
Summer Nature Centre Annual Report

2010

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Purpose:

The purpose of the B.L.E.S.S. summer nature centre is to educate youth on the importance of nature and to provide children with some activities with which to fill their summer break. Hopefully, the children gain not only knowledge of their environment, but a respect for it as well.

Summer Themes

Note: All weeks included coloring and sidewalk chalk in addition to the activities listed.

Week 1: It's Easy Being Green

This theme was about easy ways to be environmentally friendly, and hopefully made the children a little more aware of their impact on the planet. The focus has shifted slightly from lowering emissions to recycling and other waste-reducing methods. Next year, I hope to include a segment on composting and even have a compost bin here in the log cabin!

Activities

Crafts:

Lights Out

- At first it was a paper mache light bulb using a water balloon, but then I discovered that paper mache takes about 24 hours to dry... the craft was then modified to remove that aspect. A small balloon attached to a small paper plate to simulate a light bulb. Popular, although boring. I wouldn't recommend repeating.

Bird Feeder

- A cardboard tube glued to a small paper plate. The kids enjoyed this craft, but some parts were difficult for young children.

Indoor:

Matching

- Match environmentally friendly techniques to their pictures
- Not very popular, but very educational

Water word search

- Not many children did this activity, partly because most of the kids who come in are unable to read yet. The age group attending the nature centre appears to be declining, so reduce the reading required for many activities.

Memory game

- Kids try to find matches in this classic card game
- Very popular, even with young children

3-R Matching

- Children needed to match statements about waste management and categorize them as reducing, reusing or recycling.
- No wrong answers, really. They were very flexible, but it still made the kids think about using things again rather than throwing them out!

Outdoor:

Pollutant Knockout

- Kids try to knock down signs that have bad pictures on them while keeping the good signs up.
- Extremely popular! Definitely a hit!

Scavenger Hunt

- I created a more relevant scavenger hunt from last year, and the children had to find things like people walking or biking, carpooling, taking the bus, etc.
- It was popular enough, but difficult for many of the kids.

Theme Analysis

The importance of this theme cannot be understated. The messages being taught in the theme are shifting towards waste-reducing methods rather than greenhouse gases, but the overall purpose of this theme has not changes. Children must be aware of how they can affect the environment, both positive and negative. Children who do not understand the particle theory (about 99% of our visitors) will gain nothing from learning about invisible gases that are causing our planet's climate to shift. What they can understand are things like landfills, recycling and composting.

Notes for Next Year

This year was definitely better than last year in terms of activities. Water word search is very difficult for young naturalists who cannot read yet (which is most of them, nowadays) so replace it with another activity. The pictures on Pollutant Knockout are getting a bit ratty, so replacing them would be wise. Laminate pictures to attach to the signs rather than mac-tacking them on. Lamination is more durable (albeit more expensive), and the pictures can be interchangeable for different themes. Make a game about waste and have the kids organize it into recyclable, compostable, or trash.

Week 2: Take Flight

This week's theme introduced the children to our local birds.

Activities:

Crafts:

Build a Duck

- Build a duck is always a hit! They color and assemble a paper duck.
- Simple for all ages!

Paper Bag Owl!

- Very self-explanatory. Kids painted a paper bag to look like an owl.
- Many kids invented their own species of bird to make, but oh well.

Indoor:

Puzzling

- Kids had to put puzzles of birds together and then identify them based on physical clues.
- Puzzles are always great for all ages

Whoo Am I?

- Children had to identify our 12 local owl species based on clues on their appearance and habitat.
- Extremely educational! Not only to kids get the opportunity to learn about our owls, but they learn what traits can distinguish one species from another and how to look for them. Great game!

Bills and Bodies

- Kids had to match heads to bodies and then identify the bird on paper.
- Difficult, as there were no clues. I ended up helping a lot of kids out with the Birds of Alberta book.

Migration Watchers

- Kids had to identify the type of bird based on their silhouettes.
- It was really difficult for them! Next time, make some clues for them.

Outdoor:

Bird Watching

- Children went outside and looked for different species of birds. They would write down or draw what they looked like and where they were on a piece of paper, then try to identify them using our field guide.

Scavenger Hunt

- Kids had to find as many species of birds as they could from a list.
- Difficult, but fun. I chose common birds, so most of them knew what they looked like.

Nesting

- Another beanbag toss. This one required the child to throw one bean bag into each of the hoola-hoops, and as I suspected, was very popular.

Theme Analysis

It was a great idea to split birds and other animals into two separate themes! I was able to focus on all kinds of birds and go further into detail than I could last year. Plus, there were a lot of activities to choose from for this theme, so it was definitely full of information.

Notes for Next Year

More posters are always welcome, so try to find one on bird feeders or winter birds. Identification games are fun and educational, so try to include more of them in other themes as well.

I think having a bird feeder outside the Nature Centre would be a grand idea! It would make bird watching easier and give better photo opportunities for bird pictures and give kids a chance to try to identify a bird that is right in front of them.

Week 3: Wild Things

This week was based on land-bound animals in our area. Again, the decision to separate land animals from birds was an excellent idea, and now we can go into more detail than last year.

Activities:

Crafts:

Paper bag puppets

- Kids decorated paper bags to look like their favorite animal
- Popular, but many kids decided to do things like monsters. Try to find a way to make it more structured without being boring.

Oh Deer

- Children decorated cardboard tubes to look like deer
- Very cute! Kids really liked this one despite the difficulty.

Indoor:

Mystery Mammal

- Children had to solve 9 animal puzzles and then identify the animal on them.
- A classic; kids always love puzzles!

Making Tracks

- Kids had to match animal tracks with the picture of the animal.
- Extremely difficult, so I brought out our tracking guide and flagged the animals in it. That made it easier for parents to help their kids!

Crossword Puzzle

- The crossword was actually quite difficult, more so than I had expected. Only kids able to read could do it, so that is very limiting.

Who's Who?

- There were several animal specimens on the table and kids had to try to guess what animal they all came from.
- Difficult, but kids really enjoyed it.

Antler Antics

- 5 different kinds of antlers and horns were on the table and they had to identify which animal they came from
- Very difficult for kids to tell the difference between white-tailed and mule deer. A book was helpful, though.

Outdoor:

Scavenger Hunt

- Classic scavenger hunt, so it wasn't very relevant to animals. Really needed something to get kids out of the cabin!

Theme Analysis:

This theme was popular, as always! The information provided was good for both parents and kids, which is great to see. The crafts were popular and relatively easy for all ages. I'm not sure how we could improve this theme other than have more outdoor activities to prevent things from getting out of hand inside.

Notes for Next Year

Try to have more outdoor games next summer, for all themes. I'm noticing an increase in enrollment, and the days are getting busier. If we have 15 kids in one little log cabin, things get a little crazy. Scavenger hunts, bean bag tosses, blindfold games, etc are helpful to get kids out. Other than that, things are good. Maybe diversify the information to include a game about reptiles of Alberta as well; we can't just ignore them!

Week 4: Plants and Trees

This week was about local plants and how they survive. I included information about pollination and identification of local plants.

Activities:

Crafts:

Collage

- Popular, unlike last year! I included instructions on how to do it, as well as a sample craft.

Clothespin Flowers

- Kids glued petals on a clothespin to make a flower.
- They really liked it, and it was easy for all ages!

Indoor:

Leaf Rubbings

- Children were to go collect leaves and make their own rubbings
- Wildly popular, even for adults!

Plant facts

- Despite the fact that it seemed boring, this was actually popular! Kids learned a lot about plants with this activity.

How old am I?

- A birch log with labels is on display and the children need to count the rings.
- Not very exciting, but very educational.

Memory Game

- Memory game with plastic bugs as pollinators

- Popular, but no different from other weeks. Try to diversify your activities a little.

Grass Heads

- Kids painted small pots and planted grass seeds in them
- Very popular, and helped kids understand what plants need to grow

Outdoor:

Word Unscramble

- Very difficult for young kids, but popular with elementary students
- Ask the children what the word has to do with plants. For example, Bees pollinate flowers.

Butterfly to Flower

- Bean bag toss, so popular as always

Theme Analysis

This week was far more successful than last year, partially due to timing, I think. The final week of July is a busy one, so make sure there are lots of activities to do both inside and out! There were a lot of fun activities, but not too many overly educational ones; I haven't decided if that's a good or a bad thing yet. On one hand, you don't want kids thinking they're back in school, or having it go over the heads of the young ones, but on the other hand, you want them to learn something.

Notes for Next Year

Try having a matching game for tree species next year. It will probably be difficult, so include detailed descriptions! Maybe send them on a tree hunt to look for the species they learn about, too! That would be a very good way for them to get some fresh air and learn something about local trees.

Week 5: Creepy Crawlers

This week is slowly becoming famous! This is the week where kids get to play with bugs and hopefully learn something about them at the same time.

Activities:

Crafts:

Butterfly Mask

- Kids traced a mask shaped like a butterfly and colored it.

- Very popular! Some kids made a particular species, others just decorated it in their favorite colors.

Pom-Pom Bugs

- Kids glued pom-poms down in the shape of a bug and added antennae and legs.
- Simple, yet popular.

Indoor:

Puzzles

- Kids solved insect puzzles and then identified the bug on it

Memory

- The classic memory game with plastic bugs under cups instead of cards

Go Fish

- The classic card game with an entomological twist. The cards were pictures of insects and their larvae instead of a standard deck.

Outdoor:

Bug Hunt

- Kids grabbed a net and tried to catch some bugs. I generally helped identify the insects they caught

Scavenger Hunt in a bucket

- Children had to find as many water bugs as they could, and they loved it!

Butterfly to Flower

- Beanbag toss, so it was wildly popular

Theme Analysis:

Another Bug week success! Even though we were not open on the holiday Monday, we still reached our weekly average of 100 kids, so the other 4 days were quite busy! Children will always love grabbing a butterfly net and catching insects, all we have to do is supply the nets and a little information to go with them.

Notes for Next Year

The walls are a little bare in bug week, so maybe make some posters about common insect orders. Other than jazzing up the décor, I don't have any suggestions to improve bug week.

Week 7: Warm Waters

This theme was about coral ecosystems and the diversity of life within them. I feel that it is important to have themes about faraway places to give children an idea of how vast our planet is and how important it is to take care of it as a whole, not just our portion.

Activities:

Crafts:

Something's Fishy

- Kids had to make a fish out of a paper bag and some construction paper.
- Very popular craft from last year, so I decided to use it again. Some kids still have theirs from last summer!

Pipe-cleaner Coral

- Kids made an coral scene out of a paper plate, some pipe-cleaners and construction paper cutouts of fish
- Surprisingly popular! I made stencils for the kids to trace of various sea creatures like sharks, dolphins and turtles.

Indoor:

Tropical Word Search

- I made an easy word search for the kids to do, with no backwards words. The older kids and the parents enjoyed it, but it wasn't really an option for the pre-school age.

Memory Match-up

- The classic memory game with some tropical sea life pictures. It showed some of the kids how diverse the coral reefs are!

Sea Life Puzzles

- The kids had to try to solve all of the tropical puzzles on the table. I made these puzzles a little bit harder than last summer's, but the kids can do them! I was very surprised.

Mammal Matcher

- Pictures of various sea creatures and labels were scattered on the table, and the children had to name the animals. The older kids had the challenge of identifying them as mammals or not mammals.

Shell Lost and Found

- There were 6 shells in a clear box, and the children had to try to match the name of the organism to the shell

- A little tricky for some, but overall it went well.

Outdoor

Pollutant Knockout

- Same game as week 1, but always popular!

Theme Analysis:

This theme was popular with kids of all ages, because even little 3-year-olds could sit and look at shells, or do a puzzle or try to name the animals. We are in need of some more posters, as we only have 2, but the decorations are still nice. Try to diversify the games further, as I'm starting to notice a pattern of the types of activities we have each week.

Week 7: Out of the Blue

This week's theme was about pond ecology. I emphasized the importance of wetlands and ponds as ecosystems and how fragile those ecosystems can be.

Activities:

Crafts:

Duck Caller

- Very popular, but noisy! Kids made a duck caller out of a plastic cup and some string.
- If you don't mind noise, I highly recommend this craft! Kids loved it!

Build a Duck

- Always popular, but was overshadowed by the duck caller

Indoor:

Eye Spy

- Kids love this "Where's Waldo"-esque poster game. Good for all ages, and parents had fun too

Amphibian Facts

- True or false game about amphibians
- Popular, but tricky! Kids learned a lot with this game. Good for all ages, but someone had to read the cards out for younger kids

Fish Puzzles

- Puzzles are always great, and this one had the added bonus of being educational. The pictures were already titled, so they learned the different kinds of fish instead of guessing them.

Professor Noggin's Trivia Game

- Fun and tricky trivia game! More popular with older kids, but I knew that would happen.

Outdoor:

Frog Toss

- Same old bean bag toss. Not very educational, but fun for all ages. I even caught some city workers playing on their break!

Scavenger Hunt in a Bucket

- Kids had to try to identify the creatures that were in the bucket. Fun for everyone!

Pin the Fish on the Heron

- The classic birthday game with a wetland twist! Not very educational, unless they didn't know that herons eat fish. Still fun, though.

Theme Analysis:

There are many resources for this theme and lots of activities too! It is easy to cycle through the activities and games so that it is not the same each year. I found some great coloring sheets of water fowl and some excellent work sheets after cleaning out the back area, so be sure to make use of them next year!

Notes for Next Year:

I noticed that the biodiversity in the sturgeon (and other locations) wasn't as great as last year, which I think may be because of how late in the summer I collected. Many larvae such as damselflies and dragonflies had already emerged, so maybe have this theme earlier in the summer, perhaps as one of the first weeks.

Week 8: Cold Climates

This theme is about the life that lives on the north and south poles.

Activities:

Crafts:

Paper Bag Penguin

- Kids made a penguin out of a paper bag stuffed with old newspaper and decorated it with construction paper.
- They loved it! Plus, there was no paint involved, so no drying time was needed.

Cotton Ball Bear

- Kids glued cotton balls to a coffee filter in the shape of a bear's head and cut it out.
- Really quick and easy, and young kids could do it too.

Indoor:

Arctic/ Antarctic Match

- This was a short, education matching game where the kids matched pictures of polar animals to the pole they lived at.

Frigid Facts

- True or false game about the poles
- Popular, but tricky! Kids learned a lot with this game. Good for all ages, but someone had to read the cards out for younger kids

Puzzles

- Puzzles are always great, and kids had to put the names on the puzzles. There were paragraphs on the back describing the animal and some neat facts about them.

Word Scrambles

- There were 15 scrambled words about the poles, and a word bank on the wall. This was a lot easier than other word unscrambling games, so even some young kids were able to do it

Spot the Differences

- There was a poster on the wall with pictures of local animals and their polar counterparts. The kids had to find a few ways in which they were different and how it helped them.
- Tricky for young kids, but older kids got it right away.

Outdoor:

Home is Where the Nest is

- A bean bag toss based on the journey of penguins to their nesting grounds. Always popular!

Ice Fishing

- Kids had to try to catch the fish with their hook and identify the arctic species of fish they caught.

Theme Analysis:

Despite this being the first time this theme had been used, it was wildly popular! All of the games were educational and there were no games that were neglected over others! Parents learned a lot with their kids and everyone had a great time.

Notes for Next Year:

Consider adding another poster, although there's only room for one more. Perhaps a poster on the northern tundra ecosystem would be a good addition. Other than that, this week needs very little improvement. Supplementing the activities wouldn't hurt, but it isn't necessary.

Repairs and Improvements

- The door should be replaced when it is convenient to do so. Currently it has a metal brace on it from the break-in last year; it is stable, but neither welcoming nor aesthetically pleasing.
- One of the windows on the north side of the building no longer opens (the one nearest the west wall) so it should be adjusted. The other window on the north side of the building is loose and occasionally slams shut.
- The white tables could use a new coat of paint (beige would be nice). This is not a priority, but it would help the centre look a lot nicer.
- The plastic partitions are not very stable and they wobble frequently. If we could replace them with plywood, that would be better.
- The walls in the bathroom are scuffed, and even have some tears. There is a hole that was patched with gyprock, but not plastered. A new coat of paint and some plaster would solve the problem nicely.
- Better lighting in the southeast corner would help, now that it is tidy enough for usable storage. A small lamp should do, or perhaps just a new bulb in the light nearby.

- The exterior logs are in poor shape, even more so than last year. Recommend that the city replaces some of them.

Observations and Recommendations:

Ages of Participating Children:

The age of children participating seems to be getting lower and lower. 3-6 years of age seem to be the most common, although there are some that are younger and older. If this is a trend, I need to be careful to decrease the required reading for each activity and make my posters easier to read.

Games:

Certain types of games were always popular, and some were hit or miss. Any game where the children had an opportunity to throw something was an instant success. Bean bag tosses were popular, so I have made some more, although not with the boards. Another knock-down game would be welcomed. Competitive games were also popular, especially if there is a score attached to the victory. Having “high score boards” was a good way to encourage friendly competition while giving the solo kids goals to strive for.

Crafts:

Crafts must be in varying difficulties; for example, a three-year-old and an eleven-year-old must be able to do the craft without getting frustrated or bored. A good way to do this is by having fewer highly structured crafts, and having more crafts depending on creativity. Try to have at least two crafts per week so that the children have a choice. When choosing a craft, you must consider the size of supplies and the amount of cutting required. If there are small things that must be glued on or worse; small things that need to be cut out and glued on, you may want to choose another craft. Pom-poms will be all over the floor; just imagine what would happen with glitter. Maximize fun while minimizing the clean-up.

In previous years, I have been using old newspapers to cover the craft table, but this is really time-consuming. Try getting rolls of newsprint if it's not too expensive.

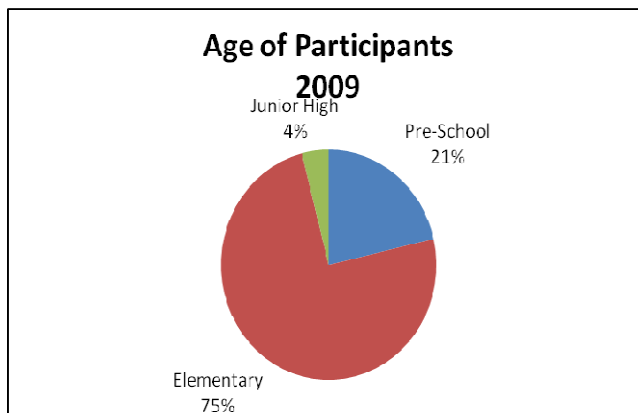
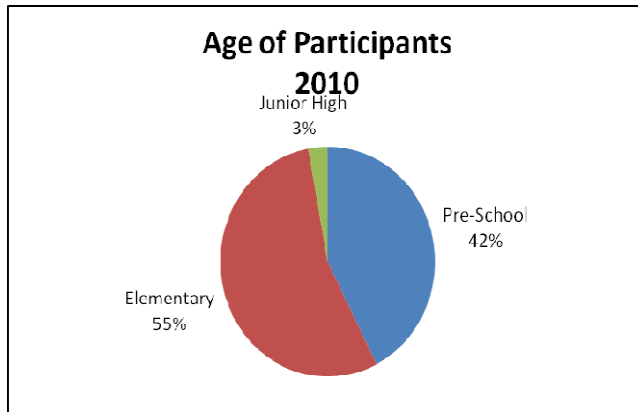
Other Activities:

Activities should be educational without reminding the children of school. Anything that requires writing is not recommended, but reading seems to be ok. Research may be necessary, but try to find information that is not very commonly known; this will peak the children's interest. I've noticed a pattern in the weekly activities: 2 crafts, 2 coloring sheets, usually some puzzles and memory game as well as a bean bag toss. Try to diversify the weeks a little bit! Memory games are easy to set up and fun, but not every week. Change things up with some trivia, eye spy and other games.

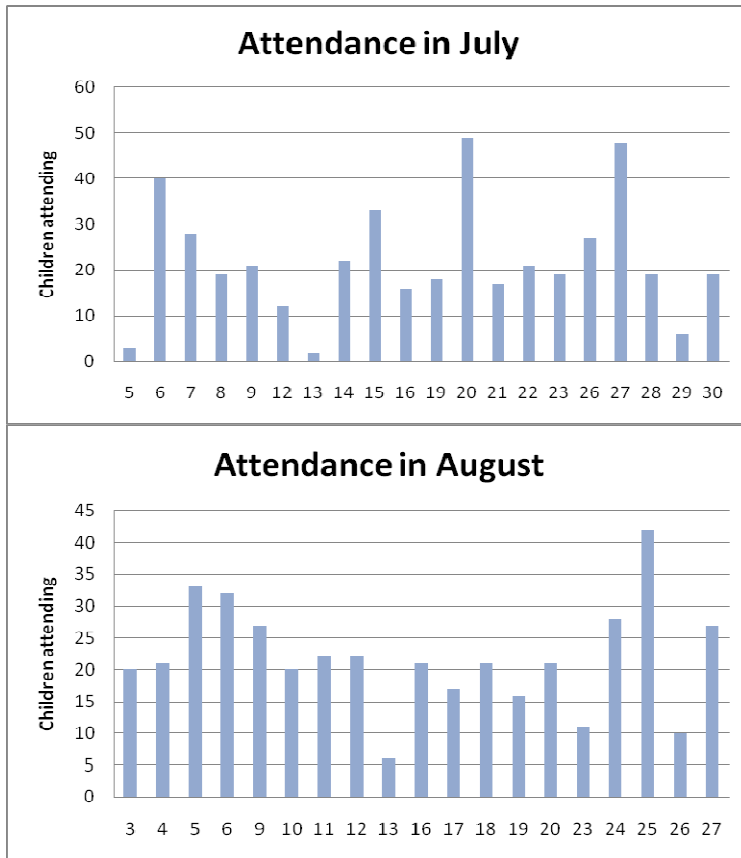
Statistics

Age of Participating Children

This year, the age groups of participating children were mainly pre-school and elementary-aged kids. Comparing this to last year's data, we can clearly see a marked increase in pre-school children.



Overview of Summer Attendance



Interestingly enough, the average number of children per day for both months was exactly 21.95. The total amount of patrons for the 8 weeks that we were open was 856, tallying up to an average of 107 a week. These numbers do not reflect how many signed up for the program, only the number of kids walking in the door and participating in activities. Many children decided to participate throughout the week rather than once a week.

Over all, this year's numbers are significantly higher than last year, where we only had 650 in a period of 7 weeks, averaging 93 children each week. I can't say for sure what the reason is for the increase, but many of the parents said they heard about the nature centre from a friend. Word of mouth seems to be the most effective advertising tool, followed closely by the section in the newspaper. I haven't heard of anyone hearing about the nature centre from the posters around the city, but not every parent shared where they first heard about it.

I was interested in seeing if there was correlation between the weather and attendance, but there was no statistically significant pattern. The only time weather seems to consistently effect attendance is when it is extreme. The three lowest days in July were the 5th, 13th and the 29th, and the weather was rainy and below 19 C for the first two mentioned and the 29th was 35 C. August 13th saw 6 children in the Centre and was cloudy at 18C, so there is little reason to believe that the weather is the main reason for lack of attendance.

I asked many parents what part of the city they come from to visit the Nature Centre, and my results were all over the map. We had many parents from Deer Ridge, Mission, Heritage Lakes and Grandin. We even had a few visitors from out of town or in Edmonton. Many of the regulars are close enough to bike or walk, but with our trail system in St. Albert, that can be from almost anywhere.

In conclusion, this year has been extremely successful, both in popularity of the activities and in attendance. My hope is that this is a trend, and that next year will be even more successful than last!