

**COMOX VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT #71
MINISTRY OF EDUCATION**



Elder, Sally Gellard, teaching YER II participants, Greg Hanson and Olivia Neufeld, about wetlands in Comox Valley Regional District, Spike Road Park.

**For the Period of July 1, 2023 to June 30, 2024
Report Completed on August 30, 2024
By
YOUTH AND ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION
Wendy Kotilla
4327 Minto Road
Courtenay, BC V9N 9P7
youthecology.ca
wkotilla@shaw.ca
250-336-8487**

COVER PAGE – Elder, Sally Gellard, teaching YER II participants, Greg Hanson and Olivia Neufeld, about wetlands in Comox Valley Regional District, Spike Road Park1

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INTRODUCTION

Youth and Ecological Restoration (YER) accomplished twenty years of youth service in the Comox Valley on July 1, 2024. Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) has financially supported YER since it started. Comox Valley Regional District (CVRD) has provided funds since 2012. School District #71 (SD#71) began funding YER in 2022. These three funding sources make this program possible for struggling youth in our community.

YER Phase I (YER I) is twenty hours of one-on-one work experience and training to conduct ecological work with Comox Valley environmental groups. YER Phase II (YER II) has two youth involved with ecological inventories in local parks under guidance from a biologist and YER staff member. Both phases provide youth with transportation, lunch and work equipment. On program completion all participants receive a certificate, letter of reference and honourarium.

Four hundred and seventy-six youth have participated in YER over the past twenty years. Most youth are referred through SD#71 and are students within the Comox Valley School District. As there are collective funds from provincial and regional governments, youth expenses are shared between agencies. For the purposes of this report there will be a focus on all of the students from SD#71 for the 2023/2024 school year.

The initial SD#71 funding in 2022 was intended to support youth for mental health, community interaction and outdoor education. These areas were recognized as having the most impact on young people from the Covid isolation period. This was a perfect fit for the YER main goals of: Building Healthy Community Relationships; Gaining Valued Work Experience; Improving Ecological Knowledge; Increasing Personal and Social Skills; Enhancing Communication Skills.

This is a transitional year for YER. The program creator and coordinator for the past twenty years, Wendy Kotilla, will be retiring. Youth Support Worker, Grahm Hilliar, has been mentored for the past nine years to step into the coordinator position. He has worked closely with YER youth and consistently receives positive feedback from the youth and their care givers.

RESULTS AND IMPLEMENTATION

YER is a unique program for youth having difficulty with academic learning and social interactions. It provides work experience, ecotherapy and support with one-on-one mentoring. YER referrals focus on youth who are struggling with social connections, behavioural issues and learning challenges. Youth interact with elders to conduct meaningful environmental work in the Comox Valley. The program is presented as a work experience and training program to avoid any stigma or labeling that can be associated with youth at risk. There is currently an 88% YER youth completion rate. More details are available at YER, MCFD Annual Reports at: <https://youthecology.ca/reports/ministry-of-children-and-family-development-annual-reports/>

School Referrals

In 2023/2024 there were thirty-one SD#71 students (# 449 to 476) referred to YER I by eight schools; and four students (#62 to 65) referred to YER II by three schools (Table 1). YER I participant #450 did not attend school. Twenty-seven YER I participants attended Behaviour Resource Services, Glacier View Secondary School, Highland Secondary School, Isfeld Secondary School, Lake Trail Community School, North Island Distance Education School, Queneesh Elementary School and Vanier Secondary School (Table 1). Four YER II youth participated in July and August 2023 from Isfeld Secondary School, Lake Trail Community School and North Island Distance Education School (Table 1).

The following is a list of the number of students from each school:

1. Behaviour Resource Services (BRS) – one YER I student
2. Glacier View Secondary School (GVSS) – seven YER I students
3. Highland Secondary School (HSS) – five YER I students
4. Isfeld Secondary School (ISS) – one YER II student
5. Lake Trail Community School (LTCS) – six YER I students; two YER II students
6. North Island Distance Education School – one YER II student
7. Queneesh Elementary School (QE) – two YER I students
8. Vanier Secondary School (VS) – six YER I students

Youth Quotes and Academic Credits

YER youth participants are interviewed to collect data on their experiences with the program. The interview techniques are based on evaluation questionnaires developed when YER started in 2004 and have evolved over the years. These include preliminary, daily debrief, post work and post presentation questions that were formulated utilizing standard quantitative social science research methodologies.

Youth quotes are listed for each of the thirty-one SD#71 students who participated in YER during the 2023/2024 school years. Twenty-seven YER I youth worked with several Comox Valley environmental groups. Four YER II participants completed projects in Comox Valley Regional District, Royston Seaside Trail and Spike Road Park.

Behaviour Resource Services

One YER I student

#458 – No academic credits

“I liked best holding the egg and it was moving. It was a pink salmon egg and I was holding it to get it put back in the incubator. We were picking out the dead eggs and we did that because more eggs could die if we didn’t pick them out and then they would hatch. It was nice to help; it felt not bad.”

Glacier View Secondary School

Seven YER I students

#451 – Leadership 11: 2 credits at 86%

“I learned a lot today. I learned a lot more today than I would have if I was learning about them in the classroom. I was able to learn this way easier than if it were just on a piece of paper. It worked better for me being able to talk to people about what I was learning.”

#459 – Leadership 11: 2 credits at 86%

“I guess it has kind of enlightened me more that I should get outside more and I guess it has helped me in terms of how it has helped my mental health. Like in terms of getting outside more I could get out more. I have difficulty sticking to a routine and it has rebuilt some of my confidence. It has kind of given my brain a reset and started me on the way of doing more personal work.”

#465 – Leadership 9: Proficient

“They are trying to help the environment and they are working together and bonding over trying to keep our planet alive. I feel like it’s given me more hope in our community now to know that those people are doing what they are doing helps settle my mind a little bit.”

#469 – Leadership 8: Proficient

“It was good working with them. There were a lot of people. There was a lot of team work going on. They were good at helping each other and you had to work together. It was weird because I usually work as me. It was alright, their jokes were not that funny, they were pretty cheesy dad jokes.”

#470 – Student Leadership 10: 2 credits at 86%

“My favorite place was the Oyster River hatchery because I got to see so many fish all in one place and the hatchery was built around nature, unlike the Puntledge River one. I learned how to tell a coho apart from other salmon by looking for a black and white leading edge on the dorsal and anal fin and the orange tail. I had a lot more fun during this program than I thought and everyone involved was super friendly.”

#472 – Inquiry 8: Proficient

“I’m thirteen years old and I was taking part in the Youth and Ecological Restoration Program. I took part because I’m usually in my room or out with friends or sleeping, so I wanted to get out more and connect with nature. You can help fish and other things while connecting with nature. When you’re done the program, you get fifty bucks and twenty hours of work experience and the feeling of success.”

#475 – Inquiry 8: Proficient

“On the last day we went to MARS Wildlife Rescue where I was helping animals. The first bird I helped was a baby barred owl, which I helped by cleaning its kennel and feeding it crushed up mouse. I fed the owl by waving the meat in front of its face with tweezers. The second animal I dealt with was a raven chick. I did the same thing with the raven as I did with the owl. We wore bug masks for both of these animals so we did not imprint that humans mean food.”

Highland Secondary School

Five YER I students

#449 – No credits

“It’s helped me interact with other people because I’m not really one that would go work with a group and being with a group of people that are understanding. If I needed help from a group, they would help me because there was that group there. When I was helping the gull be tube fed while having someone right there for help. I feel like they trusted me to try new things.”

#452 – No credits

“It was scary and nerve racking just being in front of the people reading and you screw up and you feel like you totally failed. I just kept reading to get through it and I felt like a million bucks at the end. They learned what I did at each individual location. It feels good; I’m free and I don’t have the pressure of the presentation to stress out about. I also don’t have to wake up early anymore. I can do a lot more things than I think I can if I put my mind to it. I didn’t think I could do all the things I did. It feels amazing.”

#460 – No credits

“It was the most stressful thing I have ever done in my life because they couldn’t hear me at all and I had to talk super loud, which was hard for me to do. I just had to keep reading, that’s how I got through it. I know I didn’t look up as much as I should have. It was rewarding at the end and I felt good about myself. I feel like I’m awful at doing presentations and they said I did a nice job, so that felt nice.”

#466 – No credits

“I’m always nervous because I haven’t had a real job, so it was nice to learn that I can actually go out and work doing something and not be on my phone and that I’m not lazy and I can do a job if I put my mind to it. It’s made meeting people a lot easier. My first day I was really nervous meeting new people, everyday it just got easier and easier. So, I think it has helped me with my nervousness around meeting and talking with people I don’t know.”

#471 – No credits

“It was kind of scary at first. I have really bad social anxiety, so it was really hard at first being around all those people. I think it has really helped my social anxiety. It was just practice talking with all those people and it kind of pushed me to talk to them because it’s kind of important to be able to talk to people for work and just for life.”

Isfeld Secondary School

One YER II student

#64-367 – No credits

“It felt good, maybe because I don’t necessarily lead all that much. I usually let others take the lead, but by taking the lead for one of the first times outside of school helped show me that I could lead people if I had to. I feel like if I’m ever leading another big group, I will always ask for their attention before I start speaking and make sure I can always be heard. It’s useful to maintain people’s interest and attention so they may learn what they came to learn in the first place.”

Lake Trail Community School

Six YER I students; two YER II students

#453 – No credits

“It helped me with my anxiety, my depression and mostly just helped me with a ton of things. It helped me with getting outside more. It’s a positive thing for me because I hardly get outside, except for when I’m at school.”

#455 – No credits

“We cleaned the predator nets that stop the predators from getting to the fry. They were coho fry and we had to get the leaves off. We had to shake them off by pulling the net and pushing it down. There were a lot of other people to help, so that made it easier. It was quite fun working with other people because you get to do a lot of fun jobs with them.”

#464 – No credits

“I learned to treat animals with respect. I could mess up animals a lot and when an animal dies it goes back into things. Like the trees and the grass and that goes into feeding other animals and nature. I think we should treat them with respect because if we treat them bad that will mess them up and they won’t be able to do the things they were meant to do.”

#467 – No credits

“On my first day we were doing water monitoring and we were checking the rain levels. We put the multimeter in the water to check the pH, conductivity, temperature, total dissolved solids and water level. We were at the headwaters of Millard Creek and we check the water every month because we are just looking for changes in the water. My favorite part of the day was observing the waterfall.”

#474 – No credits

“We also caught a good amount of cutthroat trout. How I learned to identify them was that they have two cut like openings under their jaw that can be yellow to red in colouring. Other ways to identify them is on the dorsal fin. There is a white tip that covers three or less rays and if the maxillary goes past the eye. My favourite part of the day was catching the fish out of the traps.”

#476 – No credits

“On my third day we were checking the water in Millard Creek. We were monitoring the ground water. We check six sites once every month to check for any changes. One thing we check for is dissolved oxygen, this is important because fish need it to breathe. My favorite part of the day was seeing the old cars that were covered in moss.”

#63-415 – No credits

“The methodology was that we split the estuary into nine zones, then used a telescope to count the herons and eagles in each zone. We took the highest daily count to find out how many eagles and herons were using the estuary each day. We chose the right time of year and the right low tide to observe the species. The timing was for when the eagles and herons were feeding their babies in the spring at the lowest tides.”

#65-422 – No credits

“Reed canary grass often grows in disturbed sites and this is a disturbed site and it’s disturbed for quite a few reasons. Two of those reasons being roads and ditches, which drain water from wetlands and make them dry, which is obviously not good and detrimental to the environment. Some of our recommendations to fix some problems are to fill in the ditches making sure to remove aquatic life before doing so and to plant trees and other native plants along the trail and in the clearcut area to the north.”

North Island Distance Education School

One YER II student

#62-439 – No credits

“The most important thing I learned is respect. Respect for the world around me and people around me. There were a lot of times when we would be taken back, like almost a reality check. It would bring you back into the moment and show you what to be grateful for and also what is happening in real time in regards to what humans are doing to the environment. Taking that and teaching youth how to understand and respect it.”

Queeneesh Elementary School

Two YER I students

#456 – No credits

“Some of them are helping salmon and some of them are helping out birds. It makes me feel good because they are helping out the earth, the community and nature. It was really cool to see the jobs they do and to see that they volunteer their time to help. It’s just good to see people helping the community.”

#473 – No credits

“Before I did this program I didn’t spend as much time outside, I was usually inside playing video games and now I spend like ten times more time outside. It just feels more natural being outside after these four weeks.”

Vanier Secondary School

Six YER I students

#454 – No credits

“I had a great time during the program. I’m grateful I was able to learn so much about the environment from really nice people in our community. My favorite part was going to MARS because the volunteers were nice to work with and seeing wild animals up close was kind of crazy. This program is a great opportunity for individuals who are interested in ecology, biology, wildlife and the ecosystem in our environment.”

#457 – No credits

“It feels good. I feel pretty good about myself and that I’m done. It’s a feeling of completion. That I actually like being outside a lot. It is just boring now inside, so that is something. I feel like I can actually breathe when I’m outside.”

#461 – No credits

“That a lot of the people wouldn’t care, but it’s everyone of all parts of the community that come together to help nature and volunteer their time. I just didn’t realize that that many people would care. It makes me feel like I can actually go out there and help out too and that it’s an obtainable thing to do.”

#462 – No credits

“It has definitely given me a break from school which I definitely needed. I wasn’t having the best time today at school before I came here. I feel like it has made me a lot more friendly and more talkative and other than my parents it’s been nice to talk to someone else. It’s just been a nice break from school and it’s helped me get out of my comfort zone more and out volunteering for stuff. It stopped me from feeling so grouchy all the time and made me feel like I have the right to speak up more. I usually am so worried about stuff, but this has been a nice way to learn and have fun and just relax a bit.”

#463 – No credits

“I learned that even though they are wild animals they still need to be looked after. They have feelings and emotions too, like the eagle found at the dump for example. If no body found him, he would have died and we are just lucky that somebody found him and he is getting the help he needs.”

#468 – No credits

“On the first day of the program, we went to MARS Wildlife Rescue and I learned about how hunting affects our environment, specifically eagles. Eagles love to hunt ducks. Unfortunately, ducks are dabbling feeders and they can sometimes pick up lead shot which they can process because of the low acidity of their stomach. Eagles have strong acidity in their stomach so it breaks down the lead and they get lead poisoning. The eagle I helped was found at the Cumberland dump, he had to stay there for lead treatment.”

DISCUSSION

The youth voices are heard through their answers to the evaluation questions. This information needs to come from them or it would come from the words of the adults that work with them. Through this evaluation process, the youth speak for themselves, we do not speak for them. Youth are the experts on how things are working for them.

The comments displayed in the above section clearly show the benefits of YER for each of the SD#71 students. They speak of learning about connection, confidence, ecology, community, nature, public speaking, teamwork, respect and compassion. YER takes them out of their comfort zones, and challenges them to have new experiences in places previously unknown to them. It is an enriching and rewarding experience that is articulated in their vocabularies.

Academic credits were awarded to the eight Glacier View Secondary School students. Credits were given for Leadership in grades eight, nine, ten and eleven; and for Grade eight Inquiry. It is important to recognize YER for the academic values and learning that happens when they are engaged with the program. More needs to be done to ensure academic credits are assigned.

SUMMARY

Youth and Ecological Restoration has been serving exceptional Comox Valley youth for twenty years. The program was created by Wendy Kotilla for youth to improve ecological and social relationships. YER is funded by BC Ministry of Children and Family Development, Comox Valley Regional District and Comox Valley School District #71. Most of the four hundred and seventy-six youth participants were referred by SD#71.

Thirty SD#71 students participated in YER during the 2023/2024 school year. Interviews with students revealed their success with personal confidence and interpersonal relationships. They spoke of isolation and anxiety being connected with electronic habits. Youth stepped out of their comfort zones and worked with community elders who supported and shared wisdom with them. Facilitated by YER, youth to built a sense of place and valued themselves through engagement with ecological restoration in our community.

Academic credits were given for eight YER participants from Glacier View Secondary School in Leadership and Inquiry. With some coordination, other schools could give credits as recognition for the value of YER, particularly at the secondary level. Giving students acknowledgements for their YER contributions would be an added incentive and benefit.

After creating YER and coordinating it for the past twenty years, Wendy Kotilla will be passing the program on to Graham Hilliar. Graham has been mentored as YER, Youth Support Worker for nine years and is fully trained and qualified in YER practises. This program has been a gift for the youth and individuals who have mentored them. Together, we worked past challenges and built respectful relationships, with each other and the natural world. Best wishes for another twenty years of YER being in service for the youth of the Comox Valley community.

**TABLE 1: YOUTH AND ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION (YER) SCHOOL DISTRICT #71 (SD#71)
STUDENT REFERRAL TABLE: Thirty-one student referrals for 2023/2024 school year.**

Twenty-seven (# 449-476) YER, Phase I (YER I); four (# 62-65) YER, Phase II (YER II).

YER # 450 was referred by Ministry of Children and Family Development and not attending school.

Student referrals came from: Behavior Resource Services (BRS), Glacier View Secondary School (GVSS), Highland Secondary School (HSS), Isfeld Secondary School (ISS), North Island Distance Education School (NIDES), Lake Trail Community School (LTCS), Queneesh Elementary School (QES), Vanier Secondary School (VSS). YER II numbering is YER II number first and YER I second.

YER #	BRS	GVSS	HSS	ISS	LTCS	NIDES	QES	VSS
YER I #449			1					
YER I #451		1						
YER I #452			1					
YER I #453					1			
YER I #454								1
YER I #455					1			
YER I #456							1	
YER I #457								1
YER I #458	1							
YER I #459		1						
YER I #460			1					
YER I #461								1
YER I #462								1
YER I #463								1
YER I #464					1			
YER I #465		1						
YER I #466			1					
YER I #467					1			
YER I #468								1
YER I #469		1						
YER I #470		1						
YER I #471			1					
YER I #472		1						
YER I #473							1	
YER I #474					1			
YER I #475		1						
YER I #476					1			
YER II #62-439						1		
YER II #63-415					1			
YER II #64-367				1				
YER II #65-422					1			
TOTALS	1	7	5	1	8	1	2	6