

PROMINENT CANADIAN VOICES IN SUPPORT OF
OUTDOOR & EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION

Robert Bateman

Robert Bateman is an internationally known Canadian wildlife artist.

My life, so far, has been immersed in nature and of course it always will be. It has been inspiring, adventurous and fun. I have been thrilled by the gorillas in the rainforests of the Congo, the whales of the Pacific, the penguins of the Antarctic and the lions of the Serengeti. But none of these spectacular experiences has been any more enchanting than the nature I discovered as a young boy in the ravine below our back yard in Toronto.

Nature always offers adventure since it is always dynamic and full of surprises. Although it is not usually considered an "extreme" sport, it is not without risks and physical challenges. These, of course, are exactly what is considered "fun", especially for young people. How much better is it to push yourself in the real world than in the virtual world of a video game? Some parents and school boards worry about the "dangers" of being out in nature. These are negligible compared with the dangers of obesity, and boredom leading to aggression, depression, drugs and increasing suicides, not to mention the effects of addiction to television and video games. Recent studies at the University of Illinois indicate that being out in nature (not inorganic playgrounds) decreases ADHD, reduces stress, increases civil behaviour by 80% and increases productivity in schoolwork. "Green" schools have far fewer colds and incidence of flu [see *Last Child in the Woods* by Richard Louv].

But, the overwhelming reason to increase nature study and outdoor education in the schools is nothing short of the salvation of the planet. Almost all scientists and other thinking people say that we are headed in a very destructive direction with the desecration of our atmosphere and life on land and in our waters. These things are nature. E. O. Wilson has said, "Biodiversity is the creation." The destruction of biodiversity is a sin against creation and is, in his words, "the death of birth." How can we expect to preserve and protect biodiversity if we don't even know the names of the plants and animals that share our neighbourhood? And, what is worse, if we don't care?

And love is a part of the picture, maybe the most important part. E. O. Wilson has a name for it ... biophilia ... the love of living things. In contrast to increasing destructive trends towards self-indulgence, this love is generous and gratitude based - gratitude for what nature offers us. You cannot love a human being without knowing that person and you cannot love nature without knowing about it.

As African thinker Baba Dioum has 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.*

September 2006

Thomas Homer-Dixon

Dr. Thomas Homer-Dixon is a political science professor and Director of the Centre for Peace and Conflict at the University of Toronto. He has written extensively about environmental issues and twice briefed Al Gore during his tenure as Vice President of the United States. His book, *The Ingenuity Gap*, is the winner of the 2001 Governor General's Award for Non-fiction. In this book, Homer-Dixon describes "*our staggering ignorance of how the natural world works*" and recounts how we are making unprecedented changes to the most basic of Earth's operating systems. He describes how our cities create "*an artificial and self-referential world*" that cuts us off from the fundamental life-giving realities outside our human constructions. He speaks of "*the loss of reference points beyond our human-created world,*" and how "*we are losing the awe, the respect, and the recognition of mystery that remind us to be prudent.*"

In an e-mail communication with COEO President Grant Linney on May 16, 2002, Mr. Homer-Dixon specifically addressed the need for outdoor and environmental education:

"Public funding of outdoor and environmental education shouldn't be seen as a frill that can be cut when budgets are tight. It must instead be a core educational commitment. The increasing disconnectedness of most of our young people from the natural world—young people growing up in urban landscapes of concrete, pavement, and fragments of managed nature—has practical, real-life consequences. Such children, when they mature into adults, don't have even a rudimentary understanding of humankind's intimate and infinitely elaborate relations with nature. And without such an understanding, they will not support—politically, economically, or socially—the protection of the natural environment on which humankind's survival critically depends."

In a November 2001 letter to the Environmental Commissioner of Ontario, Homer-Dixon makes the following observation about the need for outdoor education:

I cannot comprehend how our provincial government fails to see the connection between the many pressing environmental issues of our times and the need to expose our children to publicly funded, teacher-led experiences in the outdoors. It is only through such direct and hands-on experiences that our children (and future citizens) will develop the ecological literacy needed to sustain life on this planet.

Margaret Somerville

Dr. Margaret Somerville is a professor in both the Faculties of Medicine and Law at McGill University. She is also founding director of the McGill Centre for Medicine, Ethics and Law. She is an internationally renowned writer and speaker on bioethics and as well as in the study of the wider legal and ethic aspects of medicine and science. She also delivered the prestigious 2006 CBC Massey Lectures and wrote the accompanying book, *The Ethical Imagination: Journeys of the Human Spirit*. The following quotations from her book clearly speak to our need for repeated and informed contact with nature.

- *We need order, purpose and meaning in our lives if we are to fully live fully human lives. Without them, we face ennui, loss of hope, feelings of disintegration, and meaninglessness – in short, despair and nihilism. Contact with the natural allows us to appreciate that as humans we are part of a much larger order of being, which can be an antidote to such responses. (110-111)*
- *Respect for nature and the natural require close and frequent contact with nature and the natural. The situations that present dangers of loss of contact with nature and the natural may not be immediately obvious; they often come cloaked in the language of progress and promoted as “must-have,” luxury, consumer products. Loss of contact with nature is particularly tragic in the case of children. We have no idea what the long-term effects of this will be on individuals, communities and society. (111)*
- *One teacher of eleven-year-old children tells how a student wrote in her class journal that she had never climbed a tree. She longed to do that and watch the sun set. The teacher discovered that many in the class had never climbed a tree, never walked in a field. They had no sense of connection with the natural world or its fragility or preciousness. Indeed, they were fearful of nature. I have deep concern that many children lack a connection with nature that engenders the respect for the natural required to protect some of our most important shared values. Young people long to experience the wonder and awe of nature and we can help them to do so. To do this is not only a moral undertaking – it is a moral necessity. (111-112)*

David Suzuki (1)

Dr. David Suzuki is a geneticist who has spent much of his life communicating issues of modern science to Canadians. He is perhaps best known as the long time host of the CBC television series, The Nature of Things. He is a strong environmental advocate and Chair of the David Suzuki Foundation, a highly respected environmental organization. Among many other honours, he is a recipient of the highest standing in the Order of Canada.

For the past three decades, leading scientists have been informing us that humanity is undermining the very source of our wealth and well being, the natural world. As we move to cities, a human created environment, it becomes easy to think that it is the economy that delivers services that in fact originate from or end in the earth - garbage disposal, sewage treatment, food, electricity, water, and so on. As our children live increasingly in a cyberworld, they are losing touch with nature and the understanding that without clean air, water, soil and energy, we do not survive. Very few of our business or political leaders really understand that human health, the economy and nature are intimately connected and interdependent.

Never was there a time when we needed more the reinforcement of the knowledge that nature is the source of our well being, that we are not in control of everything and that it is an illusion to think that economic growth is the highest measure of progress. We need to educate children in the role that nature plays in our lives and the best way to get it is through direct experience. Environmental/outdoor education programs must not be considered marginal activities to be sacrificed when times are tough, in fact, they are absolutely crucial if our children today are going to face an uncertain future with any hope of understanding and solution.

June 20, 2005

David Suzuki (2)

This statement by Dr. David Suzuki was provided in response to a request from COEO.

As we enter the twenty-first century, most Canadians live in large urban centres. We have undergone a remarkable transition in a century from a rural, village nation to large city dwellers. In urban settings, we are surrounded with the technology and architecture of human beings, a few domesticated plants and animals, and a few pests we can't eliminate. In short, we live in a biologically impoverished world surrounded mainly by our own kind. It is easy in such a setting to acquire the illusion that we are different from all other life forms in that we create our habitat and manage our surroundings.

It is not a surprise therefore, that in my experience, most urban children do not know that every bit of their food was alive and that most of their food comes from the soil. I have been astonished at the number of children who did not know that wieners and hamburger are the flesh of animals. Children do not know where their water or electricity comes from or where sewage or garbage goes. We have become fundamentally disconnected from the natural world that delivers the most important services to us, namely cleansing, replenishing and capturing air, water, soil and energy from the sun.

In cities and towns, we tend to regard intrusive nature as an enemy to be eliminated – flies, ants, mould, weeds, vermin. If we assume that humans are in charge and that we know how to manage the world around us, it is easy to understand why we have created a global environmental crisis. In our quest for “resources” and opportunity, we opt for economic benefits while ignoring the natural services other species render to us.

Please excuse my wordiness, but I had to set up the context within which to see why outdoor education is so important. Leading scientists, including more than half of all Nobel Prize winners, tell us we are on a collision course with the life support systems of the earth. It is urgent that we understand that we are still biological beings, embedded in and still dependent on the enormous services performed by nature for us. Nothing can be more important in an increasingly uncertain world beset by massive issues of climate change, toxic pollution of air, water and soil, deforestation, species extinction, marine devastation, overpopulation, over-consumption, and so on. These are the issues of our time and they have been created and made worse by our failure to recognize that we are still a part of nature. Outdoor education programs are invaluable for reconnecting children. My two youngest daughters took a year out of regular high school to spend in a program called TREK in which they were introduced to hiking, camping, canoeing, etc., and I can tell you it changed their lives. Every TREK graduate I know is a far better person for that program than any other academic experience. I think outdoor education is one of the most basic parts of education and ought to be a mandatory part of every curriculum in the country. It is not a frill or luxury, it is fundamental if we are to meet the real issues of our time.

April 2, 2001