

Wonder

NEWSLETTER OF THE NATURE ACTION COLLABORATIVE FOR CHILDREN

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Mobile Outdoor Classrooms by Hadijah Nandyose

A Cost-Cutting Measure for Vulnerable Communities

Reaching those who are being left behind as a result of disparities linked to poverty, gender, ethnicity, language, and other markers of disadvantage should be established as a first order of priority (EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2010).

Plan Uganda works in some of the most vulnerable communities in the world. In these communities, there are significant equity and poverty concerns that demand a development model that proves vulnerable children can be highly successful in school and life if provided with effective early childhood supports. In 2008 Plan Uganda began work on an ECCD approach — Community Led Actions for Children (CLAC) — to identify essential supports that help children to enter school ready to succeed, with a focus on reaching the most excluded. The approach is hinged on the following major interventions: parenting, community-managed ECCD centers, and Transitions to Primary. The mobile classroom concept is tied to the goal of this approach: keeping costs low and quality high. It:

- Is a strategy for providing an affordable option that allows children from very disadvantaged families to access early childhood services.

- Emphasizes maximum use of available resources, including space, to increase portability and affordability.
- Organizes structured learning activities in a very informal setting.
- Draws on the natural environment as a major enhancement to children's learning experiences.

PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR



The Ugandan government does not directly support ECCD as it does primary education (with school construction, basic instruction materials, and teacher pay and training). This leaves ECCD to private practitioners, as is the case in many developing countries. In the long run, resource-constrained communities must bear the burden of working with well-wishers in a self-help manner to establish and manage their programs for children. Construction of new facilities is usually high on parents' and communities' lists of priorities.

Unfortunately, constructing and maintaining classrooms is expensive and translates into levying fees, physical exhaustion, high demands for time and in-kind materials. Many families opt out or stay away, especially the poorest who are already stressed by other priorities of life. As a result, buildings take a lot of time and are poorly constructed or never completed, or are not optimally utilized. Most importantly, the people in the greatest need of the service stay out of the program. Based on these experiences the outdoor classroom concept provides an opportunity to reduce the stress, yet maximize the learning opportunities in a natural setting.

The concept is also a continuation of the outdoor aspect of daily life for these children. Traditionally, in many rural communities in Uganda, families spend a great deal of time outdoors. Aside from sleeping and storage, not many functions are conducted inside the home. Visitors are received in the compound, children play in the compound, cooking is done outside, and children rest outside if they need to, as their parents go about their work. It is not unusual, therefore, to find tree shades or open huts or other forms of temporary shades created outside homes for this very purpose.

The basic requirement for the mobile outdoor classroom is space, rather than

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Your Environmental Stewards in the Mediterranean

by Ghina Badawi, Reine Hably, and May A. Ajram

The Mediterranean is one of the most polluted water sources in the world. The problems facing this sea are sewage and waste water dumped with no treatment, polluted waste products, and a black coat of oil. This polluted sea results in the devastation of the Lebanese ecosystem, severely affecting tourism and the health of people living around it, creating a negative cultural attitude among youngsters. According to Mr. Sundeep Waslekar, the head of the Strategic Foresight Group (2010), between 1960 and 2010 the river flows in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon have decreased by 40 percent. According to the national climate change reports and international experts, the temperatures in the Mediterranean Sea will rise from 2.5 to 3.7 degrees Celsius in summer and from 2.0 to 3.1 degrees Celsius in winter over the next 50-70 years.

At hearing such alarming statistics, many Lebanese efforts were aimed at diminishing these environmental threats. At Makassed Khalil Shehab Primary School (Makassed KSPS), we could not stand idly by watching these environmental problems grow without taking action. At our school, we believe that children are our hope for a better future, and the earlier we start educating and sensitizing children to environmental concerns, the more successful we will be in raising stewards who are capable of handling environmental challenges.

In our efforts, we planned projects with national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to expand our environmental education through-out our school

community. A team of parents, students, teachers, and community members worked together towards the goal of diminishing the contaminated places. With more than 30 'green' activities this year, we have helped instill in students a spirit of caring about the sanitation and environmental prosperity of our beloved country, Lebanon.

The "Care for Water" campaign started at our school three years ago. Awareness frames covered the school walls: "Don't Waste Water"; "Always Close the Tap"; "Water is the most important resource so let's not waste it." In 2009, we joined Cedars for Care, a local NGO, in its Big Blue Operation to save the Mediterranean by cleaning up the beaches of Lebanon from al Abda in the North to Ras Nakkoura in the South.

Makassed KSPS participated in a national day to help keep our beaches clean. Lebanese Army soldiers, environmental campaigners, and representatives of the ministries all helped raise awareness. President Michel Sleiman and then-Prime Minister Saad El-Hariri attended the launching of the "Big Blue" cleaning station at Ramlet al-Baida. Hundreds of volunteers removed rubbish from more than 70 beaches along Lebanon's seashore. School and university students also participated, including volunteers from the Civil Defense. KSPS students and their parents, showing incredible synergy at this event, were involved and sensitized towards the importance of being environmentally active and efficient.

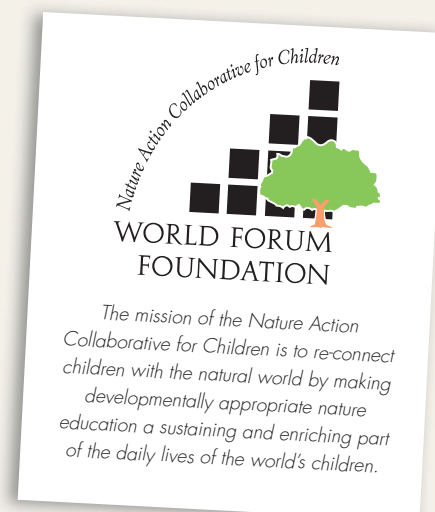
The day after the launch, students wrote essays about their experiences and sent their wishes for a crystal clear Lebanese shore to the concerned municipalities. In a unified voice they called for help to save various sea creatures and living habitats that are suffering, especially sea turtles that are almost extinct. Each year since the launch, Makassed KSPS joins Cedars for Care campaign in participating in this fruitful activity.

May 17, 2011 was also an unforgettably successful day that showed our continuous commitment to the environment. Let's pin on our chests the quote of the former Minister of the Environment, Mr. Mohammad Rahhal: "Let's all work for the environment towards a better quality of life."

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May A. Ajram, NAT (Nature Action Team), Lebanon.



Using Nature to Develop the Capacity of Communities

by Kate Hookham

The Living Classrooms' Story So Far

When representatives from Living Classrooms attended the "Connecting Children with Nature Action Forum" in Nebraska City in October 2010 as part of the Nature Action Collaborative for Children, the charity had just been established. Now, eight months on we are supporting some of the more marginalised communities within Central Scotland. What follows is our story. We share it in the hope that it will help you start your own projects where you are.

Supporting Community in Overcoming Barriers – Minority Ethnic Groups in Edinburgh and Glasgow: Many community members were worried about accessing nature or did not know how to get there. This project provided an opportunity for participants to develop competency and confidence outdoors in a woodland environment. The woodland sessions were based on an experiential learning ethos and promoted the Forestry Commission's Central Scotland Engagement Strategy. The project built on the group's comfort level with internal spaces, then to outdoor grounds, and finally to 'wild' parks and woodlands. Groups were supported in demonstrating how an indoor theme can be transferred outdoors and vice versa. Working collaboratively, each group was encouraged to take ownership of their own experiences and participate in activities for which they had a real interest. There was an emphasis on 'up-skilling' so that group leaders would develop the confidence to run their own outdoor programmes in the future. In particular, staff were supported in developing risk assessment skills, their ability to promote experiential learning,

and bush craft techniques. A strong sense of community among the groups was demonstrated through the sharing of heritage and traditional pastimes that were transferable to Scottish environments:

One magical moment occurred when the Somali group was shown how willow and dogwood can be used in basketry. One participant used her mother tongue to name the material they use for weaving at home. The older members of the group smiled as they demonstrated how a Scottish resource could be used to make a traditional Somali basket to the younger members of the group.

Aims of Living Classroom

- Promote excellence in play and learning through using innovative naturalistic experiences;
- Facilitate community involvement and ensure sustainability of play and learning outdoors;
- Operate through the highest levels of environmentally sustainable practice;
- Consult with all those involved about their interests, goals, and motivation and use this to influence our practice.

The Future

We are now working with Scottish Natural Heritage to deliver their Simple Pleasures programme to inspire more people in Scotland to enjoy nature on a regular basis, creating opportunities that are accessible to everyone, are free and fun.

For more information and to follow the next chapter of development:

Finding Funding

To ensure the charity's success, Living Classrooms had to become financially viable within a short space of time. Our success in this endeavour was due to several factors:

- Establish links and build on experiences with other stakeholders in environmental and educational sectors;
- Focus on a unique selling point for each funding bid;
- Look for matching funds; and
- Seek out networks that create unique opportunities.

Living Classrooms:

www.livingclassrooms.org.uk

To learn more about the Nature

Kindergartens, training, and resources:

Mindstretchers:

www.mindstretchers.co.uk

Kate Hookham is the co-ordinator of Living Classrooms. She came to Living Classrooms through a career path of environmental and educational backgrounds. She worked, as a trainer, for a conservation organisation, BTCV Scotland, taught in Clackmannanshire as Primary School Teacher, and now also works for Mindstretchers Ltd. as a Senior Inservice Trainer and their Eco Co-ordinator.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MINDSTRETCHERS



Mobile Outdoor Classrooms

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buildings. Communities are invited to think about their own settings in their own homes and reflect on the most important spaces they have in their compounds. In the planning stage, community members are asked to reflect on where they grew up and enjoyed playing. This helps generate ideas about how similar spaces can be created in their family home compounds. The discussion continues by asking how we can use local resources to make the spaces child-friendly, interactive, and attractive to children.

A discussion of the daily activities that will make up children's routine leads to a discussion of how these can be conducted in an open setting: access routes, how children will use each space, and the need for secure storage space and shelter for convening space (during wet seasons). Local artisanship is encouraged; parents are asked to consider how they constructed their own houses and then put up a similar structure with improvements in ventilation and size.

The mobile outdoor classroom is also aimed at helping the community realize that quality ECCD comes from friendly and caring caregiver interactions with parents and

children, well-structured learning activities, and stimulating materials — all of which can be locally achieved at little to no cost. The inter-actions and experiences are planned to support holistic development of children, building on the multitude of opportunities within and around the learning spaces:

- Caregivers work with leaves, stones, sticks, charcoal, soils, waste paper, off-cuts of clothing, and old news-papers to prepare learning aids.
- Activities include trips to local sites within the vicinity of the villages to further expose children to their environments: to watch how animals graze, where fruits and foods are grown, and observe insect homes in the trees.
- Singing, chanting, dancing, and creative movements accompany simple or familiar songs supported by simple instruments such as shakers



PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR

made out of seeds and a gourd, sisal strands sewn together to provide a dancing sash, and sticks clapped together to provide a drum beat.

- Children are facilitated to play both traditional games such as hide and seek, jump rope, and simple games with very few directions and rules introduced by the caregivers.
- Children are involved in imaginative activities inspired by colors, shapes, textures, space, and sizes in the surrounding environment (observing insects and a hen looking after its chicks, dancing to the sound of the animals, listening to a story built on important language themes like appreciating the natural environment: why water is important, why fish love water, why people need food, and how flowers look).

Classrooms in open spaces — without buildings — is still a new idea. It continues to be a struggle to convince decision makers that the most important thing for children's learning is not the building. The challenges of providing basic education to young children in rural areas is not simple, but mobile outdoor classrooms, like the ones described here, can be part of the solution.

Hadijah Nandyose is a member of the Nature Action Collaborative for Children leadership team.

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Wonder Vitals

Wonder, the newsletter of the NACC, welcomes submissions from all NACC members. Please join us at:
www.worldforumfoundation.org/nature.

The NACC Leadership Team is a core group of early childhood educators, designers, and landscape architects who came together in 2006 with a dream to change the world for young children. They represent six continents across the globe, and serve as key contact points for others around the world who have a desire to improve the lives of young children.

The Leadership Team meets periodically to discuss strategies for increasing NACC's outreach and membership, and to find new ways for all of us to work together to further our common mission.