

Spellbound by Nature Report for AGM Feb 2020

Spellbound by Nature was a pilot project attempting to reconnect youth with nature and encourage outdoor leadership through arts-based outdoor activities, hoping to show the value of the arts and nature to wellbeing.

In June, 2019, an ACA artist helped to develop workshop frameworks, and in July, two students with arts backgrounds (one music, one visual arts) were engaged and trained to facilitate the outdoor programming through Antigonish County camps, at the People's Place Library and at the RK MacDonald Nursing Home. In total, 12 programs (mostly 3 hours long), varying with location and age of participants, took place between July 10 and August 15. Programs were supported by Antigonish County, Antigonish Culture Alive, People's Place Library and RK MacDonald staff, and by volunteers with AHA!. Regular debriefing sessions were held with the artist facilitators and with project partners.

Approximately 350 children between the ages of 3 and 14 participated in this program, some more than once. According to one of the facilitators, "Continuity has shown that the children who have been constantly participating in the program have a higher engagement level, attention span, increased observational and inquisitive skills. Not only do they demonstrate a better sense of awareness of their surroundings and growing connection and sense of respect for nature, but they were also unconsciously teaching others".

Activities included nature-based games, action activities, nature-based arts activities, storytelling, mapping and wayfinding in nature, scavenger hunts, free exploration in nature, discussion of found objects, and observation and descriptive skill building. Themes included forests, animals, insects, camouflage, respect for nature, ecosystems, birds and scents. Volunteers supporting the program commented, "the children involved in the program were delighted by the possibilities that the activities opened up for them", "I was inspired by (the facilitators') WOW energy, playfulness and ability to unleash our creativity", "loved the arts-based play", and, "this programming is....beneficial because it allows children to interact with and know the natural world". One commented that an unexpected outcome was "that this is an extraordinary model for engaging children who are marginal in the community" as there were Syrian children in the session at which she helped, and as one of our artist facilitators spoke Arabic, she ensured their inclusion in all activities. "It enables those who are new to our community to come to the activities on a level playing field". A parent commented that her 'kids had a blast', loved the morning and were eager to share their artwork with her when they got home. Programs at the RK included a valuable intergenerational component, tapping into the wisdom of elders, while also giving them permission to play with the youngsters. A facilitator commented that key accomplishments included sparking curiosity and creativity, improving thinking skills, communication and participation, and that children became more caring of their surroundings, reflective and open minded.

Although there were logistical challenges along this journey, our regular debriefing sessions were helpful in addressing these and in tailoring programming to often challenging situations. One county camp had 65 children between the ages of 3 and 14! Some sites worked better than others. We did find that smaller sessions with similar ages generally worked better, although sessions with siblings often encouraged the older children to become the teachers of the younger ones. Morning sessions in the summer held attention better than those held on warm afternoons.

We came to understand that even the camp counsellors in late high school and our university-aged facilitators had lost a deep connection with nature and some didn't seem comfortable with exploring outdoors, highlighting a need for reconnection over more than one generation. A naturalist or biology student as co-facilitator might have helped deepen the learning for the older children and young adults. It was also very difficult to mobilize community volunteers in the summer, although many were interested in the program and supportive in principle. It had been hoped that our volunteers would have been able to introduce this much-needed naturalist knowledge.

In spite of these challenges, Spellbound by Nature definitely met our goal of reconnecting youth with nature, and met the unanticipated goal of helping marginalized Syrian children better integrate with their peers. As a pilot project, this was incredibly valuable for AHA! in that our learnings will definitely guide our youth programs moving forward. We discovered there is a great need for this kind of program for all ages of youth and even young adults. Future programs will be created for smaller groups and will be programs that build with successive sessions, allowing the reconnection with nature to deepen over time.

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