

# Eco-program engages Saanich Grade 6 classes

Since 2009, more than 3,000 Grade 6 students in Saanich have graduated from a program that teaches them how to be stewards of their environment. Creatures of Habitat is an age-appropriate environmental program hosted by the Peninsula Streams Society in collaboration with funders such as the Victoria Foundation.

Every year, 500 students from Royal Oak, North Saanich, Bayside, Glanford and Colquitz middle schools are given a full day of indoor and outdoor activities that raise their awareness of the environment around them.

"It's an opportunity to get the kids engaged and teach them how they can contribute and be part of the solution," said Ian Bruce, executive co-ordinator for the non-profit group.

Volunteers, who include a theatre crew, engage the children with interactive activities, workshops and hands-on environmental restoration activities.

"It's a way for them to learn about issues such as invasive species," Bruce said.

"Even if that is the only knowledge they take away, there is a good chance they share that with their family, which helps bring awareness to the problem."

He says the 60 volunteers who present the program to students are only one part of the strategy. Often, Grade 12 children who have taken the course in years past return to help or to mentor younger schoolmates. "It closes the loop." Often, the program doesn't have to go far to make a point. Many schools have invasive plant species — Himalayan blackberry, English ivy or spurge laurel — growing on their grounds or on property nearby. Others border streams or sensitive ecological sites, with students taking part in the program getting the opportunity to release salmon fry or replant native species appropriate to the site.

Having the programs take place on or near school grounds has an added benefit. When students walk by the site every school day, they can see changes over time, seeing how native species re-establish as a result of their efforts or, if left neglected, how quickly invasive plants can spread.

"I can't think of a better measure of success for a program."

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