

Kids and Conservation

A Natural Connection

"Wow, did you see that?"

"I didn't know bugs were so cool!"

"My favourite part is everything!"

Picture a bright, sunny day at the Garden and overlay a soundtrack that includes shrieks of delight coupled with laughter and excitement. Focus in more closely and what do you see? A group of children lying on their stomachs, trolling Cypress Pond with hand-held nets. Unfolding before you is a typical school program at the Garden – this one called Pond Peering.

What you don't see and may not realize are the effects that such programs have on their participants. Schoolchildren leave the Garden with a greater respect for nature, an increased understanding of how all its components interrelate and, most importantly, their own role in stewarding the natural world. Children are encouraged

to use all their senses to explore the world about them. Their joy at experiencing its wonders is profound.

For instance, in Passionate Pollinators, students from grades two through four are guided through the complexities of plant pollination. 'Why do plants have flowers?' 'What is pollen?' 'What do flowers turn into?' 'How do they do it?' 'What do insects, such as bees and moths, have to do with it?' 'Why do plants need to create seeds?' These are big questions. Do you know the answers? Any eight- to ten-year old who has been to a VanDusen school program will be able to tell you. When the children see, smell, feel, touch and sometimes even taste what pollination is all about, abstract concepts become real and meaningful. They learn the value of living things and come to see that it is all connected.



By Nancy Wong
and Maggie Kilian



Above: Meeting a tree
Top Left: Pond Peering program in action
Left: Playing a game called 'Life Cycle'
Top right: Examining a moth flower



Photos: Maggie Kilian

By participating in nature's magic, children are taught the importance of conservation. Children who have experienced that joy and wonder begin to care about the environment and may be inspired to share their experience with family and friends, or seek further information in books or online. They may join an environmental club; or take part in a school or community garden; or plant a seed in a pot and tend it. No child comes away from a field trip to VanDusen Garden untouched – each takes away special memories.

For nearly 30 years, VanDusen Garden has been connecting kids to nature and, by extension, to conservation. Some of the Garden's volunteers first came here as small children; now they return with their own, or occasionally come back as teachers leading classes. All programs are guided by a dedicated volunteer trained in interpretive techniques to make nature come alive for children. Teachers are supported with a pre-trip information package that reinforces the learning experience in class.

The small fee that the Garden charges does not begin to cover the costs of providing teaching materials, tools and volunteer training. The program is supported in part by the generosity of individual donors. Thanks to continued support from the RBC Foundation and their Bursary Fund, students from financially-challenged schools are also able to participate.

Some of the program's most eloquent spokespersons are the participants themselves.

"I learned that plants are under water and the pond has zillions of creatures. Thank you so, so, so, so, so, so much."
Romina (grade 2)

"It was so exciting! That was the best field trip ever!"
Judy (grade 3)

"The field trip fired their imaginations and enabled them to appreciate plant life from an 'adventuring' point of view."
Nuala (a parent)

"I'm not afraid of bees any more."
Farid (grade 4)

"What is your favourite thing in the pond? Are there frogs the colour of a rainbow?"
Sharon (grade 3)

The next time you are in the Garden and come across a school group, take a few moments to join them in their pond peering or bee-to-flower journey. See the world through their eyes – it's an amazing place!



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