

Fresh Lens

With the Young Reporters for the Environment contest, learning is just part of the story.

MYMOON BHUIYAN is an award-winning journalist and environmental activist, and has not yet finished high school. Last year, he took first place in his age category in the Young Reporters for the Environment contest.

The Young Reporters for the Environment (YRE) program, hosted by Environmental Defence, inspires future journalists and change makers like Bhuiyan to try to solve today's pressing environmental issues. Students from 11 to 18 years old respond to each year's theme by entering an article, video or photo. Winners have their pieces published (this year's winners will be found here in Alternatives Journal) and then move onto the international YRE competition, which includes participants from over 30 countries around the world.

"Our blatant disregard for our planet's well-being will make us look suicidal," says Bhuiyan in his entry, which was an animated video exploring the negative effects of plastic pollution. Not only did Bhuiyan win first place in the 15 to 18 age group in Canada, but his hard work and passion also lead him to win third place at the international level.

Sarah Goodstadt won first place in the Canadian 11 to 14 age group, and second internationally for her article, "Now You See It, Now You Don't: Plastic Pollution Near and Far." She writes in her article: "I sit at the kitchen table on a quiet Sunday afternoon watching my sister fiddle with a Kinder Egg Surprise. A few months ago, I would have wondered what surprise was waiting to be discovered. Today, I wonder less about that surprise and more about the part that little egg here in my house plays in the worldwide plastic pollution problem."

Goodstadt took the initiative to investigate this issue and surveyed a number of staff in her school. She found



COURTESY OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENCE

The winning photo in the age 15 to 18 category of the 2016 Young Reporters for the Environment contest was submitted by Pranav Agnihotri, Sarvan Gill and Dryden Wiebe from Seaquam Secondary School in Delta, British Columbia.

that everyone was able to identify plastic pollution in his or her community. She also explored the implications of The Great Pacific Garbage Patch and how it is connected to each and every one of us.

"Whether it's properly disposing of plastic waste, using less or using none at all, we can all play a part in reducing plastic pollution in our communities and in our oceans," she writes. "We all share

this world and responsibility for its future. I now know: Every Kinder Egg counts."

Teachers collectively responded that the project taught invaluable skills in storytelling, inspired action and allowed the students to learn various journalistic skills, such as being able to organize and analyze data they had collected themselves.

What may be most important, however, is the fact that it "blend[s]

theory and action" as Michael Iachetta, a teacher from Seaquam Secondary School in Delta, BC, put it. By participating in a contest such as YRE, students are able to take what they learned in the classroom and apply it creatively to a real world issue, while at the same time getting to speak their minds and have their voices heard.

Even if students don't follow the journalistic path, they will have learned something new, practiced a skill, and finish, knowing they made a small difference.

YRE Canada runs this contest to help create the next generation of environmental leaders. Jen Mayville, communications manager at Environmental Defence, says that by investigating environmental issues, participants can share what they've learned.

Bhuiyan's experience shows their approach is working: "Before [making] the video, though I was concerned about the state of the environment, I wasn't as aware of the vast complexity and quickly worsening state," he says.

After finishing his video, Bhuiyan took it upon himself to become more involved in environmental advocacy.

"[My school's] Eco Club is also one of the biggest changes in my life," he says. "I met students from the Scarborough Academy of Technological, Environmental and Computer Education who cared about the environment as much as I did. It inspired me to do my best to change the environment situation."

"When I am asked what I took away from YRE," says Bhuiyan, "I say I took away hope, initiative and a new sense of purpose." **EN**

Veronika Szostak is a student in the School of Environment and Resource Studies at uWaterloo and an intern at AJ.

Your work could be featured in AJ's pages! You still have time to enter this year's YRE Canada contest, and winners will be featured in our magazine or our website. The deadline is March 17, 2017. Learn more about the contest at environmentaldefence.ca/yre-student.



ONTARIO ECOSCHOOLS

Young Sprouts

K to 12 students are leading the way to EcoSchool Certification.

IN THE HEART of Toronto, the Ontario EcoSchool's staff of 10 is busy working behind the scenes to shift the K-12 education sector towards a sustainable future. Executive Director, Elanor Waslander is working long hours these days.

Ontario EcoSchools is an environmental education and certification program working with schools and school boards across the province. Through their mission of "nurturing environmental leaders, reducing the ecological impact of schools and building environmentally responsible school communities," Ontario EcoSchools has created and supported the growth of ecological

literacy (understanding the value of ecosystems for the well-being of the planet) across Ontario for the last 14 years.

The main mechanism in achieving their mission is the EcoSchool certification program. By applying for certification, schools embark on a journey in which they develop a robust environmental program and are supported and recognized for their learning and actions throughout the year.

Since Waslander first started with the organization in 2008, she has seen it grow from 541 schools certified to 1,720 schools last year, representing 55 school boards and 35 percent of all the

schools in the province. The program continues to be the only free voluntary certification program in Ontario.

How it works

Every year, schools can apply for certification through Ontario EcoSchools based on a framework that emphasizes student leadership. The program encourages and assesses achievement in six key areas: teamwork and leadership, energy conservation, waste minimization, school ground greening, curriculum, and environmental stewardship. Through achievements in the six sections of the program, schools can be certified as bronze, silver, gold or platinum.

These program sections serve as a framework for participating schools and their EcoTeams to identify areas of action they want to implement over the course of the year. EcoTeams are groups of students who, with support from teachers, principals and parents, lead their school in the certification process. Ontario EcoSchools offers workshops, webinars and conferences to support EcoTeams with resources and training. This equips team members with the tools to guide them through certification, and it develops their leadership skills.

Sarah Flisikowski was an active member of her elementary and high school EcoTeams. Now in her third year at Queen's University, she serves as her school's co-chair for the Committee for the Environment. "The program has so many rewards and I am so thankful to have had the opportunity to participate for as long as I did," she says. "The relationships I built and experiences I had made for strong ties to my schools."

Between 2014 and 2015, Ontario EcoSchools engaged 882,000 students, certified 1765 schools and trained 886 educators.

Elizabeth Bernacki, a teacher from Pierre Elliot Trudeau Public School, found that the workshop connected her with others who share her views on climate change and love for the environment. "I also became more aware of the fact that my school was already doing so many wonderful things to help the Earth." She says, "Now I am excited to build on our



HWCDSB students enjoy time in nature as part of their EcoSchools program.

Previous page: Platinum EcoSchool St Marguerite Bourgeoys in Kingston, Ontario, has an active EcoTeam. It's where Queen's University student Sarah Flisikowski began developing her environmental leadership skills. [Tree and paper facts are not verified.]

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efforts as a school and get recognized with certification in April."

The Ontario EcoSchools program empowers individual youth and provides opportunities to develop each one's leadership skills. On a larger scale, the program has already reached over 865,000 Ontario students from kindergarten to grade 12 by linking curriculum with ecological practices and effectively enhancing ecological literacy.

"Ontario's curriculum doesn't include too much about sustainability, and I know that through EcoSchools I received a very comprehensive lesson on what it means to be sustainable," says Flisikowski. For example, EcoSchools links their program to the data management and probability strands of mathematics through data collection and assessing daily sustainability practices. By collecting data, analyzing results and implementing action plans, students witness firsthand how change can happen over the school year.

In 2014-15, ecoteams provided 7,631 environmental lessons to accompany the regular curriculum – from arts to maths. They have also ignited 4452 school-wide environmental awareness campaigns.

The impacts of the EcoSchool program go beyond school grounds. Flisikowski says her knowledge and development of ecological literacy transferred to her home, where family was not as well-versed on methods of environmental sustainability. Inspired students in participating schools share their learnings with family and friends, enhancing the awareness of the community around local and global environmental issues.

"I hope that my involvement has made a difference in the community at various points," says Flisikowski. "Food

harvested from our high school garden during the summer was donated to a local soup kitchen, and our school yard and neighbourhood clean-ups directly impacted the community as our efforts improved the cleanliness and appearance of our shared living space."

Another success was the first annual Ontario EcoSchools Youth EcoSummit held in April 2016. The event was attended by over 100 eager EcoTeam students at the Kortright Centre for Conservation in Woodbridge, in the GTA. Students were inspired by a keynote from the Ontario Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Glen Murray.

World Wildlife Fund and Environmental Defence, among other organizations, led interactive workshops. From investigating the ecological impacts of plastic to learning how to use social media to promote environmental initiatives, the workshops at the summit provided a holistic experience for students.

EcoTeams came out equipped with new resources and knowledge to amplify their environmental efforts within their schools and communities – not to mention motivation from their peers to continue their work.

What's next?

The Ontario EcoSchools theme for the 2016-2017 school year is Climate Leadership, with an overarching goal of building awareness about the many climate leadership opportunities available to students.

In January, February and March, the program will partner with various NGOs to present four Get Inspired webinars that will provide different angles on climate change. Open to all schools and the general public, the webinars are a chance for youth to hear from leaders in the field on topics from food issues to

finding a green career.

Ontario EcoSchools also aims to expand its online Energy Dashboard program, which allows schools to measure energy use in real-time. "Part of being able to take action for the environment is really figuring out what the impact is," says Waslander.

With the dashboard displays, students will be able to view data on their school's energy usage in order to help students, especially at the high school level, see if their campaigns have made an impact and identify the areas where they can make improvements.

The organization is also working towards building a network for participating schools to connect with local environmental organizations. These organizations will provide schools with the services and expertise they need to gain certification.

With a strategic goal of certifying 50 percent of all the province's schools by 2018, Ontario EcoSchools is keen to expand their reach to more schools, school boards and community partners. Until then, Elanor Waslander will continue to work tirelessly connecting and communicating with future environmental leaders.

Through the continued guidance of Ontario EcoSchools, the province can rest, knowing the future of the environment lies in the capable hands. **EW**

Eunize Lao is a fourth year Environment and Business student at the University of Waterloo. She was a former AJ Editorial Intern and continues to share her love for environmental journalism as a volunteer.

Interested in creating an EcoTeam in your school? Learn more about their certification process at ontarioecoschools.org