



CPRA ACPL

REACHING EACH AND EVERY ONE

Success Story

Bushkids immerses kindergarten students in Land-based learning

ONCE A WEEK FOR SIX WEEKS, KIRSTEN Sangris's junior kindergarten class had the chance to experience a different kind of classroom – one where they could get physically active while exploring the outdoors, and developing healthy relationships with themselves, each other, and the Land.

Among many incredible opportunities, these children ate food from the Land. They learned where the animal was harvested, the best season for harvesting, how it was harvested and how to show reciprocity and thank the animal and the Land for this gift. They established deep connections with Elders and knowledge holders.

They also explored the Land through sport – participating in Northern and Dene games, as well as hiking along nearby trails.



BUSHKIDS,
NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

Canada

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“The kids loved it,” says Sangris. “It was my first year of teaching, and it was so great to get the kids outdoors all day long. It was really enjoyable.”

Sangris’s class received this incredible opportunity through a partnership with the Northwest Territories Recreation and Parks Association (NWTRPA) and Bushkids, a Yellowknife-based on-the-Land learning initiative that provides training and mentorship for educators to bring their practice outdoors. This partnership was made possible thanks to the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association’s Reaching Each and Every One: A Community Sport Intervention program. This program, which was funded by Sport Canada’s Community Sport for All Initiative, seeks to remove barriers and increase sport participation rates for equity deserving groups across Canada.

Wendy Lahey, co-founder of Bushkids, says the program helps students – many of whom are Indigenous – overcome systemic barriers to on-the-Land learning which exposes them to Indigenous knowledge systems, languages, and cultures. Additionally, Bushkids gets them physically active on the Land and allows them to connect with it through sports, games, and recreation.

“We’re so grateful for this funding, because almost all of the students are Indigenous and the accessibility to Land for some of these children is minimal,” she explains. “I think that Land-based learning should be accessible to everybody, especially here where over 50 per cent of the population is Indigenous and Indigenous peoples have lived on these Lands for millennia. It should be deeply embedded in the public education system, and it’s not.”

Lahey adds that the program includes mentorships to teachers, like Sangris, to help them to feel comfortable implementing on-the-Land learning into their pedagogical approaches delivered in the public school system.



“What we really do is try to mentor educators in a mainstream system to trust the Land to lead learning. We also feel really strongly about how much more physical activity there is for children when they’re given space to play, and learn from the Land,” Lahey says.

At the Bushkids program, students are self directed, discovering the Land, and connecting with it, through sport and recreation – offering various outdoor activities like cooperative games, hiking, traditional Northern and Dene games, orienteering, and various bush skills such as wood chopping, whittling, fire making, cooking on a fire and harvesting of medicines, to name a few.

Sangris says she saw first-hand how the program positively impacted her students.

“I feel like the kids really benefited from it,” she says. “They developed things like independence, cooperation, finding their own voice, and a lot of social skills. Bushkids is a great program and it developed a love for the Land for all of my students. It’s been a really positive experience.”

Lahey says that the funding for this partnership, which greatly impacted Sangris and her students, was particularly meaningful to the Bushkids team.

“It’s validating to have this work funded, because the approach we’re taking is to learn how to use an ethical space of engagement where Indigenous peoples, knowledges and worldviews lead the learning inside a Euro-western education system. This is different and challenges the mainstream system,” she says. “It’s not right that there are not more opportunities for kids to be learning on the Land regularly, through all the seasons, where their families have lived for millennia. Bushkids gives kids access to holistic learning with lots of physical activity and connections to culture because children are learning and playing in their natural environment. It’s quite beautiful, and I feel really privileged to be a part of it.” 🍁