

Educator offers insight into the value of learning outdoors



Jan. 22, 2020 By Nate Smelle

Bark Lake Leadership and Conference Centre's program manager Joe Fortin kicked off the Bancroft Field Naturalist Club's 2020 speaker series at the Bancroft Fish and Game Club on Jan. 13 with a talk on the value of outdoor education. Having worked at the Centre for more than a decade, Fortin has witnessed firsthand how beneficial it is for kids, and people of all ages to have the opportunity to experience the outdoors, learn about nature, and challenge themselves. At Bark Lake, he said they focus much of their programming on delivering kids between Grade 5 and Grade 12 with a unique first-time experience of the outdoors.

Fortin told a story of one group of students visiting Bark Lake from Taiwan that had never had an opportunity to paddle a canoe. Once the students gathered enough courage to take the vessel out on the water, Fortin said before he knew it the kids had paddled the canoe more than 100-metres from shore. He said an unexpected and fun learning experience then arose when the kids suddenly flipped the canoe.

"Our two-hour introduction to canoeing lesson became a two-hour how to tip and retrieve a canoe lesson, and the kids couldn't have been happier," said Fortin.

"You couldn't get that in a classroom. You wouldn't have such a serendipitous opportunity doing quadratic equations in class. By challenging students in a natural setting; and exposing them to risk and uncertainty through outdoor experiences such as the high ropes course, canoeing, or archery, Fortin said they are able to develop confidence as well as communication and leadership skills. When youth engage in outdoor activities like these with their friends, he said they also improve their ability to connect with each other.

"We get kids who come up to Bark Lake who have never shot a bow and arrow," Fortin said.

"It is not only an opportunity for them to learn a new skill; it also gives them a chance to then coach their classmates in how to do it. They might say 'I just shot a bulls-eye,' and that's great. But it doesn't mean anything unless they can teach their classmate to shoot a bulls-eye too. Teaching kids how to coach themselves and each other makes it a better experience overall, because it is no longer a competition, it's a community."

Because most of the students who visit Bark Lake come from schools located in a larger urban centre, Fortin said the experiences they have are often their first real exposure to the outdoors. Likewise, he said on many occasions because the students' parents, teachers and adult chaperones also usually live in the city they tend to be first-timers when it comes to experiencing nature as well. Through this exposure, he said they end up benefit from the experiences just as much as the children.

Fortin gave the example of one teacher from a school in China that has brought classes to Bark Lake for the past three years. Although terrified of water when she first arrived at Bark Lake the first year, he said by the third year she finally overcame her fear and went for a dip in the lake.

While it can be easy for people living in cottage country to take such outdoor experiences as swimming in a lake, canoeing, or hiking through a forest for granted, Fortin said these type of experiences are life changing for those who have never had the

opportunity to engage in them. Acknowledging this as one of the most rewarding aspects of being an outdoor educator, he explained ?An outdoor educator's job is to help people find the familiar and the strange, and the the extraordinary in every day. A couple of squirrels fighting over some food ? we see that every day; but for students coming up to Bark Lake who have never seen a red squirrel before, this is an epic battle and something wonderful.?

Fortin recommends anyone interested in learning more about the outdoor education programming at Bark Lake to check out their website at: www.barklake.com.