

**‘Recent Trends in Community Programming:
An Assessment of Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre’**

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Executive Summary

Due to a decline Vancouver's social capital from an aging population and increasing time spent indoors the Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre should take note of the following recommendations: continue to focus on differentiating the content of programming; keep up with new marketing strategies (increase internet presence); rebrand programming as having physical exercise involved; engage high-school students by encouraging the creation of after school volunteer programs, and enable them to organize and design the programs.

These recommendations were designed for the Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre, in order to capitalize on potential opportunities, and fill in current program gaps. The recommendations were created in conjunction with an informed assessment of relevant demographic and social trends of the past decade in the District Municipality of North Vancouver, British Columbia.

All of the above recommendations and conclusions were found in pursuit of answering the following two research questions: 1) What are the driving factors causing changes in community program participation from families in North Vancouver, and is this consistent with Metro Vancouver? 2) What can the Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre do in terms of programming to foster community support and involvement?

Supporting arguments provided are derived from primary and secondary source research, which includes peer-reviewed literature regarding environmental education, marketing strategies, demographic statistics and the health affects of physical activities; and four in-depth interviews with public programming staff at various organizations in Metro Vancouver.

Statement of Research Question

This paper seeks to assess the following research questions: 1) What are the driving factors causing changes in community program participation by North Vancouver families, and is this consistent with Metro Vancouver? 2) What can the Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre do in terms of programming to foster community support and involvement?

These research questions were developed in consultation with Tricia Edgar, Education Programmer at the Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre, located in Lynn Canyon Park, in the District Municipality of North Vancouver, British Columbia. The questions are derived from Tricia's stated desire to see the Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre be regarded as a community hub, and a place of educational opportunity for the residents of North Vancouver. Tricia has explicitly stated that she wants their children's public education programs to, "serve the purpose of connecting kids to the outdoors, providing a community gathering place, providing fun family activities on the weekend, and providing focused knowledge for children who are keen to know more." It is important to note that this overarching goal is specifically for children's public education programs, and the Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre offers several other types of programs as well. Her personal observations in participation levels of Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre's programs span the past decade, and were the driving force behind the development of these questions.

Environmental Education

The primary purpose of environmental education is to teach people about different functional components of our natural surroundings, and how human actions affect those components. Combining environmental education with outdoor education can improve the strength of lesson material, and create longer lasting lessons (Adkins & Simmons, 2002). With this in mind, research has shown that outdoor environmental education lesson plans must span multiple days in order to observe the actualization of potential lasting impacts on environmental behaviours and attitudes- consistently identified as an end goal of environmental education (Bogner, 1998).

There are numerous books on methods and strategies for designing outdoor environmental education programs, including that by Gilbertson et al. (2006). The history of environmental education, however, is relatively short. As Canadians increasingly value their surrounding natural environment, programs such as those designed and implemented by the Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre will become increasingly valuable to ensuring future environmental awareness.

Environmental Education at the Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre

Before assessing the weaknesses of the Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre's educational programs, attention must be given to its various strengths. The Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre specializes in providing hands-on environmental education programs in Lynn Canyon Park. Their current programs target youth of all ages (2-18), as well as adults and families. They offer field trip programs for schools, and regular programs with varying commitment levels to service the general community in their desire to learn about

the local environment. The Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre offers great field trip programs for schools. They also offer fantastic summer camps. Both of these programs are considered to be thriving. Furthermore, they offer several great options for weekend programming for families with children of ages 3-13 years old.

The public educational programs are designed to serve four purposes: connecting kids to the outdoors, providing a community gathering place, providing fun family activities on the weekend, and providing focused knowledge for children who are keen to know more. The school programs and summer camps are meant to do the first one, the story time and Young Naturalists are meant do the second, the Imagine and Explore and Young Naturalists are meant to do the third, and hopefully the summer camps and new spring programming will do the fourth.

Methods

In pursuit of answering the aforementioned research questions, both primary and secondary source research was conducted. A review of general environmental education literature was used to inform various aspects of this research, and serve as secondary sources.

Primary source information was collected in March 2014 during interviews with four employees who are currently involved in community programming at various organizations in Metro Vancouver. The interviewees included Celina Starnes, Public Education and Outreach Coordinator with the Stanley Park Ecology Society; Maia Green, Executive Director of the Fun Society; Janey Chang, Outdoor Education Manager with

Mount Seymour; and one interviewee who wished to remain anonymous. The first interview was conducted in person, while the other three were done over the phone.

During each interview, the following nine open-ended questions were presented for discussion:

- 1) Please briefly describe your role at this community organization
- 2) What trends have you witnessed in terms of the level of community involvement at your organization in the last 10 years?
- 3) At your organization, what programs have received the most attention and interest from families?
- 4) Have you noticed any changes in the nature of popular children's programming at your organization?
- 5) Do you know of any programs you have had in the past that did not work out? If so, please explain.
- 6) In your opinion, what are the major factors contributing to the successes of community programming for families at your organization?
- 7) What can community organizations do to stimulate more interest and involvement in programming for families?
- 8) Who are participating in your programs, and who are not participating?
- 9) Is there anything else you can add, or I should be asking?

Interviewees were given a general idea of the types of questions they would be asked, but were not directly told all of the interview questions before the interview was conducted. This was done in order to gather the most genuine responses on the spot.

Recent Demographic & Social Trends

The Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre is situated in Lynn Valley, a neighbourhood community located in the District Municipality (DM) of North Vancouver. According to 2011 Statistics Canada census data, North Vancouver DM had a population of 84,412, representing a 2.2% increase in population from 2006. This is quite low compared to the Canada wide growth average of 5.9%.

Analyzing population trends in age brackets of 0-14, 15-64 and 65+ provides the greatest insight into recent demographic trends in the area. From 2006 to 2011, North Vancouver DM has realized a 5.6% decrease in its 0-14 years old population, while experiencing a 17.6% increase in its 65+ years old population. The 15-64 years old population has remained relatively stable, with an increase of 1.3%. What we are seeing in North Vancouver DM is an aging population. Furthermore, though the numbers are not as dramatic, the general trend of an aging population is consistent in most parts of Metro Vancouver (Statistics Canada, 2012). This is something that has been noted by programmers during the interviews. Many programmers and schools have adapted their programs in order to keep up with these noted demographic trends, by discontinuing programs for younger people, and designing new programs for older populations.

A second noted trend is that Metro Vancouver is becoming more socially isolated. It has been argued that Vancouver is “moving away from...social inclusion and social sustainability,” (Cooper, 2006, p. 2). A recent article published by Vancouver Coastal Health in February 2014 suggests that 15% of people in Metro Vancouver are suffering from some form of social isolation (Vancouver Coastal Health, 2014). This is a product of an increasingly time-poor society and the increasing accessibility of socially excluding

indoor activities, such as video games, internet browsing, etc. This trend has been witnessed in environmental education program participation, and was commented upon by several of the programmers during their interviews.

Research from Active Healthy Kids Canada has indicated that, “the proportion of Canadian kids who play outside after school dropped 14% over the last decade,” (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2012). Kids are simply not looking to go outside for fun as much as they have in the past. In order to counteract this trend, parents are looking to get their kids to participate in more rigorous physical activities, and less often. To find these programs, and register in them, working parents with little time are increasingly using the internet as their tool of choice. However, not all parents are the same, as Bianchi and Robinson (1997) resolve that parental education seems to be the key determinant in the level of investment in social capital that children receive. For example, their research found that there is a correlation suggesting that children of parents with higher levels of education watch less television at home than children of parents with lower levels of education.

Assessment of Program Gaps at the Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre

The Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre has a number of successful programs to serve the needs of its local population. This being said, there is always room for improvement, and there are some noticeable weaknesses in its marketing approach and program design implementation.

Although the Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre has been building its social media and online presence up in recent years, there is still more to do. Briones et. al. (2011)

emphasize the importance of adapting to modern methods of social media in order to continue good public relations and to foster interest and participation within the organization. Virtually everyone owns a computer these days, and according to one interview source, an increasing number of people claim they are making program decisions on the internet.

The Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre also appears to be lacking in programs that emphasize physical health as a key component. There are plenty of known health benefits to spending time moving around outdoors (Armour & Sandford, 2013). The available program information online does not convey these benefits very strongly to the public. Mental, and physical health benefits are for the most part avoided in the brochure information.

The Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre has experienced a decrease in regular weekday program participation, and has had to shift the majority of its programming to the weekends in the last few years as a result.

The Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre has limited opportunities for high school students outside of summer volunteer work, and does not have any programs specifically dedicated to families with babies, although babies are welcome to attend programs.

Discussion of Recommendations

Bearing in mind the discussed social trends and identified program weaknesses, a number of recommendations are provided here with the goal of improving participation in weekday programming, and heightening the sense of community at the Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre. The following recommendations will each be assessed separately: focus on differentiating the content of programming; keep up with new marketing strategies (increase social media presence); brand programming as having physical exercise involved; and involve high-school students by encouraging the creation of after school volunteer programs, and enable them to organize and design the programs.

The Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre should continue its plans to build differentiated programs. During the interviews, differentiated content repeatedly surfaced as being the most important factor in successful program implementation. The logic is that people will be more likely to go out of their way to participate in a program at a particular organization if it is unlikely to be found elsewhere locally. This may already be seen as an integral strength of the Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre's programs, and should be continually strengthened.

The Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre should increase its social media presence, and generally build a larger presence online. If people are not aware of the program opportunities available, they will not participate regardless of how good the programming is. As the world increasingly looks to the internet for easily accessible information when making activity participation decisions, a strong internet presence is more crucial than ever. When looking for activities for their children, parents are not looking very far ahead into the future, and have limited time to do background research into these programs.

Simply having a Facebook page and a website is not good enough anymore. An increasing internet presence is not just limited to social media. Ensuring that the Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre surfaces on as many forums and websites dedicated to activities in Metro Vancouver is a must.

The Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre could incorporate more physical exercise activities into its programming, and market these as such. The first-impression branding of its programs is a key success factor (measured by participation rates) of public programming. It has become apparent that as time becomes increasingly constrained in society, parents are being forced to make tougher decisions on where to direct their children's focus. The academic learning process is the focus of schools, while physical activity is simply not. There is a current trend towards enrolling children in sports programs instead of outdoor learning programs. Therefore, it is fantastic that Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre provides supplementary education opportunities for those parents keen to teach their children more, but it could be improved by regarding physical activity as an accompanying focal point of its programming. Furthermore, since parents are spending so little time researching these programs, it must be made explicit that the programs are both an educational opportunity, and an opportunity for exercise.

The Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre could incorporate more high school students into its programming, by encouraging high schools to develop, organize and run their own environmental education programs, using the natural and built resources at the Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre, while limiting internal staff involvement. The Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre could encourage high schools to pair up with elementary schools, and facilitate their own programming using the readily available resources in Lynn Canyon

Park. By allowing high school students to develop, organize, and implement their own environmental education program for elementary schools, Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre would be offering a differentiated program that engages the 6-12 years old population and the fizzling 13-18 years old population, all while limiting resource inputs and costs to staff these activities from the Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre itself. Furthermore, a program such as this would help serve the purpose of bringing back a sense of community on the weekdays, during after-school hours. Teachers could volunteer their time (as I have seen firsthand in Toronto), to supervise the high school student's facilitating the program, as an alternative to the typical requirement of coaching a sports team, or facilitating other extra-curricular activities. For high school students, the main benefit would be earning community service hours in a unique environment. For elementary school students, there would be an opportunity for after-school programming free of charge.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the District Municipality of North Vancouver is witnessing the following trends: an aging population; and a decline in social capital due to an increasingly time-poor society, and an increase in the accessibility of indoor entertainment. According to this research, these trends appear to be consistent, to varying degrees, across Metro Vancouver.

Several recommendations have been assessed in this paper, including: an increased social media and internet presence to keep up with current successful marketing strategies; rebranding programming to continue focusing on its differentiated

programming, while emphasizing the physical health benefits and exercise aspects of programs; and an increased involvement with high-school students, by encouraging the creation, organization and design of after school volunteer programs for younger children.

Research Gaps

Due to the timing of this research study, it has been particularly difficult to gather survey data from the participants (parents) of the Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre's programs. The programs receive much higher participation numbers in the summer months. Therefore, if the opportunity arises to expand upon this research during the summer or early autumn, I would highly recommend performing an in-depth internal assessment of current programs, from the viewpoint of participants. While this research provides a solid macro-environmental analysis for the Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre, it fails to assess the internal participant environment in any significant form.

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