



Nature Centre

REPORT 2001

High Park Citizens' Advisory Committee Box 108, 95 Lavinia Ave., Toronto, ON M6S 3H9 Volunteer Hotline: (416) 392-1748

This report was prepared from material submitted by Robin Jane Roff and Karen Okamoto. The High Park Citizens' Advisory Committee wishes to express our appreciation for the excellent contributions made by Robin and Karen toward a successful season in 2001.

Our Mandate

The High Park Nature Centre is committed to the promotion of responsible stewardship of the natural environment. The Centre provides an opportunity for visitors to gain an understanding of the park's unique ecological aspects as well as the importance of maintaining and restoring the area's environmental legacy.

Our Staff

The Nature Centre is staffed by university students and graduates with experience in the educational and environmental fields. This year two undergraduate students, Robin Jane Roff and Karen Okamoto, shared the position of coordinators for the entirety of our operating season. Robin is pursuing a degree in Geography and Political Science, with a specialty in Third World development, from the University of Toronto. Karen is currently completing a double major in Environmental Studies and Women's Studies at York University.

Volunteer Support

The Nature Centre would not be possible without the help of a core group of volunteers from the High Park Citizens' Advisory Committee as well as other partners and individuals. This year we were also aided by Neil Shore, who dedicated his time one day a week to assist our coordinators with the program's activities, and Heather Dicker, who coordinated payroll administration.

The Program

We jumped into this job hoping to change the way that young people view the environment around them. Whether it is a tarmac covered parking lot, a freshly mowed lawn, or a lush green forest, we wanted the children to see its place in both the city of Toronto and the world in general.

Highlights This Year

- ~ In our third year of operation, we were able to build on our experience and accumulated resources and get the program up and running more quickly.
- ~ Recruiting to fill the two seasonal staff positions took place in February, giving us an excellent array of candidates to choose from.
- ~ Before the season started, our staff assisted with a Nature Centre table at Earth Day in High Park and a Kiwanis presentation and one of our volunteers, Kathleen Keefe, lined up many of the school bookings.
- ~ Overall, participation in our programs increased by close to 50%.
- ~ In the May/June period our Oak Savannah restoration program accommodated 51 groups, with about 1350 students. The school groups planted 2000 native grasses, sedges and wildflowers and learned about High Park's Oak Savannah and the restoration program.
- ~ Over 800 children, from 44 organized groups plus family-oriented events, participated in our activity-based nature education programs over the summer.
- ~ We improved attendance at our public events, partly by arranging to meet at a familiar central location.
- ~ We strengthened our cooperative relationship with other children's programs operating in High Park.
- ~ Our staff expanded our collection of educational material by developing new games, questionnaires and puzzles.
- ~ With funding from the TD Friends of the Environment Foundation we purchased a set of display boards and began acquiring display material.

Through activities and games we hoped to educate the Centre's visitors in the importance of maintaining and rebuilding the area's ecological heritage. High Park is a wonderful resource within the busiest city in Canada, and it is a very valuable experience for children and adults alike to be introduced to its unique habitats and ecosystems.

"We jumped into this job hoping to change the way that young people view the environment around them."

We continued to expand the Centre's educational repertoire in the hopes of creating a permanent, reusable stockpile of games, activities and information for future coordinators. We focused much of our work on creating scavenger hunts, questionnaires and mystery puzzles in order to increase the children's appreciation of High Park's environment, but also to give participants a written record of what they learned throughout the day.

School Planting Program (May 14 to July 27)

The first half of the season (May/June) targeted school groups from grades 1 through 7. The activities and discussions were designed to incorporate part of the children's science curriculum with information and participation in High Park's restoration projects. In total, the Nature Centre accommodated fifty-one groups, comprising about 1350 students, over the two-month period. Groups were charged a fee of \$35.

Participants in the spring session were introduced to the Park's social and natural history as well as its ecological significance to the Toronto region. The program's core, however, was the planting of native plants in two of the Park's prominent restoration sites (just south of the Forest School and across the road from the swimming pool). Thanks to the efforts of so many enthusiastic students, 2000 new grasses, sedges and wildflowers were added to High Park's Black Oak Savannah.

"Even those children who swore they hated bugs and worms often found themselves admiring these creatures as they moved through the soil."

The program's strongest point is its emphasis on direct restoration involvement. Many of our participants came from inner city areas and had very little previous experience within a natural setting. Therefore, the chance to put their hands in the earth and change it for the better was an important part of their visit. Even those children who swore they hated bugs and worms often found themselves admiring these creatures as they moved through the soil. All in all, the program gives many students the chance to make a positive change in their city. As a result, all our lives are enriched.

Summer Program

From July to mid-August the High Park Nature Centre offered a summer program to daycare centres, summer camps and other community groups, bringing in over 800 participants to the Centre from across the city. One group came from as far away as Brampton while several came from downtown Toronto, surrounding neighbourhoods and from within High Park, including Colborne Lodge's Discovery Camp. Many of our participants were aged 6-12 years. We also had children as young as three participate in the program and were also fortunate to have senior citizens from the Grenadier Residence participate.

We had an overwhelming response to the summer program and were booked solid for the entire season with 44 group visits to the Centre. We offered a two-hour session for groups, either in the morning or afternoon, for a nominal \$10 fee. Six family programs were organized on Wednesday mornings outside Grenadier Restaurant and near the Adventure Playground. Three Saturday morning programs were offered to the public outside the Restaurant. We were delighted to have volunteers from the Kiwanis Club attend one of our Saturday programs. Despite poor attendance at a few of our programs, our largest attendance peaked at 15 young participants, accompanied by their parents and guardians, for our Butterfly theme week. The Nature Centre also participated in the Children's Garden Sunday family event and organized a guided walk to Grenadier Pond.

"Children who were even hesitant to sit on the grass got into the dirt looking for different critters by the end of the session."

The summer program was comprised of six 'theme weeks'. Each theme week focused on either a particular ecosystem in High Park, such as the Pond, Black Oak Savannah and Forest, or dealt with special aspects of nature in High Park, such as Butterflies, Bees and Other Bugs, Sensing Nature, and Animals Living on the Edge. A program of activities was organized for each theme week to facilitate learning through experiencing nature. Our goal was to provide our predominately urban-oriented participants with a firsthand, positive experience of nature while directing their attention and concern toward wildlife and natural ecosystems in the Park.

Evaluations of the summer program from group leaders were largely positive. Group leaders commented on the many strengths of the program. They liked our interactive activities, the information we provided, the variety of exercises we had, our nature hikes and walks, our focus on reflection after each activity, and the combination of fun and educational games. Several leaders appreciated the opportunity we provided to children from the local neighbourhood to experience and

get to know the area around them. One group leader did note, however, that our program may not be as effective with preschool aged children because our walks and discussions were challenging for them.

In addition to the group leaders' evaluations, we observed the successes of the program through the participants' comments and reactions, and felt our work to be deeply rewarding. Since many groups made repeat visits to the Centre over the course of the summer, we were able to notice what participants took with them and remembered after each session. For example, we noticed participants being excited at the sight of a butterfly. Many were able to identify butterflies and different oak trees after our butterfly and savannah weeks. They began to notice many things on our walks and take more interest in different insects and plants over the summer. Children who were even hesitant to sit on the grass got into the dirt looking for different critters by the end of the session. Some participants told us that they didn't want to leave the Centre!

"...some of the children began hugging their trees and one child even kissed their tree during the activity."

There was one memorable moment during a session of Meet-a-Tree, an activity where participants are blindfolded and must feel a tree and later identify the tree they met. We noticed that some of the children began hugging their trees and one child even kissed their tree during the activity. It was such a touching sight! Many of the participants from the Grenadier Retirement Residence repeatedly mentioned that they lived in the High Park neighbourhood for their entire lives but have never been to nor known about the Black Oak Savannah. They were truly amazed. There were many memorable moments and comments that made our work so rewarding and demonstrated the importance of this program.

"A forest of different plants and animals can easily look like a wall of green for the young urban dweller who has been surrounded by the uniformity of concrete streets and buildings in the city."

This program successfully attracts diverse groups of young people from various cultural and socio-economic backgrounds from across the city to enjoy and appreciate nature in an urban setting. Oftentimes, environmental concerns do seem distant and far removed from our daily existence in the city. However, at the Nature Centre we made an effort to localize environmental concerns by focusing each participant's attention on the surrounding natural environment and by awakening their awareness

and fascination in nature. A forest of different plants and animals can easily look like a wall of green for the young urban dweller who has been surrounded by the uniformity of concrete streets and buildings in the city.

Our goal was to provide opportunities for young people to stop and experience nature, take a closer look, observe, ask questions and develop an interest and concern for the local environment. With our participants we discussed our direct impact on natural environments and what we can do to protect them. At the end of each session we would encourage our visitors to take the activities they did home with them to explore their local neighbourhoods. In other words, we hoped to inspire our young visitors to act locally by simply becoming aware of and appreciating their surrounding natural environment.

Looking to the Future

In the long term, the Centre's goal is to develop a permanent facility where individuals from the community and beyond may drop by and learn about the area's ecological features. In order to achieve this, it is important to continue to increase the quality of our display material and to seek stronger links with local and regional organizations.

Karen Okamoto (left) and Robin Jane Roff at the Nature Centre Open House held July 11, 2001. Participants included our local MP Sarmite Bulte, Councillor David Miller and a representative from our local MPP, Gerard Kennedy's office, as well as a number of volunteers and supporters.

Recommendations for 2002

Our fundamental goal for the 2002 season is to maintain and enhance the strengths of this year's program. The following is a list of our recommendations to improve the Nature Centre:

1. The school program is very popular and we are already at our maximum number of bookings. Consideration should be given to introducing a fall season to accommodate more classes and to give students an opportunity to see the savannah they helped plant at its peak.
2. Since our Saturday morning programs had poor attendance, we suggest that these either be replaced by a second weekday program or the start time be pushed back to 1 PM. We believe that a later program would have more drop-in attendance, as the park is far busier in the afternoons than in the mornings. One option is to increase our participation in the Children's Garden's Sunday family events.
3. One of the most frequent recommendations of our visitors was to improve advertising of the program. We gave Grenadier Restaurant flyers but they did not display them. Nevertheless, the restaurant remains the best location for advertisement. Colborne Lodge is another good area for publicity. Local libraries and coffee shops were very effective, and should thus be used once again.
4. Finding the Nature Centre remains a problem for many groups. It is therefore important that signage be increased throughout the park. This would also act as advertisement to users of the area.
5. Many summer groups wanted to book weekly visits to the Centre. Although we allowed this, we then found that we had to turn many other groups away. To reach as many individuals as possible, we recommend that groups be only allowed two visits to the Centre per season.
6. Although it would be nice to accommodate all ages and abilities, we suggest that a minimum age of 6 be placed on groups, since we found that on average younger children were not able to appreciate the information and activities which were delivered.
7. The feasibility of a youth leadership program should be explored to reach out to high-school-aged young people who have an interest in environmental stewardship.

The High Park Citizens' Advisory Committee

The High Park Citizens' Advisory Committee is a volunteer group made up of a broad range of park users, including individuals and organized groups.

The HPCAC provides public input on park policies, goals and objectives; helps facilitate volunteer involvement in park initiatives; and promotes public awareness and responsible stewardship of the park.

Our voting membership includes local ratepayer/residents associations, recreational stakeholders, long-term interest groups, business/park entrepreneurs and members-at-large from the community. Meetings are open to the public.

The HPCAC is supported by three subcommittees: Safety & Recreation, Transportation and Natural Environment. In turn, these subcommittees sponsor a number of volunteer programs, including:

- ~ Nature Centre
- ~ Park Watch
- ~ High Park Adventure/Children's Programs
- ~ High Park K-9 Committee
- ~ Volunteer Stewardship Program
- ~ Adopt-a-Plot Program
- ~ Walking Tours

Our Partners

The High Park Nature Centre is operated by the High Park Citizens' Advisory Committee with support from the Kiwanis Club of Casa Loma, the HRDC Youth Employment Strategy, the City of Toronto (Parks & Recreation Division and Colborne Lodge), the TD Friends of the Environment Foundation, the Toronto District School Board and many other groups and individuals.

