

School is in, but this class is out

By Peter Hope

On a recent cool fall day I found myself at Kejimikujik National Park tagging along at the back of a group, observing a class of eager Grade 4 students. This was an official day of school that involved some unique methods of learning during a program called Keji Quest.

The activities that day were unlike any normal school lesson. The class was greeted by an owl and later led through the woods by a red fox, at times aided by Park Interpreters.

The students had previously met Park Interpreter Colleen Anderson, and the barred owl, Mayor Hoot, leader of the woodland community, when the two Kejimikujik representatives visited their classroom. They had explained some of the basic ideas about food webs, forest cycles and a healthy ecosystem as found within Kejimikujik.

During their day in the park, the class was led through the woodlands by Sly Fox who challenged the students about how a natural

landscape could best be managed. But true to what they had been taught, class members kept commenting on the best ways to maintain nature and noted various observations in their special Keji Quest exercise books.

Later, two Park Interpreters each led half the class on a specific biological quest to observe and record what they found. The activities included several techniques designed to monitor park forest communities. Following the directions of the Interpreters, wooden tongue depressors were carefully placed at several levels in the soil. A year from now another class will dig up those sticks and note the rate of decomposition, thereby providing an indicator of the health of the soil. Next, slabs of wood were carefully lifted to see what could be found underneath each one. There were spiders and some molds but under one, to the delight of all, lay a tiny red-backed salamander. Those animals are very common in forests and this study is aimed at recording the number of salamanders observed every year at the exact same spot.

It all seemed so simple but these were more than just fun-filled exercises for youngsters. The methods used were those developed by scientists to monitor the health of Kejimikujik's forests and of other parklands across Canada. So, while scientists have many such monitoring plots scattered throughout the park, the students were actually participating in those studies by gathering similar data on the areas they visited.

At the end of the day I was chilled by the cold, but not the students who were too involved to note the temperature. I was amazed by the keen perception of these youngsters. There was something comforting in knowing that this younger generation knows from first-hand experience key details about our natural world. I like what that suggests for the future of our environment here in western Nova Scotia.

Many Grade 4 classes have joined in this special on-going program during this, the first fall that it has been offered. Park staff calculate that 19 classes, totaling 450 students from Queens,



Park Interpreter with school group on Keji Quest program. Submitted

Annapolis, Lunenburg and Digby counties, have participated. Teachers felt the methods achieved effortless learning of portions of their curriculum. The students felt

they were actually doing real work. Both their teachers and the Park Interpreters shared smiles all around.

It think that on this day, when the class was out, a lot

of valuable lessons were learned during those school hours.

Peter Hope is a naturalist and writer.