August 23rd, 2019

AN OPEN LETTER OF SUPPORT FOR CONSERVATION AUTHORITY STAFF

The recent order from Jeff Yurek, Minister of Environment, Conservation and Parks, has me wondering where environmental education programs will fall when the process of determining core vs. non-core mandate items is complete. The Sault Ste. Marie Regional Conservation Authority (SSMRCA) recently announced a cut to the Children’s Environmental Education program. Does this mean that each of the 35 other conservation authorities across the province are going to be forced to cut similar youth education programs deemed to fall outside of their core mandate? It is highly disappointing to consider the real possibility that such immensely valuable educational programs could be discontinued during the upcoming school year.

The Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario (COEO) is a non-profit, volunteer-based organization that promotes safe and high-quality outdoor education experiences for people of all ages and acts as a professional body for outdoor educators in the province of Ontario. On behalf of COEO, I would like to take this opportunity to recognize the work done by conservation authority staff to support youth education programs as of the utmost importance. I would also like to thank every employee for playing a key role in providing safe spaces and engaging programs aimed at getting more people outside and interacting with the natural world. COEO stands behind all professionals employed across the province to support outdoor education experiences.

Know that we at COEO have launched an advocacy campaign to spread the word about the value of maintaining current opportunities for outdoor education, reminding government representatives of the importance of access to outdoor experiences for all. The importance of active, hands-on experiences within natural environments cannot be understated as an integral part of any child’s development, especially for youth living in urban settings. We are continuing to make our voice heard through face-to-face meetings, writing letters, sharing of information and current research through our website and social media accounts. Please feel free to join our Facebook group and contribute your ideas to the conversation: <https://www.facebook.com/coeo.org/>.

As someone who works as an outdoor education program coordinator at a site owned by the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority (NPCA), I have had the pleasure of meeting and working alongside many passionate and knowledgeable NPCA employees. I hope this letter motivates you to share success stories from your local education programs and generate productive discussions with those aiming to make cuts, explaining why these programs must be considered as part of a core mandate.

Please don’t hesitate to let us at COEO know how we can best support you. Thanks for continuing to believe in the importance of the valuable work that you do.

Liz Kirk

COEO President

[www.coeo.org](http://www.coeo.org)