

Saanich branches into 'nature' education

Swan Lake to host outdoor preschool

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News staff

The Swan Lake Nature sanctuary is no stranger to young kids ambling among the critters and greenery at home in the urban wetland.

But come September, the lake and its trails will be the daily outdoor classroom for kids three to five years old, as Saanich launches its first nature preschool program.

Last September, the Sooke School District was the first in Greater Victoria to offer nature kindergarten, which immersed kids

in a forest as a key component to early learning.

Saanich is effectively following suit with preschool-aged kids, under the concept that as a whole, the next generation of youth aren't spending enough time outside the urban setting, and often don't have ready access to wild spaces.

"Three- to five-year-olds will get a base of stewardship for the outdoors and become comfortable with it, and seek it out," said Chris Filler, a recreation programmer organizing Saanich's nature preschool. "These kids are the next generation of stewards. If they don't know or understand the natural world, where will we be?"

Filler belonged to the advisory group that helped launch nature K out of Sangster

elementary in Colwood, and recognized the benefits in health and well-being by allowing kids to explore natural areas.

"The moment I heard about nature K, I thought 'what do I need to do at Saanich to make this happen?'" he said. "It's more unstructured play time, more opportunity to connect with nature and using parkland and play spaces for education."

The preschool program at Swan Lake will have an early learning educator and access to park naturalists, but the adults will take their cues from the kids - where they wander and which creatures they find will be the basis for the day's lessons.

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"They can expect to be outside for about two and a half hours each day. Rain, snow, sleet or sun, they'll be out in it," Filler said.

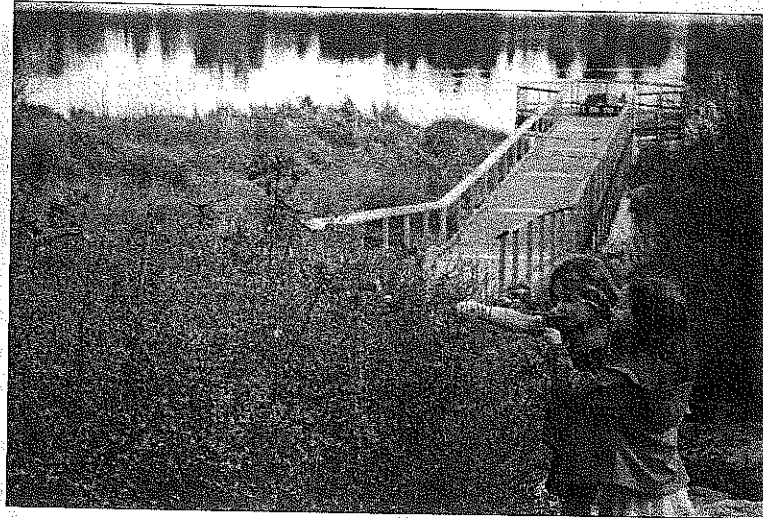
"I think the biggest challenge will be getting them back in the car. This is play-based preschool which allows them the freedom to explore. It won't be a challenge to get them involved, motivated and jazzed up."

Swan Lake will be providing a large space within the nature house for the preschool. Barry Janyk, executive director of Swan Lake, said this type of preschool program is a perfect fit for the sanctuary.

"It's great we have the facilities to provide to the Saanich rec folks. It's another way to serve the community," Janyk said.

"I think the trails will be fascinating to kids and the boardwalk will be a huge hit. And kids will get to see the passage of the seasons. It starts the progression of learning about the natural world."

Frances Krusekopf, the nature



Chris Filler photo

Tia Filler and Noelle Pasta, both 6, check out what's growing at the Swan Lake Nature Sanctuary. Swan Lake will host Saanich's first nature preschool program this September.

K project manager for the Sooke School District, said so far their 21 kindergarten-aged kids are thriving in the forest of Royal Roads Univer-

sity and at the Esquimalt Lagoon.

For their age, the K kids are showing high levels of independence and strong co-operation with each other,

she said. And weather conditions have never prevented the class from going outside - although a Christmas pageant did.

"They spent two days indoors and the educators and kids felt disappointed they couldn't go outside. They have a keen interest in getting outside," Krusekopf said.

"It's been a really wet two or three months but the children continue to find great pleasures in the wettest of days. They're always amazed at how many worms are out there."

Krusekopf said for any nature education, including preschool programs, kids need to be taught the expectations on how to stay safe, but also be allowed to make their own decisions.

"This model has existed for decades in Europe and it starts with three year olds. That age group is new to this."

Registration is open for Saanich's nature preschool program. Call the Gordon Head rec centre at 250-475-7100 or 250-475-7107.

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