

YOUTH AND ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION PROJECT

MID-TERM REPORT

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PROJECT FUNDED BY:

**QUEEN ALEXANDRA FOUNDATION FOR CHILDREN
STRATEGIC INITIATIVES INVESTMENT FUND
CHILD WELFARE ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Youth and Ecological Restoration Project (YER) was funded by Queen Alexandra Foundation for Children, Strategic Initiatives Investment Fund (SIIF). YER formed partnerships with nine Comox Valley youth and environmental organizations to engage youth at risk in ecological restoration work activities. This mid-term report documents the first six months of YER operation.

2. ACTION STEPS

Consultations with the project partners and other community members were instrumental for the proposal that was consequently funded by SIIF. By establishing good partner relationships early in the YER development these organizations continue to provide valuable feedback loops and ongoing support.

YER was initiated on July 1, 2004, when the project partners were contacted to inform them of the readiness to proceed. An article was written and published with a local newspaper, and posters were distributed to all of the youth organization partners to give to potential YER youth participants. Project promotion and advertising was done through circulation of business cards and a one-page summary (Appendix A). On July 19, 2004 the first youth participants started gaining ecological restoration work experience.

YER is designed to have a high level of interaction between community members and youth participants. Comox Valley community members have been instrumental in the projects ongoing development and implementation. The ecological restoration work events are natural places to bring them both together.

3. PARTNERSHIP UPDATE

During the development of YER nine partnerships were established with Comox Valley youth and environmental organizations, and they all continue to be involved with and contribute to the project. As YER has gained momentum, partnerships have increased to sixteen and there has been interest expressed from others. This increase in popularity is a tribute to the program success within the Comox Valley community.

Youth Organization Partnerships

The five original youth organization partnerships listed below remain active by providing youth referrals and venues for the youth community presentations (Table 1). They are also available for project consultation and feedback which is important for improving YER and providing the best service possible for Comox Valley youth at risk.

- John Howard Society
- Sandwick Alternate School
- Comox Valley Community Justice Centre
- Ministry of Children and Family Development
- Comox Valley Youth Resource Society

There has also been youth referral interest expressed from these youth organizations:

- Senior Alternate School
- Highland Secondary School
- Wachiay Friendship Centre, Nala'atsi Program
- Comox Valley Boys and Girls Club

Environmental Organization Partnerships

The four original environmental organization partnerships listed below continue to support YER by referring ecological restoration work activities (Table 1). They also contribute supplies, materials, training, community presentation venues, and opportunities for youth to work with community members.

- Comox Valley Project Watershed Society
- Tsolum River Restoration Society
- Comox Valley Land Trust
- Millard/Piercy Watershed Stewards

In addition to maintaining, strengthening and improving the original environmental organization partnerships, YER has also increased to include the following seven organizations (Table 1):

- Oyster River Enhancement Society
- Morrison Creek Streamkeepers
- Perseverance Creek Streamkeepers
- Comox Valley Watershed Assembly
- Georgia Strait Alliance
- Sunrise Rotary Club
- Fanny Bay Enhancement Society

Future Partnerships to Sustain Funding

The SIIF grant is one time only funding for YER for a one-year period and was awarded to the project coordinator on an individual basis. Funding organizations normally distribute funds to organizations with non-profit charity status. During the next phase of YER it will be necessary to develop a partnership with an organization that has non-profit charity status. In the next few months there will be discussions with the partnership organizations and others to determine the most suitable partnership for YER funding purposes. Without this partnership the project will probably not be able to seek future funding or continue to operate.

4. PROGRESS AND OUTCOMES

One of the measures of YER success was how many youth would complete the 20-hour program. In the first six-month period 13 out of 15 youth participants had completed the program, 4 girls and 11 boys, ranging in age from 13-18 (Table 1). They had to fit a youth at risk criteria, which generally included those involved with the criminal justice system, youth in foster care and others with behavioral problems that would benefit from involvement with the YER program.

A youth questionnaire (Appendix B) was developed to involve them in YER planning, and to monitor the project progress and outcomes. Individual files were created for the 15 youth participants, assigning each a number to protect their anonymity (Table 1). The files contain presentation notes, questionnaire answers, and observations documented by the project coordinator. A logbook was kept to record communications with youth, their families, and the partnership organizations. A schedule calendar documented dates of youth work experience and presentations, and any other project related meetings.

The proposed YER goals fit into the following categories: building healthy community relationships, gaining valued work experience, improving knowledge of ecological restoration, increasing social skill development and enhancing communication skills. Progress on each of these categories will be described and outcome evidence provided. Data to support progress and outcomes is contained in the youth participant files and Table 1.

Building Healthy Community Relationships

One of the YER objectives was to get youth working with community members who are involved in volunteer work and can provide positive role models. Organizing the work experience opportunities was always done to engage youth with a maximum number of community members. This proved to be very effective, as 15 youth participants worked cooperatively with a total of 490 community members, averaging 32 community members per youth participant (Table 1). Some of the realizations and learning about community relationships that occurred for the youth participants included the following:

- There was no arguing or fighting and everybody worked together as a team to get the job done (Participant #6).
- Old people are just like youth, they like to get together to do things, talk and have fun (Participant #14).
- Three youth participants summarized that YER made them feel valued, they made new friends, had fun and enjoyed the experience (Participants #2, 3, 4).

Gaining Valued Work Experience

Valued work experience was gained by engaging youth in ecological restoration work at different locations to achieve a variety of experiences. Each participant was involved at an average of four work locations (Table 1). They worked with volunteers, as well as some paid environmental workers, which gave them an insight into future employment

potential. Types of work included: invasive species removal, salmon enhancement and identification, planting and monitoring native plant species, insect monitoring, and stream assessments. Examples of youth comments that reveal a change in learning, skills or attitude for the future:

- One youth said she wanted to work with the ocean and its creatures to know how healthy it is, and maybe be a marine biologist (Participant #3).
- Another said that the skills she learned were to use a shovel, use her brains, public speaking, honesty, and working cooperatively with others (Participant #4).
- Another simply said that when you give your energy to help your community, it makes you feel good inside and warms your heart (Participant #15).

To avoid any stigma towards youth doing community service hours, they were all introduced to community members as being involved with a work experience program. Seven of the youth (Participants #3, 4, 5, 9, 11, 13 and 14) used YER work experience for credits at their schools. All of the 13 youth that completed the 20-hour program received a certificate and a letter of reference.

Improving Knowledge of Ecological Restoration

Youth participants acquired knowledge of ecosystem and watershed functions; native plant, fish, animal and bird species; and how the natural world is interconnected. One youth saw a black bear for the first time, another their first bird's nest, and several had not seen spawning salmon before. By working with the land they could see cause and effect relationships, for instance, how invasive plant species take over native species, why that happens and the end result. Examples of knowledge gained about the environment are:

- One said her favourite part was learning how everything is interconnected, like when the salmon die they give nutrients back into the stream, which feeds the aquatic insects, which feed the baby salmon (Participant #10).
- Another said that the most important thing he learned was how fish bring the ocean nutrients back to the land, connecting the land to the sea (Participant #11).
- One more said even the smallest insect contributes to the health of our environment, and people harass Mother Nature through pollution and construction (Participant #4).
- Still another said he learned how to be responsible for nature and help save some of our great country's resources (Participant #5).

Increasing Social Skill Development

Some of the seemingly small parts of the YER program played big roles in teaching communication and social skills. Picking the youth up and transporting them to the work site taught punctuality and responsibility to commitments. Preparing them homemade lunches showed them a sense of community and caring about their well being. Setting boundaries around possession of drugs, alcohol use and appropriate language at the work site were important for modeling good social behaviour. Examples of increasing social skill development are:

- One youth said that socialization is an important thing, not just for humans, but for animals too (Participant #11).

- Another said he learned about self-discipline by working in cold weather and about making commitments because people counted on him to be at work (Participant #15).
- One more said fish are a lot like us because we all need food and a safe place to stay (Participant #14).

Enhancing Communication Skills

The community presentations were a key piece of the program as it brought together communication and social skill development for YER participants. The community presentations were attended by a total of 260 community members, which averaged 20 community members for 13 youth participants (Table 1). One community member commented after one of the presentations that she “felt a real sense of community in the room”. Examples of how the presentations enhanced communication skills are:

- One youth nervously gave her first presentation at a large meeting of about 50 people and quickly learned how the use of jokes eases the tension and allows the audience to laugh with you (Participant #10).
- Another learned the value of reviewing the YER experience and writing it down for the presentation to help her remember it better (Participant. #4).
- Still another said the presentation worked really well, he didn’t think the audience would listen, but they did (Participant. #12).

5. KEY LESSONS AND LEARNING

YER has been very successful, exceeding my best hopes and expectations. It has, however, needed much more coordination time than anticipated. Working with the youth themselves has been challenging and rewarding, requiring a high level of communication skills. Other expertise necessary is knowledge of ecological restoration, youth issues, conflict resolution, and organizational skills. No additional skill development was needed as the project coordinator had previously acquired the essential knowledge.

It was inspiring to witness the youth’s transformation from rebellious teenager to excited participant as they contributed to the environmental well being of our community. A change was also observed in the community members as they went from distrusting the youth to acknowledging their contributions. Elders began sharing their life experiences and viewpoints with the youth, allowing space for both to find the common ground that linked them together. As time went on it became more typical to have intergenerational exchange, mutual acceptance and joint appreciation at the ecological restoration work events. The community presentations were also places that provided opportunities for community members to see youth from a positive perspective.

Some of the project partners shifted their outlook on our community’s youth as well. One of them thanked me for allowing him to see middle ground where he had previously looked at polarized differences. As YER became more established and accepted as a positive alternative and contribution for Comox Valley youth at risk, other youth and environmental organizations came forward to be included as partners.

Each of the 15 youth participants is a special person who deserves to feel a sense of belonging in our community. The natural world provides a safe place for the youth to gain valued work experience while interacting with positive community members. Through the ecological restoration activities they learned to heal the natural world while at the same time heal themselves. I enjoyed working with all of them.

6. PROJECT CHANGES AND ADJUSTMENTS

The YER project has been operating according to the proposal that was accepted by QAF in June 2004. Although no significant changes or alterations are needed, an extension of the total time period is required. During the winter time environmental organizations do not normally operate due to adverse weather conditions, so there was no work done by youth for about a 3 month period. An extension of 3 months will be requested in writing from the SIIF, Child Welfare Advisory Committee. This will also allow time to develop the partnership with a non-profit organization that is necessary for YER to apply for additional funds.

7. BUDGET UPDATE

At the mid-term point of the SIIF \$30,000.00 grant, the YER project has spent slightly less than half of the funds in the amount of \$14,925.22 (Table 2). The following expense items have variances from the original proposed budget:

- **Capital/equipment** costs are lower than anticipated as some personal equipment has been used, and equipment has been provided by the environmental organizations.
- **Transportation** costs are higher than expected, due to greater traveling distances and the \$.40/km rate being increased to the present government rate of \$.42/km.
- **Insurance** rates are less, as liability insurance coverage was acquired by joining the Pacific Streamkeepers Federation who has low rates for their members.

8. SUMMARY

Today's youth are often disconnected from the natural world and sometimes get involved with criminal activities, drug and alcohol abuse, and other risky behaviours. The Youth and Ecological Restoration Project (YER) is an innovative program to involve youth at risk with nature while engaging them in ecological restoration work activities. It began operation on July 1, 2004 with funding from the Queen Alexandra Foundation for Children, Strategic Initiatives Investment Fund. YER initially formed partnerships with nine Comox Valley youth and environmental organizations. In the first six months the number of organizations working with the project increased to sixteen.

By the end of December 2004, 15 youth participants had been involved with the 20-hour program. Project goals were: building healthy community relationships, gaining valued work experience, improving knowledge of ecological restoration, increasing social skill development and enhancing communication skills. These were accomplished by having youth work with community members to restore the health of local watersheds and

ecosystems. Program completion also required them giving a community presentation. Each youth conducted ecological restoration work with an average of 32 community members, and 20 community members per youth participant attended their presentations.

YER success has been in observing Comox Valley youth at risk working cooperatively with others and developing a sense of belonging in our community. By giving them opportunities to succeed and honouring their contributions, they learned to value their accomplishments and feel pride in themselves. Encouraging and trusting youth to take responsibility empowers them to be the next generation of leaders.

Table 2: YOUTH AND ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION PROJECT

Mid-term report on budget figures and expenditures.

Expense item	SIIF Grant original budget figures	Mid-term budget expenditures	In kind contributions
Professional fees and honouraria	\$17,000.00	\$9,000.00	Original \$2,500.00 Mid-term \$1,250.00
Capital/equipment	\$1,000.00	\$210.91	
Administration	\$3,000.00	\$1,700.00	
Transportation	\$2,000.00	\$1,503.82	
Supplies and materials	\$2,500.00	\$1,420.49	Original \$2,500.00 Mid-term \$500.00
Evaluation	\$2,000.00	\$800.00	
Other (Insurance)	\$2,500.00	\$290.00	
Total project expenditures	\$30,000.00	\$14,925.22	Mid-term total \$1,750.00

APPENDIX A: YOUTH AND ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION PROJECT (YER)
The YER Summary was prepared for distribution to Comox Valley youth and environmental organizations and interested community members.

The Youth and Ecological Restoration Project (YER) is being funded by the Queen Alexandra Foundation for Children, Vancouver Island Strategic Investment Initiatives Fund. YER will engage youth in ecological restoration work activities such as salmon enhancement, stream restoration, habitat assessment and monitoring, and community environmental education. The project coordinator is Wendy Kotilla who has a Restoration of Natural Systems Diploma from University of Victoria, and Negotiation and Mediation Certificates with the Conflict Resolution Program at the Justice Institute of BC, as well as twenty years combined experience with Ecological Restoration and Restorative Justice work.

The YER geographic area is the Comox Valley and partnerships have been formed with nine Comox Valley youth and environmental organizations. The five youth organizations are John Howard Society, Ministry of Children and Family Development, Sandwick Alternative School, Comox Valley Youth Resource Society, and Comox Valley Community Justice Centre. The four environmental organizations are Comox Valley Project Watershed Society, Tsolum River Restoration Society, Comox Valley Land Trust and Millard/Piercy Watershed Stewards. Referrals will come from Comox Valley youth organizations, and the youth themselves will be trained and supervised to conduct ecological restoration work for Comox Valley environmental organizations.

YER work will be supervised by Wendy Kotilla and conducted with 1-2 youth at a time to maximize one-on-one learning experiences. Lunch and transportation to the job site will be provided, and a certificate, letter of reference and crest will be awarded to youth participants on project completion. Certificate achievement will require that an oral presentation about the skills and experience gained be made to a community organization. By sharing their knowledge and experience, the youth will feel more meaningfully involved and further develop a sense of belonging with the community where they live. This will assist with addressing prevention and early intervention, and have a direct effect on supporting good relationships with youth, their

families, support workers and the Comox Valley community.

Project goals include development of youth communication, public speaking, conflict resolution, leadership and other pro-social skills. Working with committed community volunteers will provide positive role models and encourage working in cooperation with others. Ecological restoration work will result in understanding ecosystem functions and scientific research methods as future employment skills, and encourage future land stewardship ethics. YER cross-cultural experiences and interaction with others will raise awareness of youth issues, and build and strengthen family and community relationships.

While Ecological Restoration and Restorative Justice seem to operate in isolation they have much common ground and are both moving in the same direction. Combining them for YER involves taking responsibility for our relationships with each other, with our communities and as stewards of the Earth. The collective health of these relationships will determine what kind of a world we provide for this and future generations.

APPENDIX B: YOUTH AND ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION (YER) PROJECT YOUTH QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire was used to gain insight into the youth participant's interest and knowledge of the natural world, what they wanted to learn, and what they did learn through their YER involvement. By inviting their assistance and input with refining the focus of the project, they could take part in its implementation. They also helped to phrase the questions in "youth friendly language".

YER IS A NEW PROJECT AND NEEDS YOUTH INPUT (kids are the experts)

Preliminary questions:

1. How can YER help kids get curious about the natural world?
2. What do you want to know about the natural world?
3. What concerns do you have about the environment?
4. What ideas do you have about saving nature for future generations?
5. What community group would you like to tell what you learned (environmental, youth, or others)?

Post-work experience questions:

1. What did you like the most about working on the YER project?
2. What did you like the least about working on the YER project?
3. What did you learn about the natural world?
4. What did you learn about environmental work and organizations?
5. What experience did you get that might help you find a job?
6. What was it like for you to meet and work with other people in our community?

Post-presentation questions:

1. What was it like for you to tell the community group about your experience?
2. What do you think the community group learned?