in the natural world, integrating multiple modes of learning, creating a strong sense of community among participants from kinders to teens, and offering opportunities for growth, leadership and self-expression throughout. The GICEL model is innovative and special, yet the team remains humbly understated and continues to keep the focus on the kids and community. I am thrilled to be involved and feel lucky that my son and I both get to participate in the incredible GICEL program and community.



From our Registrar

By Karen Begley

2025 was a big year for GICEL's Mayne and Saturna's registration processes! We piloted a Canadian online registration software program, Amilia. Our goals were to increase ease and transparency for families, reduce the potential for human error in waitlist and sibling registration management, and free up staff time for other projects. The Amilia staff was great during our set up and onboarding. While there is a learning curve to every new endeavour, overall, this was a success and we are continuing with it. We thank the GICEL families, staff, and board members for their patience and support during the onboarding and piloting process.



Due to the time and logistics of setting up such a large program, registration for 2025 programs was delayed. We are happy to share that we are back on track for 2026's registration. As I write this, the first registration window for the 2026 season has opened. After a big year of learning for families and staff in 2025, I am happy to share that 2026 is off to a great start.

We expanded our programming once again to offer four weeks of SEEP on Mayne to help meet demand. We had 162 participants aged 6-12 attend SEEP on Mayne and Saturna and 24 participants attend Seedlings. There were a few children who we were not able to accommodate from the waitlist and we continue to seek ways to accommodate everyone who wants to attend in the future.



GICEL Board Chair report for January - December, 2025

By Michael Hoebel

Last year was another successful year for GICEL, and once again, our summer programs for young people were fully subscribed and went well, resulting in many happy participants.

For the GICEL board there was also a sad note in 2025, in that we lost long-standing board member and former chair, Des Berghofer, who passed away in October, 2025.



Board Membership

Members of the GICEL Board of Directors for 2025 were: Michael Hoebel (Chair), Des Berghofer (Vice-Chair), Jesse Guy (Treasurer), Michael Dunn (Programs), Laura MacCormack, and Adrian Pendergast.

2025 Board Meetings and AGM Meetings of the Board were held on January 31 and April 4, 2025 and the AGM was held on May 9, 2025.

2026 Annual General Meeting

All GICEL members are invited to attend the AGM on Friday, May 29 at 10:00 am, which will be held online by Zoom.

In Memoriam Des Berghofer



Members of the Board of Directors of the Gulf Islands Centre for Ecological Learning were deeply saddened to hear of Des Berghofer's passing in October 2025. Des was a consistently positive and passionate advocate for GICEL's work over his 25 years on the board, and he provided much wisdom over these years that helped shape how GICEL is today. Des understood fully that what GICEL set out to do was a daunting task, but he was confident that as an organization, GICEL could make a contribution to help change the narrative affecting the planet. The board was inspired by his writings in our annual newsletter and by his insightful contributions to our meetings. Des will not be forgotten, and we will continue to carry his passion and vision for a better future with us.

2005 GICEL's first newsletter

In memory of Des Berghofer, our first chair and board member to 2024

MESSAGE FROM THE BOARD CHAIR

Our Great Work

In this first issue of our GICEL Newsletter I am pleased to bring greetings from the Board of Directors and a brief message about the deeper meaning behind our work.

One of the defining challenges for humanity in the 21st century is to achieve a mutually beneficial relationship with the natural world. If we look back over 5000 years of known history we see an uneven trajectory along a course we choose to call development. It is uneven for many reasons, but chiefly because of the disparity among human settlements around the world and because the collective pressure of those settlements is running counter to the principle of ecological balance.

The good news is that we are now more knowledgeable than ever before about how we should design our societies in order that we might live together well on a rich but finite planet. The bad news is that we are showing very little inclination to embrace the knowledge we now have and apply it to make the changes for mutual benefit. This suggests that there is something amiss in the sphere of the human spirit. As a species we have become disconnected from the natural world that sustains us and have lost our sense of the sacred in that world. The great work of the 21st century is to regain the connection we have lost and create a global civilization that lives in harmony with itself and the universal life force that sustains it.



Like all great enterprises this work begins with the first step. More accurately, it begins with thousands of first steps taken by a network of committed people and organizations in every part of the world. The Gulf Islands Centre for Ecological Learning in British Columbia, Canada is one of those brave first steps. Inspired by belief in a dynamic learning relationship between humanity and nature, we are creating opportunities for people of all ages, but particularly for young people in schools, to access nature-based learning. We recognize our great good fortune to live in a part of the world.



We have just begun on this grand adventure. We acknowledge and thank those who are helping us to move forward by becoming members and supporters. We invite you to participate as fully as you can, but above all to spread the news that here on these beautiful Gulf Islands there is a spirit and an enterprise abroad that can change the world.

“GICEL is the highlight of my summer”

Summer Earth Education Programs: A Tradition and Treasure

by Kelly Nordin, Coordinator Mayne and Saturna Islands 2021

As we all know, the past year has had many challenges, along with a few illuminating and even perhaps inspiring experiences. For me, it has been the sense of community amongst all those involved with GICEL - campers and their families, leaders, board members, and coordinators, including both those past and current (the "elders" as I like to call us). Continued support and understanding have been shown throughout this community of people, and more profoundly, there is a shared deep respect and connection to place, the southern Gulf Islands, and all the people who have physical and emotional connections to this place.

While I'm a relatively new member of the GICEL team, I became aware of these amazing programs as part of my work within the environmental education community in BC and beyond. Working at Bamfield Marine Science Center with the public education programme, opened my young scientist's eyes to the potential life changing impact of time spent exploring and learning in - and connecting to - nature, even if for only a few days. Thus, when events came together for my young son to attend one of the camps early in GICEL's twenty plus years and stay with his grandma on Mayne Island, my partner and I were delighted.



I'll forever remember the day when I arrived at Bennet Bay a wee bit early to pick him up one afternoon later in the week. When I realized he wasn't among the happy campers changing from their swimsuits or locating all their belongings to stuff into their backpacks, I enquired as to where he was. Jess [Willows] simply pointed out towards the ocean. I looked across the grass, along the shore... and eventually spotted him standing in the middle of the bay, knee deep in the warm waters of the slowly receding tide. My initial "mom" reaction was one of alarm. "Is he OK...? What if...?" But then after a deep breath, I realize this was exactly what we had signed up for - the chance for him to be supported in connecting to nature in his own way. He was safe, as there were many eyes looking out for him. And he was immersed, literally and figuratively, in sensing the sun, the wind and the water while observing the action and the life above and below the surface of the ocean. He was connected. Oh, the stories he shared when we finally got back to the group!

When I stepped into the role of coordinator for the Mayne and Saturna GICEL camps in 2019, I re-experienced this deep sense of community and connectedness but from a different perspective. I've been fortunate to have led with many different groups of children, youth, young adults and elders over the years in an array of natural environments, yet nothing has been quite like GICEL camps. Not only is there a strong sense of community and place, but there is also a profound yet gentle sense of caring that permeates throughout the camps. Caring for each other, the campers and leaders alike, and caring for nature, leading to a community that is inclusive, accepting, and nourishing. And so importantly, creating a sense of wonder and joy in nature.

"I've been going as long as i can remember and it's where i've met some of my best friends and made some of my favourite memories"

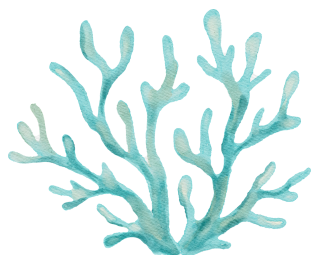


Around the same time last year, this same sense of caring community came through, but in a different form. After the very difficult decision to cancel in-person camps was made, our elders and leaders enthusiastically gathered together virtually to figure out how to keep the GICEL spirit alive for the broader community. Over several sessions throughout May and June, and then at a two-day virtual “leader camp” in July, we worked collectively to capture the GICEL essence and translate it to a virtual platform. The dedication of the leaders, given it was during a time of rapid, often radical, shifts in their lives and dreams, was truly inspiring. We meet in the evening, after a day where they had already spent most of their time at a computer, yet at each meeting there were their bright faces, their minds full of ideas and suggestions. By August, many of the leaders had created videos, stories, and or activities to share with potential campers and the community via the GICEL 2020 Connections website. And six of our leaders found the time to meet virtually with a few excited campers during the three weeks of our “Connection Sessions” to explore and share discoveries made in their own home places. The sense of community extended far beyond our Gulf Islands in a new and exciting way.



At the time of writing of this piece, it is uncertain as to what lies ahead, including for the summer of 2021. Whether or not we all are able to gather in person on our beloved Gulf Islands, I trust the sense of community and connection to nature that is the core essence of GICEL will be with you.

Until we do meet again, take a moment to stand outside in a field, or a forest, or perhaps even in the middle of a warm shallow bay and connect to all that is wonderful in this world.







25 Years and Still Thriving

by Michael Dunn, Co-Founder and Programs

The Beginnings

It was the first week of June 2000 and I was running a marine program for Environment Week/Oceans Day with the Mayne Island School children at Piggott Bay. During the lunch break, I was musing with the Gulf Islands School District Board Chair, May McKenzie, about the idea of creating a facility and nature-based programs for young people within the Gulf Islands. By coincidence, May said that the school district was looking at ways to create revenue-generating programs that would attract students from around the province. One of those ideas was an outdoor education program. From that random conversation, the nub of the idea was embraced by the school district, and I was asked to create a feasibility plan for an outdoor environmental program within the Gulf Islands School District. That was delivered in the next year, and the first pilot program was launched on Mayne Island at the Mayne Island School and Mt. Parke Regional Park during the summer. The concept, at that time, was to have programs running on all the southern Gulf Island communities. Over the following five years, programs began on Salt Spring Island, Pender Island and Saturna Island as well as Mayne.

Also at this time, GICEL was under the auspices of the Gulf Islands School District as a District program that ran in the summer. For various reasons, particularly funding related, GICEL separated from the School District in 2005 and became a separate society and federal charitable organization. The connection with the school district was and is still strong and we have maintained this relationship through an agreement.



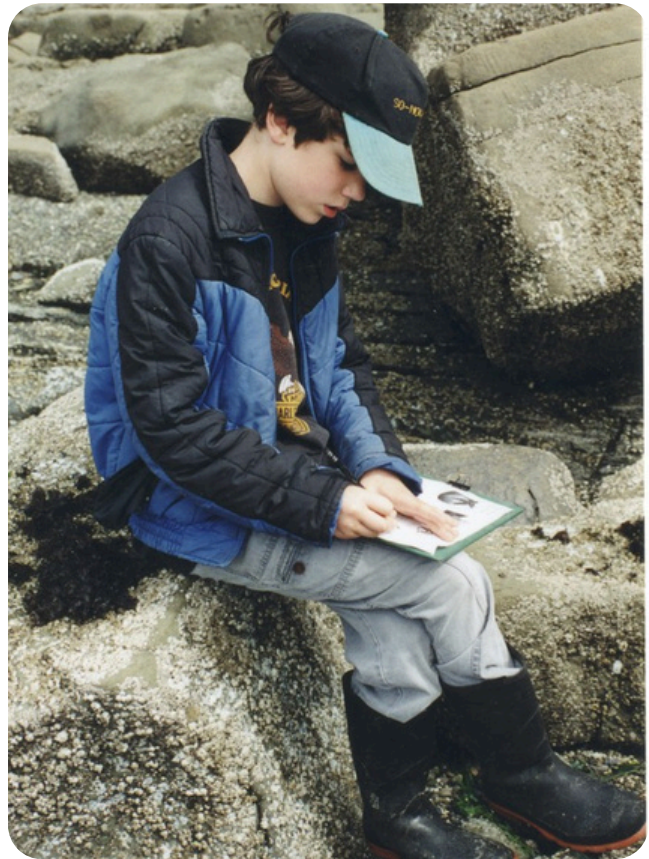
Our programs ran for two weeks on each of the islands except Saturna (one week) and that was the model for years. When we started getting young people aging out of our program (over 13 years old) we had many who still wanted to attend our programs. In 2011, we partnered with the Linnaea Farm Society on Cortes Island to offer a teen based environmental leadership program there. We ran the program for 4 years with great success. Funding and lack of instructor availability required that we cancel this program stream. In 2013, we launched our SEEDLINGS program for children 3-5 years old to provide nature-based programming and experiences to pre-school children. This program was immensely successful and popular and after a pause, it is being offered again.

The core of the programs we created were grounded by the original vision created through public workshops with island groups and individuals interested in environmental education. We believe it still stands today.

“The Gulf Islands Centre for Ecological Learning, using the rich and diverse ecosystem ms of the southern Gulf Islands, will offer educational opportunities for people of all ages (especially school children) that will help increase awareness of their role as environmental citizens. The overall mission is to help participants increase their ecological literacy and in turn, allow them to develop the ability to integrate key lessons from nature into their everyday decision-making.”



Definitely a lofty vision that required considerable planning to create the programs that would underpin this ideal. I should point out that this was developed before we knew for sure that children need exposure to nature as part of their development and that all of us benefit from time in nature. What we found was, that for the threshold for learning ecological principles such as energy flows, interrelationships, adaptation and change cycles to be reduced, it was imperative that we create an environment where participants could be comfortable in nature and not fearful. Also, the process by which we would deliver these programs needed to be fun, joyful and provide awe and wonder about the world we share with other organisms and are connected to. We accomplished this not by showing, telling, and naming but by sharing, demonstrating, and doing. We also developed, as much as possible, multi-sensory explorations of place using touch, smell, sight, sound and sometimes taste to help create connections with nature. We also worked to create activities that reflected the different forms of learning children have, so our programs were blends of art, play, music, journaling, nature science, and free exploration to facilitate the connections. Our clan-based format was to allow for creation of both social and collaborative opportunities for the children and our leaders teams. The clans creating their forts as their home places while taking part in our programs reinforced this.



Looking forward

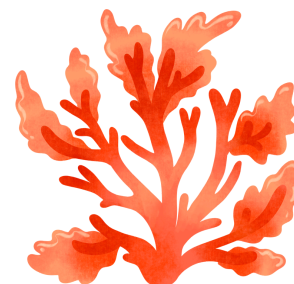
So here we are twenty-five years later, some of our original ideas and components of the programs are still in place, but many also evolved. We tested them and evaluated them to ensure that they met our vision and if not, we adapted or we created new ones. Our leaders' teams over the years represented so many wonderful adults and young people with different skill sets to offer to our participants. Special guests were and are always a tremendous addition to the programs. As of 2025, we have had just under 5,000 registrants in our programs, and the demand continues to grow. We know anecdotally that participants in our summer programs have been inspired and motivated to pursue passions in marine science, environmental law and green governance among others and many more have personal and family lifestyles tied to being in nature and exploring it with continued curiosity.



The greatest testament to the value of what GICEL hoped to accomplish comes from our leaders' teams. Once we had been operating long enough a curious and unintentional thing happened. We had young people (early teens) who had become too old for our SEEP programs wanting to continue in some capacity with the programs. To accommodate this interest and demand, we created our current hierarchical leaders' team, starting at leaders in training to junior leaders to assistant Senior Leader and finally to Senior Leader. This structure is not only a learning opportunity for these young adults (13- to 18-year-olds) but also a social opportunity. They are part of a culture of GICEL and have become advocates for its success and continuity.

Let me close by saying that the success of GICEL can be measured in so many ways but for me it has been the absolute joyousness, excitement, hope and positive energy that GICEL programs have provided for so many young people in such troubling times. The young adults who have been with us since they were children continue to hold this legacy.

We are in good hands and hopeful for the future of GICEL and its important work in this complex world.



Our Relationship with Nature

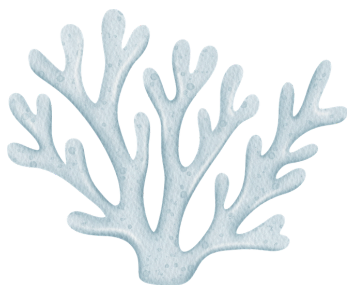
by Des Berghofer (GICEL Newsletter 2008)

One of the e-mail services to which I subscribe is a Newsletter called World Science at www.world-science.net. It is an excellent service, which usually provides information on fascinating scientific breakthroughs in the fields of cosmology, physics, biology, etc. It engenders a sense that we are living at a truly momentous time in world history and that we are moving rapidly into new domains of knowledge that enhance our understanding of ourselves and our place in the universe. That is the good news.

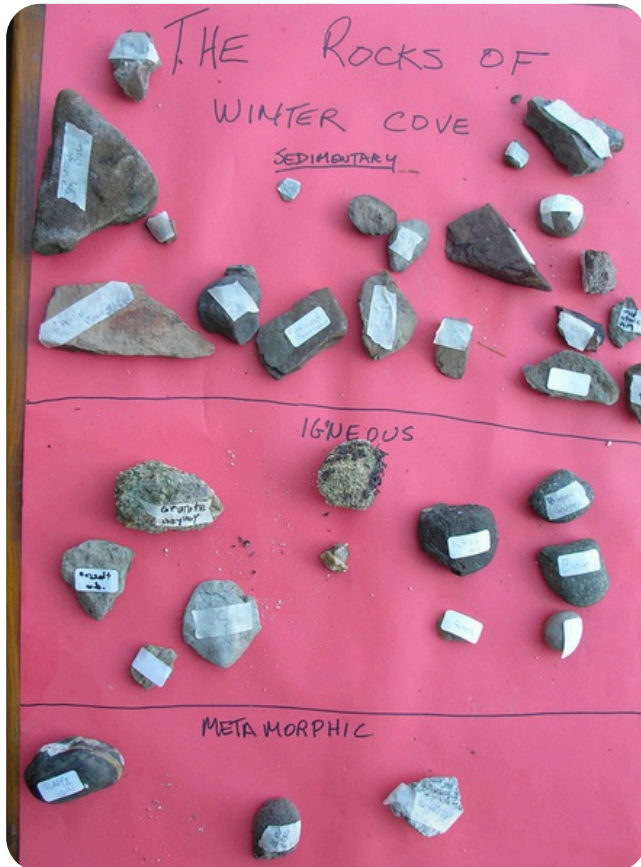
Much less encouraging, however, was a recent report in this Newsletter. Dated February 4, 2008, this article gave details of a study just published in the online issue of the research journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. Researchers Oliver Pergams, a biologist at the University of Illinois Chicago, and Patricia Zaradic of the Environmental Leadership Program at Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, gathered and analyzed survey data on various nature activities from the past 70 years.



Pergams and Zaradic discovered “an alarming trend” that outdoor activities are on the wane as people around the world spend more leisure time online or watching TV. “There’s a real and fundamental shift away from nature—certainly here [in the United States] and possibly in other countries,” said Oliver Pergams. The researchers analyzed data on per capita visits to US national parks as well as participation in such outdoor activities as backpacking, fishing, hiking and hunting. They found that from 1981 to 1991 per capita nature recreation declined at rates from 1 percent to 1.3 percent per year, depending on the activity studied. The typical drop in nature use since then has been 18-25 percent, they said. The researchers found that these data correlated very strongly with a rise in video-game playing, Internet surfing and movie watching. They labeled this shift to sedentary electronic diversions “videophilia” and remarked that it “has far reaching consequences for physical and mental health, especially in children.” Moreover, they added, “We don’t see how this can be good for conservation. We don’t see how future generations, with less exploration of nature, will be as interested in conservation as past generations.” And that, we might add, has not been particularly great. said Oliver Pergams.



For those of us promoting nature-based education at GICEL and other similar programs this is sobering news indeed. What are the benefits to civilization of more advanced knowledge in science if through its application in technology people become increasingly ignorant of their fundamental connection to and dependence on nature? Of course, some of the electronic activities engaging people's attention are excellent educational programs about nature, but I would not put much faith in that as a way to raise ecological awareness. There is absolutely no substitute for direct nature-based experience to teach people, young and old, about who we really are in the circle of life and what responsibilities we have for stewardship and conservation.



However, let us not despair at the statistics reported in the research quoted above, but rather let us be energized to redouble our efforts to provide more opportunities for children and adults to experience our programs at GICEL. Let us also be enthusiastically strategic in promoting ecological learning as a high priority to political, corporate and community leaders.

Above all, let us be the change we wish to see and understand that in re-energizing human connection to nature we are the people we have been waiting for.

Desmond Berghofer

How an organization is instilling hopefulness in young people - The Gulf Islands Centre for Ecological Learning's evolution.

By Michael Dunn, Co-founder

Nature connection is the act of personally and viscerally engaging with Nature using all your senses and observation skills, not by memorizing facts about Nature. Sensory engagement with Nature is intrinsic to your health and well-being and for children it is an essential part of their development.

“Similarly, though environmental education must do much else as well, it must invite students to look and to see, not so as to acquire another “fact” about nature but rather to value it, through experiences lived and intimacy felt.” Kahn, 1999 The Human Relationship with Nature - Development and Culture.

The above understanding is at the heart of the twenty years plus that the Gulf Islands Centre for Ecological Learning (GICEL) has been delivering nature-based programs to young people in the southern Gulf Islands. What we discovered was, that for the threshold for learning ecological principles such as energy flows, interrelationships, adaptation and change cycles to be reduced, it was imperative that we create an environment where participants could be comfortable in Nature and not fearful. Also, the process by which we would deliver these programs needed to be fun, joyful and provide awe and wonder about the world we share with other organisms and are connected to. We accomplished this not by showing, telling, and naming but by sharing, demonstrating, and doing. We developed, as much as possible, multi-sensory explorations of place using touch, smell, sight, sound and sometimes taste to help create connections with Nature. We worked to create varied activities that accommodated multiple ways of learning, so our programs were blends of art, play, music, journaling, nature science, and free exploration to facilitate the connections. Our clan-based format allows for creation of both social and collaborative opportunities for the children and our leader teams. The collaborative fort building clans engaged in, creating their own home places while taking part in our programs, reinforced this.



Now over two decades later we have experienced, through our practice, many unexpected gifts of our Summer Earth Education Programs (SEEP) that have created a dynamic among the participants that goes far beyond what could have been predicted. That dynamic could be best described as a GICEL-inspired community.

Looking back at the beginnings of GICEL programs there are some foundations that contributed to this emerging community. First, was the fact that the number of 6- to 12-year-olds we accepted for our week-long day programs was capped at 30 which was felt to be the maximum number that could participate and receive a high-quality experience. Second, the larger group was divided into clans of 10 and a leader and support person assigned to each. This provided a ratio of 5:1 within the clans which we felt would ensure each member would receive a high level of attention. Each clan was a separate entity, mixed-age and did activities as a group including making their forts and spending time in the spaces they chose to site their forts. Third, the programs were themed with a schedule of activities designed to reinforce and support the learning focus. And fourth, our experiential approach and use of free explorations of place created a community of learners that, facilitated by our leaders, shared their discoveries, collaborated on activities, and mutually supported one another.

These foundational elements still anchor the work we do today and have allowed us to evolve and be responsive to the participants and the places where we deliver our programs.



Over time some very important aspects of the programs and participant experiences became apparent. A key one was that we had a cohort of participants who spent the whole program period (up to three weeks) with us and came back every year to participate. This group became a social network while they were attending the programs. Our participants were made up of children from the island community on which we were running programs plus children who had some connection with the island either through a relative or having a summer home. This group of repeat participants over time, connected to the places we held our programs and began to tell their own stories of these places to their families and new participants.

After the first six or seven years of our summer programs, we had a group of young people who were teens that had started with us at age 6 and who wanted to continue being involved with the program. This emerging pool of young people were excited about what we were doing and what it had meant to them personally to experience our programs caused us to rethink our leaders' recruitment strategy. Up to this decision point we had recruited adult leaders (mostly interested teachers) and other adults from the community. Now we had the opportunity to employ young people who were familiar and engaged with our programs and motivated to help deliver our program activities. Hence, we began a process of selecting junior leaders from this group to support the adult senior leaders. In turn, we offered our young leaders guidance on working with younger children, what their roles and responsibilities were including the care and safety of participants. The unexpected outcome was that a high proportion of this group came back every year to support the program and new ones came in behind. Over the ensuing years the number of teens who wanted to return to support the program grew. We are now in an enviable position of having a large cohort of young people who began as participants in our programs to now being key components of the delivery of those programs.



Again our recruitment of the leaders' team needed revision to accommodate the adult-aged young people who have been involved with GICEL since they were 6 years old. As a result, we now have a process whereby we ask that interested young teens send us a letter outlining why they want to be a leader, what they bring to the program and what dates they would be available. We emphasize that we must hear from the young leader directly not through their parents. We now have a leadership team model in place which consists of leaders in training, junior leaders, senior leaders, and coordinators. The latter are adults that provide mentoring for the young leaders. This model also recognizes the importance of social interactions with peers in the teen years and we have a group of teens who are all engaged in and love nature and want to ensure the experiences they had as participants continue for new participants in the program. In response, we have created a leadership program for the teen leaders which includes providing reference letters, help with CV writing and doing interviews. For all our programs, we hold a leadership weekend camp with all leaders for the year and use the opportunity to have them understand their roles and responsibilities working with young people, socialize, help us build the program and choose or develop new activities that they test with the others. They are then provided feedback from their peers on their delivery, the subject, what was learned and recommendations for improvement. These training camps have been highly successful in creating a community and culture of trust among our leaders; giving voice to their ideas and confidence in making decisions for their futures.



We have done no formal assessment of how participants in our programs and those who become leaders, are influenced by their exposure to our programming. Anecdotally, we know that some of these young people have gone onto many different pursuits including environmental law, climate change science, marine biology, and the Green movement. Regardless of their life track they remain grounded with their experiences at the GICEL summer programs. A 2020 quote from a long-term participant and then leader, sums it up beautifully:

“Next fall I plan on attending a four-year University program as an environmental science major. I wanted to let you know that GICEL has had a huge part in this decision, and I want to continue my learning journey with GICEL in it. I wrote my common application essay just about how much this camp has shaped me as a person, and how it continues to help me everyday. I've been inspired to become part of the climate change solution since day one at Bennet Bay [Mayne Island], I am so thankful for this experience.”



I am guided by the observation of Irish poet Seamus Heaney on hope:

“Hope is not optimism, which expects things to turn out well, but something rooted in the conviction that there is good worth working for.”



This is how I view what GICEL (its staff and programs) have created and instilled, not hope, which is passive, but hopefulness by doing good works that create a sense of belonging, optimism and motivation in each person.

Let me close by saying that the success of GICEL can be measured in so many ways but for me it has been the absolute joyousness, excitement, hopefulness, positive energy, and learning that GICEL programs have provided to so many young people in such troubling times. The young adults who have been with us since they were children continue to hold this legacy in how they live their lives. Thus ensuring that the future for GICEL and its important work in this complex world will continue.

BECOME A MEMBER

Throughout the world awareness is spreading that people must form a new relationship with the Earth—one that will allow civilization to prosper rather than flounder in global conditions hostile to life. The key to building this new relationship is ecological learning. For twenty five years, GICEL has championed the new learning programs that must one day be taught to all children. We are honoured to have your support. By becoming a member, you'll be the first to know about any new programs we are offering.

To become a member, please visit:

<http://www.gicel.ca/about/become-a-member/>

Membership Fee

\$5 individual

\$10 family

\$15 corporate/company

Thank you to our Sponsors & Funders



**SATURNA PARKS
AND RECREATION
COMMISSION**

PRIVATE DONORS



**MAYNE ISLAND
&
PENDER ISLAND**

BARRACLOUGH FOUNDATION

CONTACT INFO

Mailing Info:

171 Georgina Point Rd.
VON 2J1

Mayne Island, B.C.

gicel@gicel.ca

www.gicel.ca

Charitable No. 88355-
4503 RR0001



**STEWART FUND -
THROUGH
THE VANCOUVER
FOUNDATION**