

40th ANNIVERSARY OF THE SASKATCHEWAN OUTDOOR AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

In 1969, a group of passionate educators came together to create an organization that later came to be known as the Saskatchewan Outdoor and Environmental Education Association (SOEEA). In the beginning, outdoor education was emphasized and environmental awareness was not yet prominent; at that time, the group was known as the Saskatchewan Outdoor Education Association (SOEA). Our pioneers came together to promote the importance of learning in and about our natural world within Saskatchewan education systems. As Jack Mackenzie, founding member, noted in a recent interview, “[T]he goal was to blow fresh air into the school system.” From the beginning, an inter-disciplinary approach was used. Early leaders came together from many subject areas including science, physical education, arts, social studies, math, and history, and from many levels including youth agencies, Saskatchewan universities, and various school boards. It was recognized that much of the curricular content could be applied and taught in outdoor environments.

Through the early years, SOEA offered a number of conferences and workshops, and then in 1973, the first issue of our newsletter, *Envisage*, was published. In 1974, SOEA assisted the Ministry of Education with publishing *Out to Learn: Guidelines and Standards Manual for Outdoor Environmental Education*. This was a provincial education document that was designed to assist teachers in developing safe and well-organized outdoor education programs. *Out to Learn* was more recently revised and republished in collaboration with the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education in 1991. These publishing efforts and

five successful conferences led to the broadening of SOEA’s reputation as a model association that was quickly becoming recognized by educators across Canada. In 1975, SOEA hosted Canada’s second National Outdoor Education Conference, “Challenge for Education - Hope for Environment.” This renowned event took place in Fort San, SK, and brought over 400 people together to work towards our common goal of developing and disseminating effective outdoor education practices. The keynote speaker was Dr. Julian Smith, a professor from Michigan State University who had mentored many Canadians interested in the area of outdoor education. Dr. Smith had long seen outdoor education as a means for curriculum enrichment. In his work, he has noted that our natural environment provides a learning climate that allows students direct and authentic experiences (*sensu Broda*¹).

Environmental concerns, including conservation, pollution, and resource management, were topics that began to enter Saskatchewan’s collective consciousness in the late 70’s. In 1978, the organization’s name was changed to Saskatchewan Outdoor and Environmental Education Association under the direction of Chairman Barry Mitschke. The name change, as well as a revamped mission and vision, came as a result of shifting societal concerns. Another milestone at this time was the awarding of the first Melanson award to Jack McKenzie for his long-term commitment to outdoor and environmental education in Saskatchewan. Since then, 19 other notable Saskatchewan educators have received this award for innovative teaching techniques, demonstrating knowledge of natural environments, and taking a holistic

approach to outdoor education. To these recognized individuals we gratefully pass on a heart-felt thanks for their continued efforts.

Throughout the 1980's, SOEEA volunteers continued to host numerous conferences and workshops in areas such as Candle Lake, Cypress Hills, Saskatoon, Lumsden, Waskesiu, Moose Jaw, Fort Qu'Appelle, and Moose Mountain Provincial Park. Numerous articles and resources continued to be shared through the *Envisage* newsletter. Long-time SOEEA chairperson and Melanson recipient Barry Mitschke wrote "The Status of Formal and Informal Outdoor/Environmental Education in Saskatchewan: 1986 - A SOEEA Research Paper." This involved a province-wide survey of educators on the status of outdoor/environmental education. In addition, SOEEA worked with Saskatchewan Parks and Recreation to launch the still popular Project Wild Resource Guide. It was and is common for SOEEA to send members to national and international conferences yearly. For example, in 1987, six SOEEA delegates went to the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) conference in Quebec City to learn from and collaborate with leaders in the field. Over the years, SOEEA has collected membership dues and has received minor grants for initiatives, and we continue to rely heavily on the work done by strong collective efforts of a dedicated group of volunteers. Until the early 1990's, financial support from SOEEA for educators and learners had been limited. This changed in May 1994, when we were able to start supporting Environmental Action projects and field excursions. This financial support helped teachers and students get outside, promote active healthy lifestyles, appreciate the natural environment, challenge participants' thinking, and encourage

long-term changes in behaviour. Many Saskatchewan students have benefited from this funding.

By 1995, SOEEA's mission had shifted from being focused on outdoor learning and pursuit towards a much stronger emphasis on environmental concerns. Due to this shift in focus, our eligibility as a recreation association had come under question, and we worked on reviewing our mission and goals. Through this process, we re-focused on the importance of becoming active within our environment and getting outside again. It was at this time that SOEEA introduced the first Ecotour to the newly established Grasslands National Park, in southwestern Saskatchewan. These tours continue to attract many interested parties and help participants gain awareness of our different eco-regions. Through these trips, many have gained an appreciation for the importance of outdoor education and are inspired to bring their students and families to the areas visited. This year, SOEEA is hosting its 15th Ecotour at the Boreal Learning Centre in Ness Creek, SK.

We have again reviewed our strategic planning in recent years and have reconfigured our structure to include collaborative working groups. Our mission and goals have been revamped to clarify our current vision and lead us onward towards our quest for interdisciplinary, progressive education within our province. We strive to assist in the creation, coordination, and delivery of integrated, high-quality outdoor and environmental education programs. Saskatchewan students deserve an education that takes them outside and offers first-hand experiences. SOEEA labours to support Saskatchewan educators at all levels, including post-secondary, in the development of appropriate and responsible endeavours to meet these

needs of our students. Going forward, we are moving to offer certification programs in the areas of outdoor and environmental education. It is our hope that through these programs, Saskatchewan educators will be empowered to explore new techniques, develop local programs, and assist their colleagues in the development of projects and programs.

As we look back at the accomplishments and celebrate our past at this time, we continue to actively work toward future goals and initiatives. Our board understands that we need to continue to push ourselves beyond the classroom walls, to build connections and partnerships, support each other,

and to come together in a community of activism in pursuit of sustainability goals. We will be able to sustain ourselves and our efforts through our connections with one another.

1. BRODA, H. 2007. *Schoolyard-Enhanced Learning: Using the Outdoors as an Instructional Tool, K-8*, Stenhouse Publishers, Portland, Maine.

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EDITORS' NOTE: For more information about SOEEA, visit their website at: <www.soeea.sk.ca>



Winter Weasel

Randi McCulloch