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Chair

Mr. Mark Warawa

Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development

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● (1615)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Mark Warawa (Langley, CPC)): I call the meeting to order. We have quorum.

This is the 58th meeting of the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development. We're continuing our study of urban conservation practices in Canada. I believe that each of the witnesses is aware of the five items in the scope of the study.

We appreciate you for coming and some of you for coming back again.

Déjà vu: we're starting a little late because of a vote. I will get right to the testimony, because we only have an hour to meet.

We will begin with Mr. Bingley, from Scouts Canada.

You have up to 10 minutes.

Mr. Mike Bingley (Outdoor Program Manager, Scouts Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of this committee, for having me back to speak about this important issue.

When I was last here, I was telling you that on this, the 50th anniversary of the printing of *Silent Spring*, we're now facing a new silence in the wilderness. The peregrine falcon is no longer on the endangered species list, but we are close to losing the sound of children's laughter from our forests.

It's not an exaggeration to say that people who spend time in nature are a species at risk and, like the peregrine falcon in the 1960s, it's the youth numbers that are plummeting. Having a strong connection to an outdoor place is the first step to ensuring any kind of conservation ethic, and it is an essential component of our Canadian identity. We must act decisively to reverse this trend or we will soon find ourselves in the position where it is too late.

In order for us to reverse this trend, we first must understand why it is happening. Research has shown that a combination of fear, a lack of education, and overzealous conservation practices have been the major contributing factors.

Government has a role in reversing these trends. It can implement tax credits to encourage families to take part in programs that bring young people in touch with nature. It can enact a liability shield for adults or groups taking young people on activities in nature. It can partner with organizations like Scouts Canada in delivering quality outdoor experiences in nature for Canadians. It can make it easier for youth groups to take advantage of parks and protected areas.

Across Canada, young people will experience the wonder of the outdoors on their own terms on a Scouts Canada activity. Earlier in this study you heard Mr. Bienenstock speaking of roam rates declining: children are not able to explore the world to the extent they once were; one of the things that we try to do in our programs is create an environment where young people feel confident enough to work together in groups to roam and explore nature without the direct supervision of adults. They work on projects and they camp in tents away from their adult supervisors.

I've seen the impact that these programs have on kids: bullying decreases, attention spans are lengthened, and interest in the world around them—and not just the natural world—is increased. You've heard about these benefits from other witnesses, so I won't belabour the point, but nature makes a difference in the lives of young people.

Every summer I'll get at least one phone call from a parent who is concerned that their child will be abducted by a stranger or eaten by a wild animal at camp. I have to explain that the natural world is a very, very safe place.

I have searched deeply, and I have found only two cases of child abductions from a summer camp in the last 50 years. The chance of a child being harmed by a stranger at camp is incredibly low. These are supervised environments with policies in place that make sure the kids go home with the right people. Natural environments in Canada have one of the lowest crime rates in the world.

Also, negative concerns about wild animals are not significant either. There are less than two fatal bear attacks every year in North America. There have been only 38, total, in Canadian history, but parents ask me about them constantly.

Now, at the risk of overstating the obvious here, a parent who is concerned about her daughter being abducted from a Scout camp isn't going to let her child roam the local ravines in the city with her friends. I understand that. I am a parent myself. I know that I should let my son roam to develop resilience and a strong conservation ethic, but I get nervous when he's playing in the backyard, much less in the local park, and I do this for a living, so while these fears are misplaced, we have to recognize that they exist and that we reinforce them in this age of 24-hour news cycles and with the Internet telling us about every time a child anywhere in the world has gone missing or is hurt. Those of us in public roles must be careful to talk about the world as a safe place if we're going to reconnect people with nature. We have to come from a position of hope.

There's also a fear of liability. This has left many organizations helpless in regard to taking more kids outdoors.

In the United States, there is a grassroots movement that's engaging more than a million children each year in nature play in what are called family nature clubs. This program began less than five years ago when one family asked another if they could take their kids to the local park. You have to understand that this required a tremendous leap of faith that they weren't going to be sued if something went wrong.

We need to make it easier for people to act within the scope of their abilities and not be sued for their actions, in the same way that "good Samaritan" laws protect first-aiders. It should be noted that this kind of law would not remove the need for high-quality risk management protocols, but it would remove the risk to personal property because of a need to defend against a frivolous lawsuit.

I would next like to speak about education. We've moved from a place-based model to a classroom-based model in Canada. While curricula guide teachers to teach about Canadian geography and animals, they do not guide how to teach those topics. Great teachers will use experiential methods to allow students to learn about the world, but many will simply tell their students about what they could see outdoors, without helping them experience it, and if students don't experience their local environment, they'll not internalize it.

There is a growing body of evidence that supports the value of learning in a natural context. For example, youth who engage in multi-day nature immersion programs graduate from high school at a higher frequency than those who don't.

● (1620)

I'd submit to you that the loss of this shared knowledge is one of the biggest issues facing Canadians today. Students who don't know the birds in their neighbourhoods will not notice that they are missing. Students who are not in touch with the land will not notice that droughts last longer or that winters had heavier snowfalls in the past. It's a massive problem that in classrooms across Canada students can describe the problems of polar bears drowning in the Arctic but can't tell you what fish live in the local ponds or the colour of a robin's egg.

In 2008, the Oxford University Press announced that they were removing nature words from the *Oxford Junior Dictionary* because they weren't being used in classrooms. I'd ask you to consider how far society has gone, knowing that the word "beaver" has been removed from one of the standard dictionaries used in elementary school classrooms across Canada.

I'd like to move on to health. In many jurisdictions, in response to childhood obesity, students take part in daily physical activity programs. These programs haven't worked. A 2009 study found no impact on obesity in 15 separate studies conducted around the world. Studies on organized sports have found the exact same thing. In fact, the rise of childhood obesity has exactly mirrored the rise of organized sport in Canada. I'd hesitate to stretch the causality of that number too far, except to say that the growth of sport in Canada hasn't helped this epidemic. Outdoor programs help, because they encourage unstructured play in the outdoors on an ongoing basis.

It's time for government to treat programs that engage young people in the outdoors in the same fashion as sports programs are treated. A tax credit similar to the child fitness tax credit should be extended to programs that engage young people in nature. A tax credit of this sort would serve to get programs like Scouts Canada back on the menu for many families.

It's also time for the government to work more closely with programs that are making a difference in the conservation sector. While great work has been done in Parks Canada's Xplorers program, the My Parks Pass program, which was only used by about 6,000 students across Canada last year, has not had the same kind of return on investment. The My Parks Pass program would be much more effective if it were expanded to allow members or organized groups free access to Canada's national parks and historic sites. Currently, organized groups do not use these resources to the extent they should because of the cost.

Allowing more access would permit members of organized programs to be in these areas more often, and they would become advocates for them. It's worth knowing that studies show that many adult users of parks first visit these areas as part of an organized youth group. In other words, no-charge passes become a no-cost marketing tool to expand the use of the parks. In the long run, they will expand park revenues.

We also need to learn how to collaborate across sectors and replicate successes. There's an opportunity for charitable groups to engage more young people in the outdoors. Scouts Canada has been working with the Palisades Stewardship Education Centre in Jasper to replicate the programs that have been developed at Scout camps across the country. We need to build more partnerships like this to create both short-term opportunities for service, such as learn-to-camp programs, and also longer-term opportunities, such as a summer service corps of young adults who would be embedded in national parks. They would be able to help people in the park do camping stuff and would communicate with friends back home using social media.

One of the hard lessons those of us in the field are learning is that in order to make our programs relevant to neophytes, we have to use a limited amount of technology in the field. Digital photography has been found to have a strong ability to bridge the gap between worlds, as have certain apps. If we're going to connect people in any meaningful way to the outdoors, we need to ensure that we're not turning people away with a dogmatic "no technology" approach.

A second hard lesson we must learn is that the look-but-don't-touch philosophy toward outdoor areas has left millions of people disconnected from the very land that's been protected for them. When I think about how we treat conservation in this country, I'm reminded of the words of the Five Man Electrical Band: we “put up a fence to keep me out or to keep Mother Nature in". There are certainly good reasons for that in some terrain, but there are other areas where it would be acceptable for young people to roll rocks back to see what's underneath or to skip stones in the local pond.

In a recent article David Sobel, from Antioch University in the States, wrote that our overzealous protection of some areas and telling people that they should look but not touch are creating a generation of people who are not as connected as they should be to the natural world. It's ironic that when we look at the long view, our protection schemes may actually be damaging the lands we've aimed to protect.

In closing, I'd like to invite you all to spend a day at a Scout camp in the near future to see what a program that engages young people in nature on their own terms looks like. Most of our youth come from urban areas, and after some time in the woods, they come to view those areas as their own. We believe that the best practice for engaging our youth in conservation projects is to ensure that they first learn to love the land by spending time on it. Then they will become stewards of it.

Thank you.

● (1625)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Monsieur Brunet, you have 10 minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Normand Brunet (Consultant and Researcher in Environmental Science, Institute of Environmental Sciences, Lecturer, Université du Québec à Montréal, As an Individual): I have been interested in environmental issues since the early 1970s. My interest in urban environmental issues began in 1988.

I have organized my remarks based on the issues this committee is considering. I will therefore speak to them one at a time. Let us begin with urban conservation.

Generally speaking, urban conservation deals with the protection and conservation of urban biodiversity. The concept of biodiversity applies at both the species level and the ecosystem level. A broad interpretation of urban conservation would also include issues related to the rehabilitation of ecosystems that have deteriorated.

According to an all too common perception, biodiversity mainly occurs outside urban areas. All you find in cities are transformed, deteriorated and urbanized ecosystems. Yet, many ecosystems zones still exist. They have a significant ecological value and they display the characteristics of those natural ecosystems before their urbanization.

In urban areas, it is also important to strike a balance between ecosystem conservation and the use of ecosystems for recreational purposes. That balance has to be based on ecological principles and enhanced by making these natural areas accessible and making the public aware of environmental issues. In fact, the natural characteristics of several of these areas can evolve over time. They are still just as valuable.

I will now talk about urban conservation goals.

Species and ecosystems, and even some natural or semi-natural landscapes located in urban areas, have intrinsic value. From a long-term perspective, their conservation can allow current and future generations to develop harmonious cohabitation with nature in cities. The Aichi-Nagoya Declaration on local authorities and biological diversity emphasizes public awareness, especially with regard to youth, of the value of biological diversity.

For approximately 15 years, researchers have been interested in the notion of ecological services provided by ecosystems and they are attempting to assess those services in monetary terms. In urban areas, natural and semi-natural ecosystems also contribute to air quality improvement, carbon capture, mitigation of urban hot spots, runoff stabilization, landscape improvement, and public health and wellness.

Other urban biodiversity conservation goals should include things such as land use planning, limiting urban spread, and dealing with concerns related to conservation in general.

You asked about best practices in Canada in this area. First, I would like to mention that the ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability published a series of studies in 2010 on best practices in Canadian cities for local biodiversity management. I will simply mention the cities that these studies focused on: Kelowna, Calgary, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Greater Sudbury, Guelph, Toronto, Montreal, Trois-Rivières, Wolfville and the Deh Cho First Nations.

At the international level, UNESCO, under its man and the biosphere program, jointly developed with Concordia University the concept of an urban biosphere reserve. Several cities belonging to international local authorities networks come together on a regular basis and discuss urban biodiversity conservation issues.

In Quebec, there are some interesting examples of urban biodiversity conservation. Non-governmental or university organizations have often had a role in these examples. In Montreal, for example, Friends of the Mountain monitor conservation in Mount Royal Park on a regular basis. The Parc de la Rivière-des-Mille-Îles includes a series of areas that are organized and managed by a not-for-profit organization. In the mont Saint-Grégoire, paths are maintained by another not-for-profit organization. McGill University owns the mont Saint-Hilaire Nature Centre which is available to the public.

NGO participation in urban biodiversity conservation is therefore essential. There are several organizations in Quebec such as the Sentier Urbain, the Société de verdissement du Montréal urbain, Vivre en Ville, the Centre d'écologie urbaine de Montréal, and others.

● (1630)

In Quebec, there is also a network of environmental regional councils that brings together all the organizations that play an active role in this area and engage in a regional dialogue on environmental conservation.

At the regional level, the Communauté métropolitaine de Montréal recently adopted their Plan métropolitain d'aménagement et de développement (Metropolitan Development Plan). One of the major objectives of this plan, in cooperation with regional environmental groups, is to protect and improve the environment.

Now I would like to briefly speak about the main challenges. First of all, this field calls on a multitude of stakeholders and several levels of governance. What we call multiscalar articulation is therefore a significant challenge. Secondly, provincial and federal departments, municipal services and academic institutions were essentially designed on the basis of questions, concerns and sectors such as health, the economy, the environment and so on.

It has become clear that a sectoral and fragmented approach is no longer sufficient to tackle multisectoral problems that are extremely complex. Conserving biodiversity in an urban setting requires integrated and ecosystem-based approaches. Our current structure is far from facilitating the implementation of such approaches.

Furthermore, municipalities are often confronted with having to choose between conserving the ecological wealth of a certain area, or developing a real estate project that would generate income through property taxes. In Quebec, this is a major stumbling block because municipalities receive most of their revenue from property taxes.

Lastly, there are other challenges when civil society participates in the conservation of urban biodiversity, especially where public consultation is concerned because often it comes too late in the decision-making process.

As for the advantages, urban conservation contributes to maintaining global biodiversity and ecosystems that the health and well-being of urban populations depend on.

The economic aspects were highlighted earlier when discussing the concept of ecological services. Moreover, a large scale program could be designed to restore urban ecosystems that would generate wealth and likely be advantageous to the economy and society.

To make sure I don't run out of time, I'm going to go straight to the role that the federal government can play in urban conservation. The federal government has some wonderful resources that could contribute to such an effort. Take for example Environment Canada, Parks Canada, Statistics Canada, the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, and so on.

In the 1990s, Environment Canada carried out a number of studies and publications on the development of a set of national environmental indicators and on the state of the environment reports, which are still very useful. However an update on these publications would be appreciated. The work done by the National Roundtable on the Environment and the Economy could also be useful, particularly their work on biodiversity, the fight against climate change and soil decontamination.

Over the years, Canada has made a number of commitments on the international level, several of which have an impact on the conservation of biodiversity in an urban setting. It might be a good idea to be updated on these commitments and understand how they are implemented.

When developing a future national conservation plan, Canada must ensure that it maintains its national sovereignty over environmental legislation. It should also review and consolidate its environmental legislation and regulations when necessary, as well as their enforcement. This would suggest that a high level of scientific expertise be maintained within the government.

There are many challenges. We're talking about renewed leadership, federal inter-agency coordination, an innovative approach, multiscalar articulation, adequate funding and maintaining existing resources. Consulting less recent publications could also be relevant.

Finally, the Government of Canada endowed the Federation of Canadian Municipalities with $550 million to create the Green Municipal Fund. This fund offers funding for plans, studies and capital investment projects. On the face of it, a municipal project for biodiversity conservation in an urban setting would not be admissible in this framework. Perhaps it would be the appropriate time to review the program rules or design a new one that would specifically focus on conservation and restoration of biodiversity in urban settings.

● (1635)

This kind of program could potentially create jobs and significant economic benefits.

In conclusion, there are multiple, significant and complex issues. About 100 years ago, in 1909, the Government of Canada created the Commission of Conservation. A review of the commission's work shows an understanding of sustainable development in Canada before it became recognized. This is decades before the Brundtland Commission, which developed the same notion years later. The Government of Canada abolished the Commission of Conservation in 1921 for unknown reasons. How would things be today if it had been maintained?

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Next is Mr. Beattie; you have up to 10 minutes.

Mr. Kenneth Beattie (Manager, Habitat Programs, Canadian Wildlife Federation): Thank you, honourable Chair and honourable members. It's a pleasure to be invited to be here.

I represent the Canadian Wildlife Federation, celebrating its 50th birthday this year, with a mission for education and conservation. We're an NGO, and we're supported by and have been supported by over 300,000 ordinary Canadians.

After 58 meetings, I'm sure you have heard lots of statistics and lots of definitions, so I won't go on with “urban” and “conservation”. However, you may have realized that this is the first time in human history that more people are living in urban settings than in rural settings. Therefore, the mandate is large; the shift is on.

We have come up with some definitions of what “urban conservation” is or should be.

There should be an awareness at the basic grassroots level of our environment, built or natural; our role within it; and our consciousness to sustain, conserve, and improve where and how we live. Urban conservation speaks to all levels of community and is not relegated to a destination. It is actualized in all greenspaces, starting in the backyards, schoolyards, balconies, or planters and spreading out from there. Therefore, education is fundamental in achieving this shift of consciousness.

The second question is, what could be the goals of connecting urban Canadians with conservation?

They would be the following: to educate, facilitate, mentor, and demonstrate to Canadians how they can make a positive impact for themselves and for future generations through conservation efforts; to instill and develop the notion that every conservation effort counts, and that collectively individuals will recognize and realize positive change in their very own Canadian communities; to inspire Canadians to make healthy decisions regarding their leisure, family, and working time through experiential learning with their own communities on private and/or on public lands; to showcase Canadian urban conservation initiatives as models for others through sharing positive working solutions, our stewardship, and collaborative efforts at all levels of government; and to allow Canadians the opportunity to enjoy, appreciate, and learn about nature within their immediate community through sound, sustainable urban planning that includes rich open areas and greenspace.

What might the best practices in Canada be for this?

The national parks and derivatives of same are not easily accessible to many urbanized Canadians. This historic model continues to serve a purpose, but with the changing demographics a more community-centric approach is recommended. Canadian Wildlife Federation continues to provide positive exemplars in conservation, as it has for the past half century. CWF, as we are known, informs, inspires, and facilitates individuals, educators, private landowners, and organizations through education and active participation, showing how and why conservation is critical. These programs link Canadians with the Arctic and our oceans, forests, lakes, and rivers, and connect millions of students to practical conservation initiatives.

With regard to urban conservation initiatives currently in use, what are the best practices?

The biggest challenge to urban conservation is accessibility for all. One example, that being the Rouge Valley park, appears to follow a traditional Parks Canada model that is scaled to fit a particular parcel of land. This restorative approach is an excellent start, but it should be supplemented with a strong and visible development and an educational approach focused on sustainability and the urban conservation model.

CWF represents excellence in conservation program development and delivery, shown in programs such as Project WILD, which I'm sure you're familiar with, and Below Zero. These educational resources have been available to and incorporated into subject areas across the country by over 110,000 educators in Canada, reaching thousands of students annually.

Sturgeon Creek in Winnipeg, Manitoba, is a current example of urban conservation that is fully accessible to all by public transit, and it is working.

What are the economic, health, biodiversity, and social benefits associated with this?

The health benefits of open spaces, parks, greenspaces, trees, and plants have been documented for some time. Of late those benefits are increasing, from the obvious examples such as a cleaner air, noise abatement, and the calming effects of a natural setting to the less obvious psychological benefits and therapeutic advantages.

I coin this as “common sense living”. The definition of common sense living could relate to food, sustainable living, ecosystems, and wildlife as a complete and holistic approach to how we live our lives.

● (1640)

Metaphorically it's a web, beginning at home with the practice of initiatives such as maybe growing your own food in a container on your balcony or in your garden. This demonstrates, for youth in particular, that food doesn’t come from a box in a store and that physical input is rewarded in the harvest.

Life lessons such as these are a simple approach, and they abound: tolerance, acceptance, immediate habitat requirements, and consequences of actions. Conservation, urban or otherwise, begins in Canada with education on a smaller, more intimate scale, perhaps at home, which would be the centre of the web, and expanding out to the local pocket park or larger urban conservation areas within Canadian neighbourhoods.

Conservation also reflects a cultural aspect. The knowledge of how to grow something, preferably edible, is a dying art that also requires conservation. Intergenerational transfer of knowledge in areas of urban conservation, cultural and familial traditions, and finally a respect for the land, plants, and animals are in critical need of conservation also. Smaller, localized models and examples of conservation, gardening, and overall respect for the land, perhaps in the schoolyards of Canada, will reach and be more meaningful to a larger and more diverse community of Canadians.

In terms of the social benefits, the great outdoors is not a reasonable retreat for many Canadians. Smaller and more numerous urban conservation areas would be of more value to more Canadians. Urban conservation has an ability to forge and strengthen community, familial as well as new. Typically, these areas could and should provide recreation, exercise, and a sense of belonging to all Canadians. Properly designed models will go a long way to reducing the fears of the outdoors and will address security concerns.

Regarding learning, urban conservation venues should provide for experiential and transformational education in every season. They should give Canadians the tools to practise urban conservation at home with minimal costs and show numerous benefits. This leads to an understanding of why urban conservation is important and how Canadians can be involved in increasing their ability to become more self-sufficient.

Economic benefits could relate to increased jobs in construction and maintenance of new urban conservation venues. That is rather predictable. Industry growth in supplying living infrastructure would also occur. A more informed and conscientious population who actively engage in conservation with common sense lifestyles should benefit the nation as a whole. Of course, spending, investing, and procurement patterns may change. An improvement would seem reasonable on that front. Healthier Canadians equate to fewer sick days and decreased demands on our health care system.

How do we define a protected space? Regulations governing protected spaces are required. Currently, they do exist, but on a smaller scale; the users themselves would become the stewards. Active stewardship begins with and is intrinsically tied to education. Protecting spaces would be, in part, the responsibility of the users themselves, who would come to see their community as the proper owner. Protected spaces therefore should impose restrictions or limits on commercial development, not on the people who use them.

What role should the federal government play in urban conservation? Perhaps setting an example on all government properties would be a fairly easy start, as well as providing information to individuals on the benefits and importance of living in a more sustainable manner.

To my understanding, the federal government legislates, provides funds, and gives tax breaks. All three areas are in focus. As has been said today already, a collaborative approach with other levels of government, particularly within education, is key and fundamental as a role to be played in urban conservation. As well, perhaps there could be a National Capital Commission urban conservation demonstration venue within the national capital region. Using Ottawa as a good example, I cite the public garden at the Experimental Farm as something along those lines that is accessible.

Under the heading of funding, direct funding should be given to organizations that can implement these goals, take action, and achieve results focused on education and conservation, environment, and stewardship.

Finally I come to tax breaks. Incentives should be provided to agencies and individuals who perhaps plant trees, improve habitat, and/or actively engage in conservation efforts. Schools should be assisted to ensure every student has the opportunity to experience nature, understand conservation, and learn their stewardship role. One very easy and practical example that doesn't cost a lot of money would be transportation assistance.

Thank you.

● (1645)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Finally we come to Ms. Power; you have up to 10 minutes.

Ms. Marlene Power (Member, Board of Directors, Director, Forest School Canada, Child and Nature Alliance of Canada): Thank you, honourable members and Mr. Chair, for such a vast and collaborative process. I think everyone who has spoken today has shown that there is definitely a need, that there is a rich history, and that there are some really wonderful things happening on a national level around conservation at a practice, policy, and research level.

I'm here today to represent the Child and Nature Alliance and to share the great work we've been doing to connect children to nature. In doing so, I hope to highlight how the work we do aligns itself with the vision of the national conservation plan to protect, connect, restore, and engage, and to share some innovative approaches we'd like included in Canada's national conservation plan.

The Child and Nature Alliance operates based on a collaborative leadership model—collaboration being the key word here today—in which grassroots and policy-related initiatives are always done through a partnership model that engages multiple sectors, stakeholders, and leading organizations across the country. Our partners include organizations such as Parks Canada, Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, provincial parks, parks and recreation, ministries of health, the David Suzuki Foundation, Scouts Canada, Bienenstock Playgrounds, Evergreen, ParticipAction, KidActive, the HALO research team...and this list could go on.

The alliance supports individuals, organizations, and ministries in connecting children and communities to nature by supporting collaborative dialogues and initiatives at both provincial and national levels. Examples of this include the Healthy Children Healthy Spaces conference in Ottawa in 2010, the Healthy by Nature forum in Vancouver in 2011, and the Get Outside BC youth leadership initiative in 2012. As a result of these collaborative dialogues, we have co-created the Vancouver Healthy By Nature charter, in addition to co-launching Take Me Outside Day and Nature Play Day. Lastly, we have participated in the minister's round table on parks and have worked closely with ParticipAction and Active Healthy Kids Canada in getting an outdoor and nature indicator placed in the report card highlighting a connection to nature as a major health indicator for children in Canada.

Currently we are working on launching two national initiatives, the first being the Natural Leaders Alliance and the second being Forest School Canada. The Natural Leaders Alliance is a network of youth inspiring youth and is driven by two youth representatives who sit on the board of directors for the Child and Nature Alliance. The Natural Leaders Alliance has been piloted through the Get Outside BC youth leadership initiative, which we hope to launch nationally to provide youth with the opportunity to engage and inspire each other to connect to the natural world.

The second initiative, which is the one I am responsible for leading currently, Forest School Canada, was born four years ago when Canada's first forest preschool, Carp Ridge Forest Preschool, was launched in Ottawa, Ontario.

Children within this model of education spend their entire days outdoors exploring local woodlands, creeks, meadows, and ponds. They follow a play and experiential-based curriculum and learn from natural materials found in the outdoors. Emphasis is placed on exploring local habitats, connecting to indigenous cultures and a sense of place, as well as practising sustainability and conservation in a child-directed and age-appropriate manner. On a daily basis, children will hike, snowshoe, birdwatch, track animals, identify plants and animals, compost, build birdhouses, engage in lots of art activities with natural materials, build fires and shelters, and grow and cook their own food.

This model of education started in the 1950s in Denmark and is now an education model used throughout the U.K. and within most Scandinavian countries. There are currently over 500 forest schools in Germany alone, and in parts of the U.K. all schools are mandated to bring their students into a park or woodland area for forest education at least once a week.

Since the launch of this preschool, there are now over 15 forest preschools, nature kindergartens, and forest schools that have opened or are in the process of opening across Canada. We have seen a movement within the field of education as educators begin exploring how they can start up similar programs or how they can incorporate nature-based education within their own settings, such as schools and day care settings.

● (1650)

This movement has had policy implications, is garnering lots of interest from academic and research institutes, and has moved environmental education into the early years and into the hands of all educators, not just outdoor educators working in satellite outdoor education centres.

As a result, the Child and Nature Alliance has formed a national education initiative, called Forest School Canada, to promote nature-based education in the early, primary, and secondary years through an increased use of the built and natural environment. This includes natural playgrounds, as was presented to the committee by Adam Bienenstock; outdoor classrooms; and municipal, provincial, and national parks.

The vision for Forest School Canada is to see an increase in outdoor and nature-based learning within all schools. This may mean launching forest schools in provincial and national parks where children can go to school year-round, partnerships between parks and school boards to support weekly forest education, and increasing natural playgrounds and outdoor classrooms on school grounds to deal with accommodations issues that all school boards are currently facing.

Forest School Canada has partnered with the U.K. national governing body for forest schools to develop a national teacher training program. The goal of this teacher training program will be to promote an increase in forest schools and nature-based programs by providing educators with the pedagogical knowledge and skills base to take their classrooms outdoors. We are looking to pilot this training program in the summer of 2013 in three locations across Canada, with a complete rollout of training in each province throughout 2014.

We are working closely with colleges and universities to incorporate nature-based education courses into faculties of education and early learning, and we have started building strong partnerships with provincial early learning associations as well as school boards.

Additionally, we are working with the Healthy Active Living and Obesity Research Group to outline a Canadian research project to study the health outcomes and ecological literacy of children who attend nature-based education programs across Canada.

Lastly, we are identifying national policy issues and policy gaps that must be addressed to support teachers and administrators in starting up forest- and nature-based programs.

Forest School Canada addresses the minister's recommendation to engage with the formal education system in the 2012 minister's round table on parks. We envision this initiative as a way to get students and teachers into parks for education programs and also to have national parks as a venue and partner in the development and delivery of the forest school teacher training programs in each province.

The Child and Nature Alliance would like to ask the Standing Committee on the Environment and Sustainable Development to acknowledge our two initiatives as national strategies and examples of best practice to promote conservation in Canada.

We would like to highlight the need to engage children beginning in the early years, to engage our formal school system as a way to increase impact, and to engage youth to drive this movement forward.

Additionally, we would like to highlight the necessity for collaborative leadership in order to continue connecting children to nature across all sectors and between all stakeholders.

Lastly, we ask that appropriate funds be allocated to develop, launch, and deliver both initiatives in each province in a comprehensive, collaborative, engaging, and sustainable manner.

Thank you.

● (1655)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Our first round of questioning is normally seven minutes, but we only have 20 minutes left, so it will be five minutes each in the first round.

We'll begin with Mr. Lunney. You have five minutes.

Mr. James Lunney (Nanaimo—Alberni, CPC): We thought I had a little longer and I was going to share that with Ms. Ambler, so I'm going to try to be really fast.

You've all given us a lot of very interesting food for thought here. Welcome back to a couple of our witnesses, Forest School and Michael from the Scouts.

There's lots of food for thought there in all of this.

First I'll make a very quick comment. You said there are 500 forest schools in Germany. It's amazing, because they don't have a lot of outdoors. I wonder if that's why every second person on the West Coast Trail in British Columbia—half of which is in my riding, 75 kilometres—is from Germany or Austria. That's a very interesting observation. They're really promoting outdoor experiences.

Quickly, you made some very practical suggestions there, Ms. Power, on two strategies. You talked among yourselves about implementing a children's nature tax credit program.

Mike Bingley, you also talked about partnerships, and you referred to the Parks Canada pass.

I want to ask you to expand on what you mean by a nature experience liability shield. We're talking about getting more young people outside. Could you please expand on what that means?

Mr. Mike Bingley: Certainly.

When I talk to people in Lions Clubs, to people in organizations that don't normally take people outdoors, the two most common objections are these: I don't know how to do that, and I'll lose my house if a kid twists their ankle.

The reality is that we need to protect people from the second one. It's easy to teach somebody how to do this stuff. I can teach somebody how to take a kid outdoors in about 15 minutes. All you have to do is ask them how they would it. It's really hard, though, to get people over the idea that they might lose something just because an accident has happened.

When I look at first aid courses, if somebody acts within the scope of their training, most provinces have some sort of liability shield or Good Samaritan law that says as long as they're not going beyond the scope of their training, they can do first aid on somebody.

When I look at outdoors stuff, I would imagine that it would be something along the lines of acknowledging that you're taking kids down to a local park, not rock climbing on Everest.

That's the idea behind it. Does that answer your question?

Mr. James Lunney: Yes, and I appreciate your expanding on it. That is helpful.

The Chair: You have two and a half minutes left.

Mr. James Lunney: Okay.

I'm going to defer to Stella—

Ms. Michelle Rempel (Calgary Centre-North, CPC): No, no, keep going. We're splitting the time. You're good.

Mr. James Lunney: Following up on the same area, then, I'm very sympathetic to what you described as the "look but don't touch" philosophy about parks—don't stand on the grass, don't touch anything. Kids need to get engaged somehow, to get practical experience. At the same time, you talked about kids having their own experiences in the wild without adult supervision.

On the one hand, I heard you say that although parents are afraid about their kids going to camp, camps are safe. They are supervised. On the other hand, you talked about kids going out into the wilderness area unsupervised.

How do you reconcile these concerns, and how do you see that being advanced?

Mr. Mike Bingley: It really is a matter of implied risk, if you will.

Scouts Canada does a great program in the Cypress Hills area in Saskatchewan. The kids think they're going on a week-long backpacking trip without adult supervision. The reality is that there are adults following behind at a short distance. They can see everything that's going on, while the kids get the feeling that they're doing something.

You know, I've watched the kids at the beginning of that trip and the kids at the end of that trip, and they go from about here to here, it seems, in terms of height. They're more independent. They're more likely to do things.

The other reality is that at the end of the trip, they can go to their parents and say, "You know what? I did all these things by myself." In turn, their parents are more likely to say, "You know what? We're going to let you do some more things by yourself."

A great example of that is Craig Kielburger from Free the Children, who was on our national board. He always talks about going to India by himself when he was 13. I asked his mother once how on earth she let him do that. She said, "He was a Scout. I knew he could be trusted."

We can do these things. We train the kids so that they know how to take part in the outdoors.

● (1700)

Mr. James Lunney: That's admirable; I certainly appreciate that.

My wife is a counsellor in the school system, and she loves outdoor camping. They took some kids from an inner school out camping, and she always talk about how the boys that night were talking about going to scare the girls, but before they could do that, just as darkness set in, there was a raccoon fight outside their tent.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. James Lunney: They weren't going out of the tent, let's just say it that way; she describes it her own way.

The Chair: Mr. Lunney, your time has expired.

Mr. James Lunney: You're kidding.

The Chair: We're going to have to wait to hear what happened with the raccoons another time.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Madame Quach, you have five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Beauharnois—Salaberry, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for coming here to meet with us.

One again, although we have heard a number of witnesses, we continue to learn. Most of my questions are for Mr. Brunet.

Mr. Brunet, you said that the role of the federal government is also to create legislation and ensure that it is properly enforced. What we are seeing through a number of bills is an attack on the environment. You mentioned the National Round Table on the Environment and the economy, where climate change is discussed.

What type of regulation undermined urban conservation? How do you think the federal government could improve urban conservation by enacting new legislation or strengthening existing laws? Currently, in Doha, for example, the discussion is mostly focused on climate change.

Mr. Normand Brunet: I also spoke about maintaining scientific expertise within the federal government. You will not be surprised to hear me say that there are a number of budget restrictions and cuts, and that very competent people are being laid off. This will definitely have an impact on the quality of the environment.

In addition, a number of bills deal, for example, with the law protecting fish habitat. Fish habitat are also a source of biodiversity. If we are dealing with this kind of impact, we cannot expect to see outcomes for biodiversity that are positive overall.

The decisions made here, across the street, have major long-term impacts on the quality and diversity of life, both within and outside our cities.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Thank you.

Let's talk about the Green Municipal Fund. You said that a certain amount of money comes from the federal government. Could some cities withdraw funding for fossil fuels and reinvest those sums into urban conservation, by either putting it all into the Green Municipal Fund, or by creating jobs restoring natural environments? What do you think of that?

Mr. Normand Brunet: Of course, transfers would be possible. Still, I know that billions of dollars were spent on urban infrastructure. That was at the federal, provincial and municipal levels.

It would be possible to design a similar project, one that would aim not to restore water and sewer lines, but to conserve the city's remaining biodiversity, which is highly threatened. Degraded ecosystems could also be restored.

I don't want to know where the money would come from, but I have the impression that these resources could be freed up to go in this direction. That could lead to a positive economic impact, namely job creation.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Could you tell us more about the commission you mentioned, the one which no longer exists? You were saying that the federal government was involved in urban conservation. How could we reintroduce this type of commission?

Mr. Normand Brunet: I think an interest should be taken in history. I learned of the existence of this commission while doing research on behalf of the Office of the Auditor General of Canada, research into the management history of the St. Lawrence River over the last 100 years. I think that a Ph.D. thesis by a University of Ottawa researcher was found; he studied the Conservation Commission, which was created in 1909, during a major shift in favour of conserving national parks, which occurred in Canada and the United States. There was a relatively strong conservation movement at the time.

The Government of Canada created the Conservation Commission. It was not strictly urban. It was conservation, in a broad sense. The commission was active for many years. It would seem that it did important and interesting work. At a certain time, the federal government decided that the commission had done enough and abolished it.

Looking back, it might be time to set up this type of commission again. For more details, you can consult the published document written by Michel F. Girard, entitled *L'écologisme retrouvé : essor et déclin de la Commission de la conservation du Canada*. In my notes, you can find the complete reference. This book was published by the University of Ottawa Press. Taking a few minutes to read it is really worth the time.

● (1705)

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: You have ten seconds.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: I wanted to talk about the importance of education and raising awareness. Everyone mentioned it. How the federal government could help national parks ...

[*English*]

The Chair: Your time has expired.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: ... or others find guides that would be better able to speak to children?

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you. Your time has expired. Sorry.

Ms. Rempel, you have five minutes.

Ms. Michelle Rempel: I'll be sharing my time with Ms. Ambler, but I wanted to give a preamble.

On behalf of the entire committee, thank all of you for coming. I think everybody here has provided us with some concrete recommendations that the committee can consider. I think what we will do, because of the depth of information that we received today —certainly Mr. Bingley and Mr. Beattie had some very concrete recommendations, and Ms. Power as well—we might follow up with you for some more information as we do our deliberations.

This is just a note of thanks on behalf of everyone for the amount of work that you put into coming up with some very tangible and concrete recommendations that we can consider.

I'll turn it over to Ms. Ambler.

Mrs. Stella Ambler (Mississauga South, CPC): Thank you so much.

Mr. Bingley, does Scouts Canada have any specific urban conservation initiatives? I googled Scouts badges and I wonder if you have a badge that would be relevant to work that children did on urban conservation.

Mr. Mike Bingley: Certainly we do. We have a number of badges on just about any topic. In our Cub Scout and our Scout programs, we have a conservation badge. We have the World Scout Environment Programme. We have horticulture badges.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: They could all be for urban projects?

Mr. Mike Bingley: Absolutely. The majority of our groups meet in urban areas. If an eight-year-old is doing a conservation project, he's probably doing it in his own backyard, and that's what we really encourage.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: I'd like to know a bit more about what you mean by "overzealous conservation practices".

Mr. Mike Bingley: I was running a program in Waterton Lakes National Park a couple of years ago, and I said to one of the rangers, "We're going to take the kids over here and we're going to roll back a rock." The ranger said to me, "You're not going to do that in a national park." I said, "Well, we'll put the rock back", and he said, "You're not going to do that in a national park." I asked why, and nobody could give me a really good reason. That's one example.

Fairly often, I'll see environmental educators saying to kids things like, "You can't touch that; nature is delicate." The reality is, these places aren't museums. I believe they're works of art, but they're works of art that regenerate themselves.

If we're not using them... All we need to do is look at the legacy of Nemiskam National Park, which was de-established in 1947. We chased people out to the point that nobody went there anymore, and somebody said, "This is great farmland; let's use it as farmland."

Mrs. Stella Ambler: Thank you. That's a great point. These places aren't museums. I like that.

Ms. Power, you mentioned that the Child and Nature Alliance is largely focused on connecting children and their families with nature. In both this study and our study on developing a national conservation plan, one term that came up often was "nature deficit disorder", meaning that children don't get out enough and they suffer various consequences because of that.

Could you comment on the effects this might have on a child—that is, the mental, physical, and emotional consequences for a child who does not have much exposure to nature?

Ms. Marlene Power: Yes.

The term "nature deficit disorder" was coined by Richard Louv, who wrote the book *Last Child in the Woods*. He's actually an honorary chair of the Child and Nature Alliance and runs an organization called The Children and Nature Network in the States. It has a mandate very similar to what we do.

There's increased writing and research being done on the health, social, and economic outcomes of children not connecting to the natural world, and Mike has touched on a lot of them today. In Richard Louv's book, he talks a lot about nature deficit disorder being connected to ADD and ADHD at increasing levels and about diagnoses of those two disorders in school systems. Children aren't being given the opportunity to play and explore and run around and move their bodies in the same way that previous generations were given when they had more outdoor time and when phys ed classes happened both indoors and outdoors. There's definitely the behavioural and medical—

The Chair: I am sorry—

I guess I'm done—

● (1710)

The Chair: I am so sorry.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: Let her have that one last word: behavioural and medical..."disadvantages"?

Ms. Marlene Power: Basically just health implications.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Ms. Duncan, you have five minutes.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to you all.

Dr. Brunet, should ecological integrity and ecosystem health be a recommendation from this committee?

Dr. Normand Brunet: Ecological integrity in the urban settlement is hard to attain.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Should it be ecological health?

Dr. Normand Brunet: Ecological health, of course; integrity, I doubt.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Yes, okay.

Should we be enshrining ecological health in policy and legislation?

Dr. Normand Brunet: We should, to the extent of the jurisdiction of the federal government, because there's this question of federal and provincial and municipal responsibilities that have to be maintained. If it is something that can be done without too much difficulty, I think the principle should be there at least.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you.

Again I'll ask Dr. Brunet a question, and this is hard, because it's trying to get a balance here.

How do we manage goals, such as connecting people to nature, in a way that does not compromise an overarching conservation goal or compromise ecological health?

Dr. Normand Brunet: You can have different types of conservation zones in urban areas.

For example, in Montreal, we have a park called Parc-nature du Bois-de-Saraguay, which is for conservation. It is not open to the public for recreation. This is a typical forest in the area from 200 years ago. This forest has never been touched. It is maintained for its ecological value.

Nearby you have another park, which is open to the public for recreation. There are different types of activities. There is conservation, but it is open to the public. There is a type of equilibrium to reach. I think it's possible.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you. Would you be able to send the committee further recommendations on these different types of zones?

Dr. Normand Brunet: I can give you more examples for parks. For example, in the Montreal area, we have Mont-Saint-Hilaire, which is part of the network of UNESCO urban biosphere reserves. This is a forest that has never been cut or touched. It is only there to maintain the quality of the ecosystem. It's open to the public. There's no recreation, but people can take a walk, listen to the birds, and so on. This is something really interesting.

The Montreal area has a wide variety of ecosystems. We have Quebec national parks close to the city of Montreal. Within the city, there's Mount Royal, which is another interesting forest and park. It involves the efforts of a local conservation group. There are a lot of models of types of forests.

● (1715)

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Could you provide this committee with these different models and examples of the different models? Can you give us the park names as well? That would be terrific.

Dr. Normand Brunet: I could, of course. I have produced some notes, which are available. They will be translated soon. Within these notes, there are some examples, but I can be more exhaustive.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Specific recommendations to the committee would also be very helpful.

Dr. Normand Brunet: I can make a table, which would be useful.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: That would be it. It should have the model, which parks use it, and your specific recommendations.

Dr. Normand Brunet: I will give examples. Okay.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: I am probably done.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Okay. I will ask Dr. Brunet one more question.

How do we have balance and ensure that visitor engagement is not emphasized over conservation?

Dr. Normand Brunet: Visitor...engagement? I don't understand very clearly.

The Chair: You have five seconds.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: It's okay.

Thank you.

The Chair: Again, thank you to the witnesses for being with us today. We regret that it wasn't longer. What you shared with us was valuable information. We appreciate your taking the time and being with us this day.

Colleagues, we have bells pending, I believe.

The meeting is adjourned.