

The Outdoor Classroom

We invite you to step out of your familiar surroundings, to experience a 'classroom without walls'; to enhance your student's learning experiences with a trip to the outdoors.

A trip into the forest or into other natural surroundings is a chance to study the environment first hand. Your adventure can range from exploring a grove of trees in the schoolyard, to a day trip to a park, to a weekend excursion into wilderness area. The objective of this adventure is to move students beyond the four walls of the classroom, to inspire creative learning into a more natural setting.

Planning: Things to consider before you start!

Exploring the outdoors can be intimidating for those unfamiliar with it. But, by following a few steps, taking students into the outdoor classroom can be success!

In the outdoor classroom, always expect the unexpected. This can range from a torrential downpour to discussing big trees when banana slugs are running rampant! While all of these can be easily dealt with, a little pre-trip planning can go a long ways towards making your field trip a success.

Below are some pre-trip planning pointers to get you on your way!

1. What is your reason for going, what will you be seeing and doing?
2. Select the site that you wish to visit. Some sites you may need to visit prior to going outdoors to become familiar with trails and also the possible safety hazards.
3. Check for permission. Permission letters from parents will be needed as well as permission from resource people the you may be visiting might be required. Take this opportunity to let parents know of any supplies that the students might require.
4. Estimate trip costs. This may include bus costs, lunch or spending money.
5. Select and contact any resource people. A good ratio is one leader to five students. People to include are parents, university students and individuals from local conservation or naturalist societies. Its amazing who will come and talk - if you ask them!
6. Think of a back up plan. This includes rain plans and alternatives in case of trip cancellation, as well as an emergency medical plan.
7. Preparing the students. You can use teaching aids such as films, slides, resource personnel, books and library research.

Things to take on a day trip

For the student:

- appropriate clothing, including raingear
- proper footwear that are waterproof and have a good tread
- Insect repellent and sun protection lotion
- field notebooks with attached pencil
- snacks and/or a lunch and a full water bottle

For the teacher:

- a first aid kit and someone who knows first aid
- whistle
- binoculars and /or magnifying glasses
- pocket knife
- local field guides to look up animals, plants, trees, etc.
- garbage bags- they make great rain gear or seats for wet days
- pencils
- toilet paper
- a good story to read aloud during lunch time (such as stories about forest ecosystems or local First Nations Legends)

Good Rules to Follow

It is important to discuss with students before going outdoors the importance of appropriate outdoor behavior and set ground rules.

- Set up a meeting signal to get everyone together once you are outside, such as raising your hand or using a whistle
- Set boundaries and explain the importance of staying within them
- Follow all directions (Make sure your directions are clear and that the students understand them)
- Stay with a buddy, to keep from getting lost or separated

Conservation:

In addition to the basic rules, it is important to remember that because we are guests visiting the outdoors there are certain special rules we must follow:

- All living things, including plants, are to be respected and not injured in any way. The basic rule, look, learn and leave alone is a good rule to follow.
- If it is necessary to handle and organism, be very gentle. Be aware that some animals might bite to protect themselves.
- Return all organisms to the spot they were found as soon as the observation is complete. This includes replacing their surrounding habitat as you found it. For example, if you found a slug under a leaf, put the slug back under that same leaf.
- Stay on the trail. If you stray off, you may accidentally destroy someone's habitat.

Getting Started!

There are many general concepts that can easily be studied while exploring the outdoors. These include:

- defining habitats and niches and discussing the characteristics of the habitat and the effects on an organism when habitat change occurs
- listing producers, consumers and decomposers and examining their role in the forest ecosystem
- constructing a food chain using examples of living things found on a nature walk

Sample Activities

Here are a few ideas that you can use to get both you and your students started in the outdoors!

Blindfold walk: Devise a guided rope trail that leads two students, one blind folded to features in the forest of different smells, texture, sizes and shapes. At particular points of interest along the rope tie a knot or a colored ribbon. These points could include a tree with rough bark, a mossy nurse log, hanging lichen etc.

Forest Scavenger Hunt: Create a simple check list/ worksheet of various forest components (different species of trees, cones, nurse logs, wildlife trees, water, particular animals or birds, fungi, moss, lichen, berries, scat, owl pellets, a possible animal home etc.) During a forest walk, have students try to find as many items on their check list as possible. On the back of the paper have students pick one particular component and write a story about it, including a discussion of its habitat requirements.

Perches: Ask students to choose an animal that would live in a particular environment. Ask them to find a 'perch' appropriate for that animal and role play. Individually check each student by asking some questions. What animals are you hiding from? What animals do you prey upon? What do you eat? What colour are you? Once checked, students should be instructed to think like their animal until all animals are checked.

Why Am I Here?: Find and examine a nurse log. Note or draw the types of plants and animal life on and in each. Remember to include shrubs, mosses, lichen and fungi. Look for other items as well. Hypothesize as to why these things are on the nurse log.

Changing Hike: Along a walk, students stop and list all the things changing around them (e.g. a twig breaking, plant swaying in the wind, a bird flying away). Try to invoke the use of all senses: sight, sound, smell and touch. Look for changes caused by both living things and non-living things. Look for changes caused by humans. What changes are reversible? A "Change Table" of observations could be made by students working in pairs.