

Education and community service come together through NERDS/NOS



By Nate Smelle

Outdoor education has a long history at North Hastings High School. It began in the 1970s with the Earth Studies, Geology and Mining Technology program, where students would learn about mines, claim staking and winter camping. Today the tradition is carried on through the Northern Outdoor Studies (NOS) program and the NERDS program. NOS is a four-credit high school program open to grade eleven and twelve students that prepares students for direct entry into the work force with employers in selected sectors such as: environmental management, natural resource and wildlife management, ecotourism and commercial logging.

When the NOS program began in 1997 it was designed to cater to the needs of students living in North Hastings. Listening to the testimonials of teachers and students who have participated in the program this customized approach to education seems to work well for many students.

As one of the two teachers who founded the NOS program Bob Shouldice can attest to this. One proof of how well these programs connect with students he says is that in the last five years of his career as a teacher for NOS the class had a 100 per cent student retention.

'Not every kid is suited to a 76-minute period in a classroom,' said Shouldice.

'Because the format of these programs is so different, and the emphasis is on taking them out of the traditional school environment, that there is a whole segment of the school population that you are giving an educational opportunity to that wouldn't have had it otherwise. You are retaining kids in the school who may have otherwise have just packed it in. To me that's a real benefit.'

The students study ecology, resource and forestry management, recreation services, community leadership, the environment and interconnections with natural resource management, species biology (including at-risk and invasive species), and human impact on the environment. At the same time they are able to gain certifications and valuable hands-on experience, skills, and training for working in many different outdoor occupations.

The benefits of the NERDS and NOS programs are not just reserved for the students. Engaging in community service is an important component of both programs so the benefits extend outward to residents and business owners in the community as well.

'These kids do a lot of work,' he said.

'Steve Wilkins from the stewardship council calls the 'sweat equity.' There are all of these benefits to the community in that things are getting done that wouldn't have otherwise been done without having to pay somebody to do it. It also raises the profile of the school and its programs within the community, and it paints the school in a more positive light.'

Chair of the Bancroft Area Stewardship Council (BASC) Steve Wilkins also sees great value in these programs. BASC was a founding partner of the Northern Outdoors Studies class.

"We are very proud of our continuing involvement on behalf of so many community volunteers," said Wilkins.

"It's still amazing to see the quality of students involved, the extensive community benefits from the course, and the fantastic number of positive life changing stories we receive as a direct result of this nationally award winning program. Both the NOS and the NERDS programs are the high schools good will ambassadors to the community".

NERDS is also a four credit program focuses on outdoor experiential education, however, this program is designed for students who enjoy the outdoors and who may be interested in pursuing a post secondary college or university career in natural resources, natural sciences or environmental sciences. Students are involved in a wide variety of projects which include data collection, analysis, and communication of information as part of on-going monitoring and scientific research with numerous local agencies and associations involved in natural resource management and environmental monitoring. Students also get the chance to work alongside fish, wildlife and forestry specialists where they gain valuable experience that will help with future studies in environment and resource management at the college or university level.

By the end of the program each student in the class has put together their own portfolio highlighting the certifications, skills and knowledge they have gained. These portfolios are designed to be used as presentation documents when applying for future employment in their chosen career path. Off the top of his head Shouldice said he can think of more than 30 former NOS/NERDS students who have gone on to put their newfound knowledge and skills into action in their career.

Jessica Mrazek is a former student of the both programs who is currently working in Alberta for Parks Canada. While living in Bancroft Mrazek carried on her community service after graduating from the programs; becoming an active member of the Bancroft Area Stewardship Council. Now working with Parks Canada in Alberta, Mrazek looks back on her time studying the outdoors through NOS and NERDS with great fondness. Without the skills she gained through the program she believes she wouldn't be where she is today.

"Those programs were my best memories from high school," said Mrazek.

"I remember talking with council members before I left that before I took those programs I wanted to be a writer. They completely changed my career path for one. It jump-started my career. I was learning stuff at such an earlier age, putting me miles ahead of my peers as far as knowing what I wanted to do and most importantly knowing I was going to love it."

Mrazek said she had always loved the outdoors, however these programs inspired a deeper passion in her for the natural world.

"I had a new found appreciation," she said.

"It was satisfying. I knew, I understood, and it made me want to learn more helping define my career path. The teachers involved with both the programs made a huge impact on me. They all cared so much about the programs and making sure the students got the best out of it. They cared beyond what a typical teachers position called for, something I definitely appreciate now. Without those programs I wouldn't be where I am now. They shaped me for sure."

In spite of the multitude of benefits that the NERDS and NOS programs deliver to the students and the community, both programs are now under threat of being shut down. If the programs are eliminated Shouldice said the loss of the students community service would leave a huge void in the community. New regulations that forbid students from participating in any activities in or near the water. Because of these regulations this year's NOS canoe trip has been cancelled. Many involved with the programs are concerned the new rules will eventually be the demise of outdoor education in North Hastings.

"If they keep throwing up these road blocks eventually the dedicated and motivated teachers will just throw up their hands and say to hell with it," Shouldice said. "It's just too bad that people are so quick to sue, and that lawyers are telling school boards that they have to cover their ass all the time. In the end it's the kids that suffer."