



More than 20,000 children, teachers and others have enjoyed the nature experience of Ontario's longest continuously running outdoor residential conservation education opportunity, Sylvan Conservation Program at Camp Sylvan. Part of the unique experience for students is sleeping overnight in covered chuckwagons (see photo above).

Student becomes teacher, returns to Camp Sylvan to create new generation of memories for his class

A teenaged boy stayed overnight in a pioneer-style, covered chuckwagon, in a frontier-style setting, at Camp Sylvan back when he was a Grade 8 student. The experience was so memorable he brought his own students back to that recreated pioneer outpost when he became a teacher.

"I had a good time at Camp Sylvan," remembers Mr. Dusko Cvetkovic, a Grade 6-7 teacher at Caradoc North Public School near Strathroy, Ontario. "It was one of my good memories from public school so I thought I would bring my own students here to share the same positive experience."

The Sylvan Conservation Program outdoor education experience was created in 1964 and is now Ontario's longest continually running overnight program of its kind.

More than 20,000 students, teachers, parents and visitors have taken part in the Camp Sylvan residential conservation education opportunity, which is delivered by the Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority (ABCA).

The camp is owned by Scouts Canada and is located southwest of Parkhill. The 350-acre pristine nature area offers diverse forests, ponds, streams, fields and meadows.

Students attending the Sylvan Conservation Program take active part in an ecology-based outdoor experience where they sleep overnight in chuckwagons and learn how to build covered shelters out of natural sources and to filter water. They play and eat together and they attend educational programs on topics such as water quality, orienteering, forest conditions and the positive roles of trees and survival activities.



Teacher Dusko Cvetkovic, who had gone to Camp Sylvan in Grade 8 and returned as a teacher with his students, oversees shelter building.



Grade 6 student Alexis de Laronde peers out of her covered wagon after staying overnight at Camp Sylvan.

ABCA Conservation Education Specialist Julie Hicks is a teacher who attended Camp Sylvan in Grade 8 and liked it so much she volunteered there right from high school through university and now runs the program.

"Learning in an outdoor environment gives students the opportunity to make connections with nature and experience lessons first-hand through the use of props, demonstrations, hands-on and interpersonal activities," she said. "These connections encourage lifelong learning and respect for nature and the environment."

Some of Cvetkovic's class visiting Camp Sylvan this year had never gone camping before, he said. Camp Sylvan doesn't just have academic value, he said. "It's the life lessons they learn that are most important."

Some of those life lessons include putting your sleeping bag away and cleaning up the camp - and lots of students said that was their least favourite



part of the Sylvan experience. Students interviewed at Sylvan recently rated the 'Go Wild' survival program as one of their favourite activities.

"The best part was the survival game, you got to run a lot," said Jaiden Clark-McKnight, a Grade 6 student who also took an active interest in a water filtering exercise.

Former ABCA Conservation Education Specialist Matt Redmond, now a teacher, said spending days and nights immersed in the environment provides children with a sense of connection beyond what single-day field trips can provide. Camp Sylvan's impact on children and adults

has been nothing short of incredible, according to Redmond. "For some it has changed the way they look at a snake, bird, tree or stream," he said. "For some it has changed the way they relate to their peers and teachers and for others it has literally been a turning point in their lives."

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In photo at left, Denise Biega, Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority Conservation Technician, and student leader Rachel Mungar, supervise students. Above, pioneer-style Frontier House at Camp Sylvan.

SYLVAN CONSERVATION @ **CAMP SYLVAN**

ONTARIO'S LONGEST-RUNNING OVERNIGHT OUTDOOR ED CONSERVATION PROGRAM

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Ontario's longest continually running residential outdoor conservation program is going strong and students still learn about their natural surroundings, sleep overnight in covered wagons and learn the value of hard work.

Rachel Mungar was an 18-year-old Grade 12 student at South Huron District High School last academic year. She served as a Junior Leader at Camp Sylvan. She remembers coming to Camp Sylvan as a Grade 7 student.

"It was fun," she recalled. "We played games and had a good time and got to know some stuff about nature and it was a good chance to get outside."

The teacher who returned with his students wasn't the only adult who remembers Camp Sylvan days. The current General Manager and Secretary Treasurer of the ABCA, Tom Prout, attended the camp as a child many decades ago. In fact, the experience led him to pursue conservation as a career path.

"After one trip to Camp Sylvan my career path was set," Prout remembers. His Grade 8 yearbook even lists him as 'most likely to become manager of the conservation authority.'

Scouting groups and non-profit, youth-oriented groups regularly enjoy camping at various locations at Camp Sylvan on weekends. The Conservation School uses the Frontierland site during the week. (For information on the camp facility you can visit online at: swoscouts.on.ca/campbookings1/1sylvan/SylvanCampPage/). The Thomas Tract and Ausable Gorge are located on the west side of Camp Sylvan and this is one of only two designated Natural Heritage sites in Lambton County.

The Carolinian forest that is an important natural feature distinctive to this part of Ontario is present at the Sylvan site. Scouts Canada has recently worked with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) to plant prairie grass on the Thomas



Student Jaiden Clark-McKnight filters water as one of the educational activities in Sylvan Conservation Program.



Lauren Bourke tries out shelter she and her classmates built.

Tract uplands. This will be developed during the next two years with nature trails through the grass.

Many outdoor education programs have been cut or scaled back because of funding constraints but the Sylvan Conservation Program at Camp Sylvan remains strong because teachers who have experienced its benefits make a point of working tirelessly to give the Sylvan experience to their students. Businesses and individuals are encouraged to sponsor a class at Camp Sylvan. For information on how to bring this unique outdoor educational experience to a new generation of young people, contact Julie Hicks at 519-235-2610 or toll-free 1-888-286-2610.



Student Kevin Lutowicz holds tinder for a campfire.

For more information on the Sylvan Conservation Program visit abca.on.ca