Outdoor Environmental Learning

“Nature provides opportunities for cognitive development through education and research about organisms and habitats. The estimated value of nature-based education was based on the 2012 Canadian Nature Survey... we arrived at a total value of approximately $9.5 million per year.”

FROM SOUND INVESTMENT: MEASURING THE RETURN ON HOWE SOUND’S ECOSYSTEM ASSETS (MICHELLE MOLNAR, 2015, DAVID SUZUKI FOUNDATION)

What’s happening?

Each year, over 22,000 students experience environmental education with Howe Sound as the classroom. The Howe Sound area hosts the largest regional cluster of summer camps, outdoor schools, and environmental programs in British Columbia. Many more, young and old, meet and learn about nature through schools and universities, local community groups, and commercial ecotourism in Howe Sound. This outdoor learning relies on proximity to Vancouver and the diverse geography and ecology that Howe Sound offers.

Squamish Nation canoe at Camp Suzuki. (Photo: Carmen Leung)
Howe Sound’s role as a classroom continues to grow. Camp Suzuki, a summer environmental program run by the David Suzuki Foundation and Squamish Nation, had its first season at Camp Fircom on Gambier Island in 2015. West Vancouver School District began a new year-round outdoor program in 2013 at its elementary school on Bowen Island. A boom in ecotourism is also playing a role in environmental education. For example, Sea to Sky Gondola drew about 300,000 visitors in 2014, its first year of operation. Sea to Sky Gondola employs nature guides and interpretive signage to explain Howe Sound geography, marine biology and First Nations culture at the viewpoints and along its trails. In 2014, Sewell’s Marina expanded its Sea Safari boat tours to link with land-based tours of Sea to Sky Gondola, Britannia Mine, and the Sea to Sky Highway.

Why is environmental education important?

According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), environmental education is a process that allows individuals to explore environmental issues, engage in problem solving, and take action to improve the environment. As a result, individuals develop a deeper understanding of environmental issues and have the skills to make informed and responsible decisions. Between 2001 and 2004 the American Camp Association conducted research with over 5,000 families from 80 camps to determine the outcomes of the camp experience as expressed by parents and children. Parents, camp staff, and children reported significant growth in self-esteem, peer relationships, independence, adventure and exploration, leadership, environmental awareness, friendship skills, values and decisions, social comfort, spirituality. It's not peer-reviewed research but check it out!
What is the current state?

Howe Sound’s diversity of wild spaces yet proximity to metropolitan Vancouver make it an ideal outdoor classroom. In 2015, five outdoor school programs brought over 15,000 elementary and secondary school students to Howe Sound from the Vancouver region and Sea to Sky Corridor (Table 1). Public secondary and elementary schools in Squamish, Lions Bay, West Vancouver, North Vancouver, Bowen Island, Langdale, and Gibsons, as well as a private school on Bowen Island used their school sites and nearby Howe Sound forests and shores to teach a variety of natural science subjects. Two universities, Quest University Can-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ORGANIZATION</th>
<th>PROGRAM</th>
<th>ATTENDEES</th>
<th>ANNUAL ENROLLMENT</th>
<th>LOCATION OF OUTDOOR CLASSROOM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cheakamus Centre</td>
<td>Elementary Outdoor School, Field School, Coast Salish Bighouse; High school leadership</td>
<td>elementary, secondary, teachers</td>
<td>6,700</td>
<td>420 acre ecological reserve, including farm and salmon hatchery, Brackendale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evans Lake Forest Education Centre</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camp Elphinstone</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sea to Sky Outdoor School for Sustainability Education</td>
<td>Spring and fall, 3-4 day outdoor experiential education programs; sustainability education; place-based learning, indigenous history</td>
<td>elementary, secondary</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>Camp Elphinstone property, Langdale, Sunshine Coast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camp Fircom</td>
<td>Gambier Island</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Camp Suzuki</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bowen Island Community School, Bowen Island</td>
<td>Year round “outside45” program; natural systems, local community, geology, ecology, environmental issues, outdoor skills</td>
<td>elementary, secondary, adult, families</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>120 acre Camp Fircom property and nearby Halkett Bay, Gambier Island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Island Pacific School, Bowen Island</td>
<td>Incorporated in year round science and outdoor recreation teaching; ecosystems, biodiversity, conservation, stewardship</td>
<td>grade 6-9</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>Bowen Island; Halkett Bay, Gambier Island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metro Vancouver School &amp; Youth Leadership Programs</td>
<td>Strategies and tools to support engagement, understanding, awareness and action for sustainability.</td>
<td>K-12 teachers, students, youth leaders, teacher candidates</td>
<td>1,500+</td>
<td>Occasional activities on Bowen and Gambier islands, Squamish area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southlands Heritage Farm, Vancouver</td>
<td>Summer camp educational programs; industry on the water, to intertidal life, to first nations use of coastlines</td>
<td>elementary with secondary school volunteers</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>Bowen Island, Camp Elphinstone and Camp Fircom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quest University Canada, Squamish</td>
<td>Undergraduate learning and research in biology, marine biology, intertidal life; conservation and restoration; biodiversity</td>
<td>undergraduate students</td>
<td>~400</td>
<td>Squamish estuary, Quest University Campus, Porteau Cove, Woodfibre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capilano University, Squamish, North Vancouver</td>
<td>Natural history course (Squamish campus); Environmental Stewardship class (North Vancouver campus)</td>
<td>undergraduate students</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Squamish estuary, Porteau Cove, Lighthouse Park, Horseshoe Bay</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For over 50 years, Howe Sound has been the site of one of the largest concentrations of summer camps in British Columbia. One camp started operating in 1907! Each decade through the 1990s has seen more camps opening and there are 13 camps and outdoor schools in the vicinity today (Figure 1). Thousands of youth and adults enroll in outdoor recreational programs at eight camps, primarily during the summer months (Table 2).

Local community groups are also important environmental educators. Groups such as the Lighthouse Park Preservation Society, Squamish River Watershed Society, Sunshine Coast Naturalists, Friends of Cypress Park, and Bowen Nature Club conduct interpretative hikes and other outdoor activities for the public throughout the year. Each winter, the Squamish Environmental Society and the Brackendale Art Gallery run the Eagle Watch program and Bald Eagle Festival to help thousands view and learn about the yearly return of eagles to the Squamish area. Cheakamus Centre in the Paradise Valley hosts a community Open House to share outdoor environmental learning with its 2000+ annual visitors.
“Yet we also recognize that at a time when children are becoming increasingly disconnected from nature, it is of critical importance that as a society, we continue to support and invest in outdoor environmental learning.”

CONOR MCMULLAN, CHEAKAMUS CENTRE
### TABLE 2: CAMPS AND OUTDOOR SCHOOLS IN HOWE SOUND

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>OWNER</th>
<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>START OF OPERATION</th>
<th>ANNUAL ENROLLMENT</th>
<th>AGE RANGE</th>
<th>OPERATING SEASON</th>
<th>SIZE OF PROPERTY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cheakamus Centre</td>
<td>North Vancouver School District 44</td>
<td>Paradise Valley, Brackendale</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>youth to adults</td>
<td>year round</td>
<td>420 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evans Lake Forest Education Centre</td>
<td>Evans Lake Forest Education Society</td>
<td>Paradise Valley, Brackendale</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>youth</td>
<td>Summer camp, winter camp, year round rentals</td>
<td>33 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easter Seals Camp Squamish</td>
<td>BC Lions Society for Children with Disabilities</td>
<td>Brackendale</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td></td>
<td>youth</td>
<td>Summer camp</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daybreak Point Bible Camp</td>
<td>In Trust by 11 Greater Vancouver Churches</td>
<td>Anvil Island</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>1,100</td>
<td>youth</td>
<td>Summer camp; rentals spring and fall</td>
<td>96 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camp Potlach bgcbc.ca</td>
<td>Boys and Girls Clubs of South Coast BC</td>
<td>Potlach Creek</td>
<td>1940s</td>
<td>1,000+</td>
<td>youth</td>
<td>July-August</td>
<td>133 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camp Elphinstone</td>
<td>YMCA of Greater Vancouver</td>
<td>Langdale, Sunshine Coast</td>
<td>1907</td>
<td>7,000+</td>
<td>youth to adults</td>
<td>year round</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camp Sunrise</td>
<td>Salvation Army</td>
<td>Gibsons</td>
<td>1925</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camp Latona</td>
<td>Privately owned; Camp Latona Society leases the site</td>
<td>Gambier Island, north shore</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td></td>
<td>youth</td>
<td>July-August</td>
<td>118 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camp Artaban</td>
<td>Camp Artaban Society</td>
<td>Gambier Island, SE shore</td>
<td>1923</td>
<td></td>
<td>youth and families</td>
<td>Spring, summer, fall</td>
<td>67 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camp Fircom</td>
<td>Camp Fircom Society</td>
<td>Gambier Island, SE shore</td>
<td>1923</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>youth</td>
<td>Summer camp; rentals spring/ fall</td>
<td>120 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sea to Sky Outdoor School for Sustainability Education</td>
<td>Tim and Wendy Turner</td>
<td>Camp Elphinstone, Camp Fircom, Keats Camps</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>elementary, secondary</td>
<td>Spring, fall</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keats Camps</td>
<td>Convention of Baptist Churches of BC</td>
<td>Keats Island</td>
<td>1926</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>youth</td>
<td>Summer camp; year round rentals</td>
<td>230 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camp Bow-Isle</td>
<td>Christian Science</td>
<td>Bowen Island</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td></td>
<td>youth, families, adults</td>
<td>Summer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Camp Summit was excluded due to its location 30 kilometres up the Squamish valley.
What role does environmental education play in First Nations cultural and spiritual heritage?

Four out of 12 environmental education organizations surveyed included some First Nation heritage or Indigenous practices content in their curriculum. This is particularly relevant as the Ministry of Education has recognized the importance of integrating First Nations Principles of Learning across the curriculum. On the other hand, First Nations inhabiting or using Howe Sound since time immemorial have been educating their children immersed in the environment without exception. There was no other classroom.

The Skw’úne-was program at Cheakamus Centre has shared traditional practices of First Nations people since 1986 through its overnight programs at its Coast Salish Big House. Students engage in traditional long house life, eating traditional foods over open fires, hearing local legends and traditional songs; and learning about ceremonies, medicinal plants, basket-weaving and carving.

Skw’úne-was ceremony. (Photo: Cheakamus Centre)
“South of Squamish beside Highway 99 is the celebrated granite mountain known to the Squamish people as Siyám Smánit (the Chief). In the long ago, the mountain was actually a long-house transformed to stone by Xáys (transformer brothers). If you look closely at the mountain you can see the outlines of the animals and people trapped inside when it was transformed. Also visible is a dark vertical line said to have been created by the corrosive skin of a two-headed sea serpent, Sínlhkay, as he slithered to the summit”5
What trends relate to environmental education in Howe Sound?

To our knowledge no one has done an analysis to see if the number of youth attending camps and outdoor schools in Howe Sound has increased over the years, or if the numbers per capita for the region might be increasing, but judging by the longevity of the organizations, interest and participation in outdoor education has certainly not diminished. Several new private and public ventures in environmental education have arrived in Howe Sound over the past decade, including Quest University Canada which opened in Squamish in 2007, a West Vancouver School District year-round outdoor program at the Bowen Island Community School, which launched in 2013, and Camp Suzuki, with a strong Squamish Nation involvement, just launched in 2015.

Ecotourism operators engage thousands each year in diverse activities that offer a potential for greater environmental learning: Highway 99 based bus tours with popular stops at Porteau Cove, Shannon Falls, and Britannia; boat tours on Howe Sound, and raft trips on the Squamish and Cheakamus rivers. The Sea to Sky Gondola offers guides and interpretive information at its lookouts and along trails. The Britannia Mine Museum provides guided tours of the water treatment plant that now protects Howe Sound from the harmful discharge of mine waters.

At the same time, outdoor schools in Howe Sound have had a growing student enrollment over the past decade. There is a broad resurgence or interest in outdoor learning, given concerns about the time that children spend indoors, the so-called “nature-deficit disorder” coined by author Richard Louv. The BC Ministry of Education is releasing a new curriculum that provides greater opportunity for place-based or outdoor “learning” and indigenous First Nations culture. Educators are also showing increased interest in new professional development opportunities in outdoor learning as evidenced by the development of adult programs on offer at educational sites.
What can you do?

**Individual and Organization Action:**

- Familiarize yourself with educational opportunities available to all ages in Howe Sound, and get involved!
- Explore opportunities to incorporate outdoor learning and natural sciences into professional development.

**Government Action and Policy:**

- Increase awareness of and encourage participation in the many educational opportunities offered in Howe Sound for all ages.
- Prioritize protection of Howe Sound’s natural beauty so that it remains preserved for educational opportunities to thrive and expand in the future.
- Support research on children and youth development outcomes from natural science educational opportunities, in order to better understand and document the benefits of these programs, and justify further growth.
- Collect and maintain information on educational opportunities and participation in Howe Sound to track trends to understand needs and desires for this type of learning.
- Identify additional local conservation groups, citizen science projects, and restoration efforts for potential collaborations with educational initiatives.
- Capitalize on the uniqueness of Howe Sound’s natural beauty and accessible location by expanding outdoor education programs throughout more schools in the Greater Vancouver Area.
Resources

Bowen Island Community School
go45.sd45.bc.ca/schools/bowenisland

Camp Artaban
campartaban.com

Camp Elphinstone
gv.ymca.ca

Camp Fircom
fircom.ca

Camp Sunrise
campsunrise.ca

Camp Suzuki
campsuzuki.org

Capilano University
capilanou.ca

Cheakamus Centre
cheakamuscentre.ca/s/home.asp

Easter Seals Camp Squamish
eastersealscamps.ca

Evans Lake Forest Education Centre
evanslake.com

Island Pacific School, Bowen Island
islandpacific.org

Quest University Canada
questu.ca

Metro Vancouver School & Youth Leadership Programs
metrovancouver.org

Sea to Sky Outdoor School for Sustainability Education
seatosky.bc.ca

Southlands Heritage Farm
southlandsfarms.com

Footnotes

1 http://www.bccamping.org
2 T. Dunn, Managing Partner, Sea to Sky Gondola, personal communication, June 17, 2016
3 https://www.epa.gov/education/what-environmental-education
5 Reproduced with permission from “Where Rivers, Mountains and People Meet”, Squamish Lil’wat Cultural Centre
7 http://www.cheakamuscentre.ca/s/programs.asp