



Students from Saanich School District 63

Learning together

Parks Canada collaborates with First Nations to develop species-at-risk educational program

Having Third Graders pull weeds from school grounds might not seem educational at first, but the students involved in the First Nations/Parks Canada Species at Risk Education Project were uprooting invasive English Ivy.

They had just learnt about English Ivy crowding out native plants, including some with cultural significance to First Nations. The school grounds are located within the Garry Oak ecosystems that exist within the [Gulf Islands National Park Reserve](#), [Fort Rodd National Historic Site](#) and nearby areas of British Columbia. With only five per cent of its natural state intact, this particular ecosystem is one of Canada's most endangered.

Many species exist only within this ecosystem. More than 40 are listed under the *Species at Risk Act*. The outing filled a B.C. education criterion requiring Grade 3 students to undertake a project to help the environment. They learnt that plants traditionally eaten by First Nations – such as Common Camas (*Camassia quamash*) – are disappearing because of habitat loss. Best of all, the students had fun helping the environment!



PCA Interpreter Athena George and Hul'qumi'num Elder Philomena Pagaduan and Cowichan Valley School District 79 students

Significant consultation

Over the past four years, the project has introduced more than 5,000 students and 500 educators to local species at risk in southeastern Vancouver Island and on the Gulf Islands. Most of the students and educators are from two Coast Salish communities with two different languages: Hul'q'umi'num and SENĆOŦEN.

The project began with extensive consultation with Elders, political leaders and educators and developed through collaborative partnerships with the [WSÁNEĆ School Board](#) and the Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group respectively. Team leaders, project leads and co-facilitators pursued distinct responsibilities shaped by a steering committee. The committee included ecological scientists, conservation managers, First Nations program managers and coordinators, a park interpreter, as well as elementary, high-school and adult-education specialists in Aboriginal programs.

A representative from the Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group and two language apprentices from the [WSÁNEĆ School Board](#) co-facilitated presentations with the park interpreter. Guest speakers have included eight Elders and three Parks Canada scientists.



Engaging youth

The goal is to encourage students to understand, care and act in ways that keep rare and/or culturally significant plants and animals from disappearing from the wild. The presentations include specially designed cards that depict species, their habitat, scientific and cultural information, status, threats, and what students can do to help with their conservation.

Information is provided in English as well as **SENĆOŦEN** or Hul'q'umi'num. Almost half of the species presented have cultural significance to First Nations. For example:

- Every part of a Killer Whale – including bone and blubber – was once used to sustain many coastal First Nations communities. The Southern Resident population (*Orcinus orca*) of the Killer Whale is now listed under the Species at Risk Act with fewer than 100 of these whales remaining.
- While the traditionally hunted Roosevelt Elk (*Cervus elaphus*) are not on the list, there is concern about their habitat disappearing.
- Northern Abalone (*Haliotis kamtschatkana*), another traditional food for many First Nations, has become at risk because of illegal harvesting, habitat loss and other factors.

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Northern abalone



Killer Whale

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Receiving good marks

Every visited teacher (along with cultural teaching assistants and librarians) receives a set of the cards. Other educational materials include a poster that conveys ecological principles. Teachers are given a poster to put up in the classroom, while students are invited to take one home to share with their family. As a result, First Nations are becoming more aware of the importance of the *Species at Risk Act*.

For the **SENĆOŦEN** community, a PowerPoint program with a sound component has been developed to assist teachers and students with pronunciations.

The response by surveyed teachers has been overwhelmingly positive:

- “Great integration of the language,” stated Catherine Witmer, a Grade 5-6 teacher at **ŁÁU,WELNEW** Tribal School within the **SENĆOŦEN** community.
- “Great to see some First Nations perspective on science,” related Chris Carlin, a Grade 7 teacher at Mt. Prevost Middle School where the Hul'q'umi'num words are taught.

Several teachers complimented the program for showing the students how the presenters work together, always demonstrating respect for each other and each other's points of view.

Cooperative spirit

The collaboration is in keeping with *Nuts'amaat Shqwaluwun* – the “one thought – one mind” approach valued by the Coast Salish community that speaks Hul'q'umi'num'. It calls for people



Gulf Islands National Park Reserve and Fort Rodd Hill National Historic Site

to put aside differences to work together for something important. The steering committee selected this as the underlying theme of the 2010-11 presentations. *Nuts'amaat Shqwaluwun* was printed on posters and modeled by the co-facilitators.

Similarly, the concept of **QENÁ,Ē-responsibility** – was chosen as the underlying principle for the **SENĆOŦEN** presentations. **QENÁ,Ē** is the responsibility that every human being inherits upon birth to care for plants, animals, land and water. Every presentation began and ended by teaching the **SENĆOŦEN** word **QENÁ,Ē** and its significance.



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Hands-on experiences

The **SENĆOŦEN** program involved students making a zipper-pull with coloured beads to remind them of their **QENÁ,Ē responsibility** - for different ecosystems.

- “Fantastic!” stated Marketa MacGregor, a Grade 3 teacher from Brentwood Elementary. “I loved the hands-on. So often, kids are told not to touch.”

Many of students in the Hul'qumi'num program visited a traditional smoke house to learn how to prepare salmon. They also made nettle string and trailing blackberry leaf tea and like their **SENĆOŦEN** counterparts learned to identify plants and removed non-native invasive species.

- “This program was good because it is local, hands on,” remarked Allison Dunn, a Grade 7 teacher from Quamichan Middle School. “Nice to be outside doing something.”

Based on the students' keen participation and the teachers' positive response, the First Nations/Parks Canada Species at Risk Education Project has been very successful in creating a greater understanding of species at risk and their importance to First Nations and ultimately everyone.

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