



Strategic Plan 2019–2024





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Sleeping in the Forest

From *Twelve Moons* © by Mary Oliver

I thought the earth remembered me,
she took me back so tenderly,
arranging her dark skirts, her pockets
full of lichens and seeds.

I slept as never before, a stone on the river bed,
nothing between me and the white fire of the stars
but my thoughts, and they floated light as moths
among the branches of the perfect trees.

All night I heard the small kingdoms
breathing around me, the insects,
and the birds who do their work in the darkness.

All night I rose and fell, as if in water,
grappling with a luminous doom. By morning
I had vanished at least a dozen times
into something better.

Executive Summary

At the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada (CNAC), we strive to give as many children as possible the gift of connecting with nature through outdoor play.

As a direct result of our work, more children climb trees and get to know where grasshoppers live. More educators feel confident in opening their classroom doors to support a meaningful connection with the land.

We've reached 20,000 children and families each year for the past three years. That means 60,000+ muddy boots in parks, cities, meadows, and mud puddles!

We want to continue using our unique voice and expertise to promote this type of change. To that end, we've worked with our staff, board and partners to create this five-year strategic plan—our organizational trail map.

Within these pages, you'll read about what drives our work, learn about our pivoting role in the sector, and uncover areas we'd like to 'play in' over time. This plan sets out the clear ways in which we'll achieve widespread impact across Canada.

One of the most notable outcomes of this past year's collaborative process is our decision to pivot from providing training to becoming a thought leader and movement builder.

That means we're going to focus more on serving the sector—our ecosystem—as it promotes a reciprocal relationship between Canadian children and the land. We'll do that in five key ways:

1. **Scale up**
2. **Scale out**
3. **Enable leadership**
4. **Engage in movement building and thought leadership**
5. **Foster governance and organizational sustainability**

You can read more about each of those five areas in this plan.

The process of reinventing ourselves will help CNAC better fulfill our purpose. It's a path we undertake with clear eyes, joyful hearts, and fierce ambition to achieve our vision and mission.

We'll listen, learn, and adapt to what emerges in the next five years so we can transform how we serve the greater movement to connect children to nature.

We invite you to learn alongside us as we get more children in muddy boots, outside.



More Children in Muddy Boots, Outside

Our Vision, Mission, and Values

We're better people—better versions of ourselves—when we're free to roam, be still, explore, and play on the land. With that in mind, here's a reminder of the foundational place from which we operate.



Vision

More children in muddy boots outside.

Mission

All children will thrive through playing and learning in forests, parks, meadows, and mud puddles.

Values

These are the guiding principles in everything we do:

Integrity

Our values are more than words. They're reflected in our thinking, decision making, actions, governance model, internal processes, and our content and delivery models in projects and programs.

Collaboration

We reflect the complexity and diversity of our ecosystem through collective efforts. We need many hearts and minds to achieve the change we seek in the world.

Trust

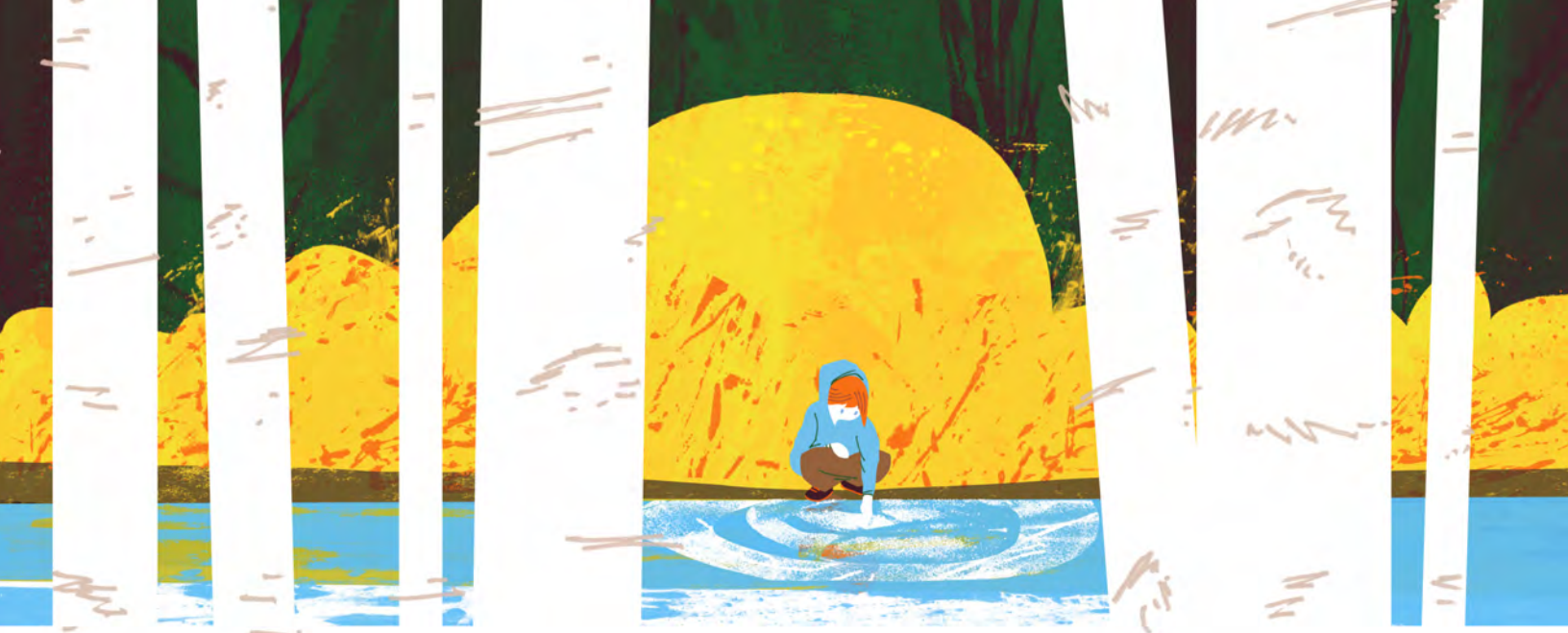
As a learning organization, we are curious, ask difficult questions, and strive to create spaces where risks, mistakes, and vulnerability are welcome. We challenge assumptions and worldviews, express gratitude, respect boundaries, and don't speak on behalf of others.

Freedom

In outdoor play, children experience a sense of freedom through which meaningful relationships and transformative learning can grow. We cultivate this same freedom within our organization so it can inspire learning, valuable relationships, and innovative work.

Equality

Power and privilege are real. Though inequalities persist, we believe that all children have an equal right to play and learn in nature. Different approaches and resources can break down barriers and ensure that all children have access to nature. We believe that displacement and a disconnection from nature was used deliberately to colonize and oppress people in Canada.



Our Impact in Recent Years

Although access to outdoor play is a relatively new issue, we see promising signs that this can change. There is a slow, grassroots movement growing at all levels of Canada's formal education systems. And the results are beautiful. More children are climbing trees, turning over stones, and discovering tadpoles in ponds.

At CNAC, our focus remains on systems-level change and the need for powerful collaboration. We're clear about how to reverse the trends we see in children (0-12 years old), and we're having a real effect.

Our Direct Impact

- **60,000** Children and families reached in 2016-2018
- **1500+** Educators and early childhood educators trained
- **300** Educators about to complete training
- Almost **1,000** forest and nature school programs running across Canada
- **52,410** More children will play and learn outdoors by 2021

Our Partners

We've invested in reciprocal, powerful partnerships that have helped us increase children's access to the outdoors and mainstream outdoor play. Collaboration has been, and will continue to be, instrumental in our approach to systems change.



Our Organization

- Grew from 2 to 35 staff
- Developed a strong governing Board of Directors
- Implemented a new financial model

Our work is very much in demand. Without advertisement, CNAC practitioner programs fill up quickly and most have substantial waiting lists. Despite this exceptional level of engagement, we've only reached 0.0005% of educators and early childhood educators across Canada. There are many children across Canada who have never touched moss, stepped into the forest, felt the rain on their cheeks, popped sap bubbles, seen an owl, or even turned over a rock. We feel compelled to work hard on behalf of those children.

An Important Pivot



The problem is a lack of equitable access to unstructured outdoor play, which would promote child development and wellbeing.

Context

Children are not playing freely outdoors; the barriers are great and they're having a significant impact on children between the ages of 0-12 years old. Children do not have equal opportunities for unstructured outdoor play, nor a meaningful connection with the land, regardless of their sociocultural background. This decline in outdoor play and a rise in the inequities around accessing outdoor play, is a relatively new issue. Research shows that significant challenges in child development and wellbeing are partly due to this lack of access to outdoor play.

Solution

There's a need for children to have ongoing and meaningful relationships on the land through outdoor play. It enhances childhood development and wellbeing through thoughtful, reflective, skilled, competent, inspired practitioners who hold these spaces for children.

CNAC's Focus

We're going to help break down the barriers to unstructured outdoor play and promote equitable access to nature for all Canadian children between the ages of 0-12 years old.

Our Pivot

We took stock this year of where we can have the most impact through our unique voice and experiences. The result? CNAC is pivoting from being a training provider to becoming a thought leader and movement builder.

Intended Impact Statement

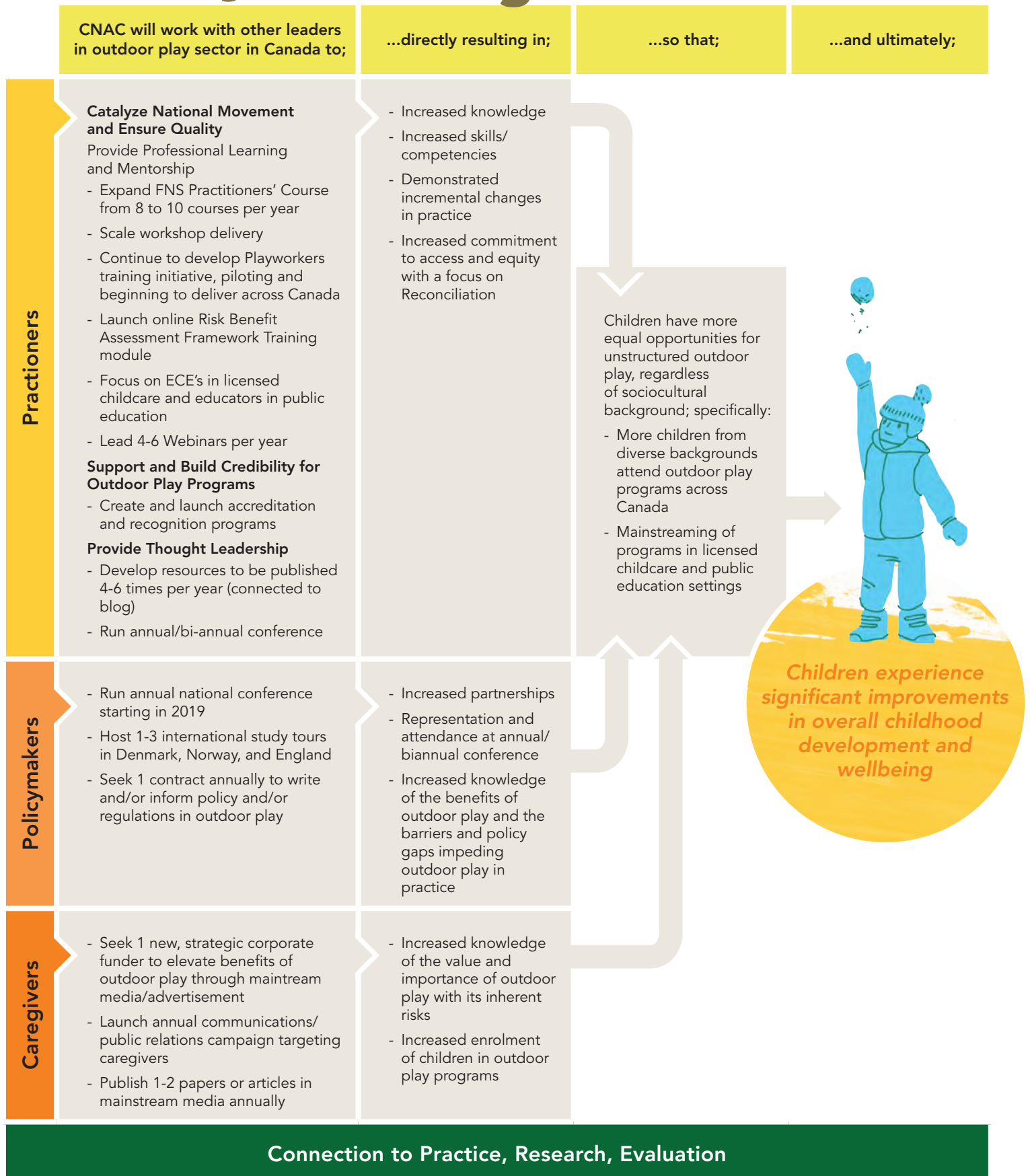
This is a beacon we can rally our resources around and use as a compass to guide our actions:

Children will experience significant improvements in overall childhood development and wellbeing through outdoor play.

To accomplish this objective, we'll focus our efforts in the next five years on four focused target audiences:

- Practitioners: We'll reach early childhood educators, primary school educators, and practitioners in informal, public settings such as parks.
- Policy makers and caregivers: They help break down barriers and open the doors to children's outdoor play.
- Supporters: These include funders and partners who are aligned with our purpose.

Theory of Change



Where We'll Play

CNAC has laid a solid foundation for working in the areas below. We're going to refocus our efforts in the next five years to delve deeper into each one and further our mission:

1. Scale Up

What we imagine:

Facilitators and practitioners with deepened connections and a broad knowledge base on outdoor play and outdoor, play-based learning.

The burning issue we're addressing:

A need for more resources, tools, mentorship and relationships among facilitators and practitioners through Forest School Canada and our broader outdoor play work.

Our approach:

- Deepen connections, understanding and opportunities for co-creation with Indigenous peoples in Canada
- Enhance and streamline processes and supports for CNAC facilitators to effectively scale
- Hold space for emerging communities of practice
- Support deepened learning about quality practices
- Use experiences that enhance belonging and connect a living network

How we'll make it happen:

- Host the National Outdoor Play Summit
- Hold an inspiring and playful annual full-staff meeting with our national facilitation team
- Develop resources
- Create an accreditation model
- Establish mentorship programs
- Engage communities of practice and create knowledge-sharing moments
- Host webinars and online connections
- Drive national thought leadership

2. Scale Out

What we imagine:

Bountiful numbers of children from diverse communities playing in nature through the Forest and Nature School approach, and inspired by engaging experiences from the practitioners who serve them.

The burning issue we're addressing:

A need to reach more early childhood educators and primary school educators so we can increase the number of people engaged in this movement and reach more children.

Our approach:

- Build on partnerships and learning with Indigenous practitioners and facilitators to shift our content, approach, and reach to align with our commitment to Truth and Reconciliation
- Build on partnerships and learning with Francophone partners and communities
- Leverage the power of co-creating and engaging with marginalized communities
- Use a clear problem statement with a strengths-based approach that resonates with and draws diverse communities to this issue
- Use network-related mechanisms to rally a web of relationships
- Promote great work happening in the ecosystem to reduce the duplication of efforts and leverage and amplify possibility
- Recognize and address power dynamics in the network
- Use policy advocacy to scale out
- Use feedback loops to move from knowledge sharing to learning and adapting

How we'll make it happen:

- Build and formalize our network
- Convene a national advisory group on the co-creation of a Land-Based Learning Course
- Develop academic partnerships to unbundle, streamline, and then scale our Forest and Nature School Practitioners course
- Develop and launch a licensing, hub model as our lever to scale
- Develop a quality assurance model for facilitating courses and workshops

3. Enable Leadership

What we imagine:

Frontline facilitators and practitioners who feel supported, nurtured, connected, and enabled to deliver quality experiences to children through nature-based play.

The burning issue we're addressing:

A lack of support in terms of cultivating facilitator and practitioner relationships with one another and in creating and maintaining the content they rely on.

Our approach:

- Create additional supports to help leaders in marginalized communities; create opportunities for many voices to be heard
- Promote a greater sense of belonging and connection to help bridge the geographical divide, attract talent, and elevate the quality of nature-immersion experiences
- Establish mechanisms that ensure that CNAC's theory and pedagogy trickles into how facilitators hold space with others
- Create professional learning that is practical and impactful
- Evaluate our content, programming, and impact to ensure there's a feedback loop into how we work
- Conduct and support research that helps us develop new content and products
- Use approaches that enable consistent quality experiences, even as we grow

How we'll make it happen:

- Develop systems, mechanisms, and tools that support people in our ecosystem
- Create an evaluation plan for all CNAC programs
- Conduct social research and development
- Create feedback loops
- Engage in deeper internal communications
- Implement organization-wide quality assurance measures
- Create ways and pilot new ways to connect across Canada



4. Engage in Movement Building and Thought Leadership

What we imagine:

CNAC as one player in a web of diverse, trusting partnerships—a living movement of people engaged in childhood development and wellbeing through unstructured outdoor play.

The burning issue we're addressing:

A need to mainstream the movement and build its credibility, and to increase awareness of how important outdoor play is in children's development and well-being.

Our approach:

- Share power and make decisions to help others emerge as leaders in this movement
- Develop trust among partners so we can collaborate deeply
- Recognize key partners in this movement and co-craft messages with them
- Focus on influential distribution channels for our message that include industry partners
- Conduct thought leadership and movement building in a way that models nature immersion and unstructured play

How we'll make it happen:

- Build a Canadian Centre/Institute for Outdoor Play with our partners
- Create and launch a strategic communications plan
- Develop and broker new diverse partnerships, retain and strengthen existing partnerships
- Develop memorable messaging that results in impact
- Become a trusted source in our larger ecosystem to move and inspire people with innovative ideas, turn ideas into reality, and "know and show" how to replicate successful approaches
- Implement a customer relationship management (CRM) system

5. Foster Governance and Organizational Sustainability

What we imagine:

An organization that is mission-driven and purpose-led, backed up and supported by a strong and resilient governance and financial model that's ready to meet growing demands.

The burning issue we're addressing

A need for an organizational foundation that is focused, strong and nimble to help us deliver on our new intended impact statement.

Our approach:

- Maintain financial models that reflect our commitment to access and equity
- Be a place of deep development and transformation for our people
- Offer our team processes through which they can think deeply about how they work together to achieve their purpose

How we'll make it happen

- Develop a board trail map that leads us toward 'Accreditation' with Imagine Canada's Standards Program
- Host an inspiring and playful annual, face-to-face board retreat
- Expand upon our revenue-generating model to support resilience
- Launch an individual giving campaign
- Seek 3-5 new funders aligned with our purpose
- Improve the systems and infrastructure that will strengthen and align our work as we scale
- Develop progressive human resource processes that will attract and retain top talent that align with CNAC's mission
- Cultivate a motivated, joyful, and creative organizational culture

Onward !

At the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada, during our capacity-building process and then our pivot over the last year, we've had the sense of being on a ridge together, contemplating where we've been and what we've learned. It's helped us plot our course for the coming years.

Now is the right time to morph and prepare for the next leg of our journey—one in which we'll move closer to an exceptional future for all Canadian children.

Having done ground-breaking work in delivering training, we know we're now ready and well-poised to support our sector on a larger scale. We understand its needs, challenges, and assets.

In the next five years, our organization will take on a new shape, and we're excited to see how that unfolds. Our objectives are clear, and we're confident that with this strategic plan, we'll conduct valuable work in the right areas, with the right people.

As we set out together, we extend our utmost gratitude to every child, parent, practitioner, facilitator, staff member and board director involved in this important and abiding work. It's an honour to move forward with you.





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