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Chair

Mr. Mark Warawa

Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Mark Warawa (Langley, CPC)): We'll call the meeting to order.

I want to welcome everyone to meeting number 54 of the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development, as we continue our study on urban conservation practices in Canada.

We have three witnesses with us today. Each witness will be given up to 10 minutes.

We will begin with Child and Nature Alliance of Canada, Ms. Power.

Ms. Marlene Power (Director, Board of Directors, Forest School Canada, and Member, Child and Nature Alliance of Canada): Wonderful.

Thank you, honourable members and Mr. Chair, for engaging in such a vast and collaborative process to determine a comprehensive national conservation plan.

I'd also like to acknowledge how this committee has prioritized connecting children to nature as a priority for youth, children, and communities, as we at the Child and Nature Alliance believe that conservation will not be a possibility if citizens are detached in any way from the natural spaces we wish them to sustainably use, protect, and conserve.

I'm here today to represent the Child and Nature Alliance and to share the great work we've been doing to connect children to nature. In doing so, I hope to highlight how the work we do aligns itself with the vision of the national conservation plan to protect, connect, restore, and engage.

The Child and Nature Alliance operates based on a collaborative leadership model, where grassroots and policy-related initiatives are always done through our partnership model that engages multiple sectors, stakeholders, and leading organizations across the country. Our partners include organizations such as Parks Canada, the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, provincial parks, parks and recreation, ministries of health, the David Suzuki Foundation, Scouts Canada, Bienenstock playgrounds, Evergreen, Participaction, KidActive, the HALO research team based here in Ottawa, and the list can go on. Many of these organizations have presented to this committee so far.

The alliance supports individuals, organizations, and ministries in connecting children and communities to nature by supporting collaborative dialogues at both provincial and national levels.

Examples of this include the Healthy Children/Healthy Spaces conference held here in Ottawa in 2010, the Healthy By Nature forum, in Vancouver in 2011, and the Get Outside BC youth leadership initiative in 2012. As a result of these collaborative dialogues, we have co-created the Vancouver Healthy By Nature charter, in addition to co-launching Take Me Outside Day and Nature Play Day. Lastly, we have participated in the minister's round table on parks and have worked closely with Participaction and Active Healthy Kids Canada in getting an outdoor and nature indicator placed in the report card highlighting a connection to nature as a major health indicator for children in Canada.

Currently, we are working on launching two national initiatives, the first being the Natural Leaders Alliance and the second being Forest School Canada. The Natural Leaders Alliance is a network of youth inspiring youth and is driven by two youth representatives who sit on the board of directors at Child and Nature Alliance. The alliance has been piloted through the Get Outside BC leadership initiative, which we hope to launch nationally to provide youth with the opportunity to engage and inspire each other to connect to the natural world.

Forest School Canada is a national education initiative to promote nature-based education in the early primary and secondary years through an increased use of the built and natural environment. This includes natural playgrounds, as was presented to the committee at an earlier date by Adam Bienenstock, outdoor classrooms, as well as municipal, provincial, and national parks. This model of education started in the 1950s in Denmark and is now an educational model used throughout the U.K. and within most Scandinavian countries. There are currently over 500 Forest Schools in Germany alone, and in parts of the U.K. all schools are mandated to bring their students into a park or woodland area for forest education at least once a week.

The first Forest School in Canada was founded four years ago just outside of Ottawa, at Carp Ridge Learning Centre. The Forest Preschool has operated for the past four years on a pilot basis and has launched a Forest Preschool for children between the ages of two and four, as well as a Forest Kindergarten for kindergarten students. As well as that, the Forest Preschool in Carp has offered a Families in Nature program, as well as a Homeschool Wilderness program for home-schooling families. The Child and Nature Alliance believes that the pilot program is a really great program that highlights the importance and some of the benefits of connecting children to nature in the early years and beyond.

•(1535)

Forest School Canada has partnered with the national governing body of the UK's Forest School to develop a national teacher training program. The goal of this teacher training program will be to promote an increase in Forest schools and nature-based programs by providing educators with the knowledge and skills to take their classrooms outdoors. In addition to this training program, we are working with a national research team to outline a Canadian research project to study the health outcomes and ecological literacy of children who attend nature-based education programs across Canada. Lastly, we are identifying national policy issues that must be addressed to support teachers and administrators starting up forest and nature-based programs.

Forest School Canada addresses the recommendation to engage the formal education system made in the 2012 minister's round table on parks. We envision this initiative as a way to get students and teachers into parks for education programs. We also see national parks as a venue and partner in the development and delivery of the Forest School teacher training programs in each province.

The Child and Nature Alliance would like to ask the parliamentary Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development to acknowledge our two initiatives as national strategies and examples of best practices to promote conservation in Canada through an education program.

We would like to highlight the need to engage children beginning in the early years, to engage our formal school system in a way that increases our impact, and to engage youth to drive this movement forward. Additionally, we would like to highlight the necessity for collaborative leadership, across all sectors and between all stakeholders, in order to continue connecting children to nature.

Lastly, we ask that appropriate funds be allocated to develop, launch, and deliver both initiatives in each province in a comprehensive, collaborative, engaging, and sustainable manner.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we will hear from Scouts Canada. You have ten minutes.

Mr. Mike Bingley (Outdoor Program Manager, Scouts Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of this committee.

This is the 50th anniversary of the printing of *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson. That book sparked the modern environmental movement and the ban on DDT, because of DDT's impact on birds.

The concern in 1962 was that species like the peregrine falcon were going to be wiped out in a generation. Populations in the wild had begun to plummet. We solved that problem, but we're now facing a new kind of silent spring. This one is where the sound of children's laughter will be lost from our forests. It's not an exaggeration to say that people who spend time in nature are a species at risk. Like the peregrine falcon in the 1960s, the youth numbers are plummeting. Having a strong connection to an outdoor place is the first step in ensuring any kind of conservation ethic and an essential component of our Canadian identity. We must act decisively to reverse this trend or we will soon find ourselves—

The Chair: My apologies. We have bells ringing for a vote in 30 minutes.

We are required to suspend and we will return to continue your testimony. We apologize for the interruption.

Mr. Mike Bingley: Not a problem.

The Chair: We will suspend until after the vote.

•(1535)

_____ (Pause) _____

•(1630)

The Chair: We're calling the meeting back into session.

Unfortunately, the bells are ringing again, so colleagues, I am....

To our witnesses particularly, our apologies. We were really looking forward to your testimony. Hopefully we can hear you in the near future. Again, our apologies.

Colleagues, we are required to head back to the House.

I think it's pointless for us to come back today, so I'd ask for a motion to adjourn.

We're adjourned.

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