

# About the Community Consultation Project

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## SPEAKERS

Cherlene, Petra, Marc

- M** Marc 00:03  
One of the other beneficiaries to this project is the Land itself. Because what we are trying to do in Forest School is nurture that sense of reciprocal relationship with the land, both with the children as well as the adults who are part of those children's lives.
- C** Cherlene 00:31  
Hi everyone, you're listening to the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada podcast. I'm one of your hosts, Cherlene Eloria, and I'm the Communications Coordinator for CNAC. If you'd like to learn more about what we do, please check out our website at [www.childnature.ca](http://www.childnature.ca). I'm joined today by two of my colleagues, Petra Eperjesi and Mark St. Dennis from the Forest School Canada team. In this episode, we will be talking all about one of CNAC's exciting new initiatives: the Community Consultation Project. In this project, which is generously supported by the Lawson Foundation, we aim to engage with the community of forest and nature school practitioners in Canada. Keep on listening to learn more. Hi Petra. Hi Mark. Thank you so much for joining me today on the podcast. How are you both doing?
- P** Petra 01:19

Good. Nice to be with you, Cherlene.

**M** Marc 01:21  
I'm fantastic. Thanks.

**C** Cherlene 01:24  
Well, thank you so much for joining for this topic, I think we have a lot to talk about. And while we have talked about the Community Consultation Project on our social media, we thought this might be a good episode to do to really get into the details of what CNAC is trying to do with this multi-year project. And so actually, before we start, I am wondering if you both could introduce yourselves for the folks at home who maybe don't know who you are, or haven't encountered you yet. Petra, let's start with you.

**P** Petra 01:54  
Sure. Okay. So, I'm the manager of Forest School Canada. And Forest School Canada is an educational program, a professional learning program of the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada. I've been with the organization for five or six years, I can't remember. And my pathway into this work was actually, I was a classroom teacher and then an outdoor classroom teacher. So that that was really my pathway into the work. And now I'm more behind the scenes, behind a computer less directly with children, but I do have three little ones of my own. And we all do better outside. So that's where we are pretty regularly.

**C** Cherlene 02:45  
Thank you, Petra. Mark, how about you tell us a bit about yourself too.

**M** Marc 02:48  
Hey everyone. My name is Marc St. Dennis. I am a father, a husband, an explorer. I'm living on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe. I am Métis on my father's side and French on my mother's side. My role at the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada is Project Lead. So I am working on the Community Consultation Project, which is what we are talking about today. My pathway to this position was a bit of a roundabout one. But I actually started volunteering for a while at a forest school in Ottawa and that's how I learned about CNAC. And so when I saw that there was an opening for this position I put my application in and here I am. And it's been a really super exciting transition. I've been

here for about a year now. So not quite as long as Petra, but feeling at home.

C

Cherlene 03:49

Thank you so much, Mark. Yeah, so let's get into it. I wrote down the full project title, and I'm wondering if you could explain it to me. So what we refer to internally and on our social media as the Community Consultation Project, is formally known as, wait for it: Solidifying the Pan-Canadian Infrastructure for Forest and Nature School Training to Support High Quality Practice as a Lever for Systems Change. Alright, who wants to take this one? What does that mean? What does systems change mean?

P

Petra 04:28

I can take a stab at this. Yeah, that's a doozy of a title. And I think we can break it down bit by bit. So "pan-canadian means", obviously, across the country and "infrastructure" is really the community of practice and our facilitation team. So we have been offering the Forest and Nature School Practitioners Course since 2012. Constantly adapting it and changing it to fit the Canadian context. And in 2017, we hired our first group of facilitators to help support the two people who were facilitating all the courses at that time. And so those folks have really become the infrastructure. They're the way that we support the forest and nature school movement in Canada. So that's what the pan- Canadian infrastructure is. And then, what's the next part Cherlene?

C

Cherlene 05:47

The "Pan-Canadian Infrastructure for Forest and Nature School Training to Support High Quality Practice." That's the next bit.

P

Petra 05:53

Yeah. Okay. So I think I spoke to the forest and nature school training as well. But the "quality practice" is the next piece, and then the "lever for systems change." And we've been getting great questions from the community about like, what is systems change anyways? So for me, I understand systems change here as we want outdoor play and learning and really high quality opportunities to play and learn outside to become an integral part of the existing early years and elementary education system. So that's what we mean by systems change. It's how do we mainstream forest in nature school? How do we have it meaningfully incorporated in existing systems without losing the heart of what makes forest and nature school so special? So this project, I think, maybe if we didn't call it the Community Consultation Project, we might call it, the "quality project", because it's

all about measuring quality, naming quality, ensuring quality, both internally at the Child and Nature Alliance for our programs. And then also with and for the sector. And we're doing that not in a come from on top kind of way to impose and say, 'This is what it means to do for school and if you're not doing it this way, then you're doing it wrong.' But actually to really meaningfully and in a really robust way, consult with practitioners all across the country, to define together what it means to be doing high quality forest and nature school in Canada. I could say more, but I think it'll probably come out in the next questions. And I'll stop there. Mark, would you add?

M

Marc 08:11

Yeah, maybe what I would add to that is a little bit of context about the forest and nature school movement in Canada. So in the last 10 years or so, it's been seen as a more viable option for childcare and for getting kids outside. But what's ended up happening is because Canada is such a vast geographical place, and there's so much different contexts depending on where you are - that could be just based on what the land looks like, how people interact with the land, but it could also be talking about provincial jurisdiction, and different laws and things that exist. So what we sort of see in the country in the last 10 years is that you have pockets of folks who have set up forest schools or nature schools, and sometimes they're called, you know, outdoor kindergartens, people have given them a whole bunch of different names. And it seems that a lot of people aren't necessarily talking about the same thing. Or perhaps they are doing a lot of things that are very similar and some things are quite unique. And so you have all these different people all across the country in different parts that are doing their own thing, based loosely on on some principles that they've learned from movements over in Europe. And so what we are trying to do now is say, let's have a conversation about what this looks like in the Canadian context. And let's together, as a community of folks who are passionate about bringing children outside to play and to learn, have a conversation about what a forest school in Canada looks like, feels like and sounds like that is of the highest quality possible. And this way we can support those conversations going forward with those policy bodies and those legislation bodies. But I think we'll also get into more more detail about what that can look like as we continue to talk. But the one thing to remember, that's very important about the context in Canada, is that we are on Indigenous Land. And Indigenous communities and peoples have been practicing learning from the land with their children since time immemorial. So while we do exist as an organization that is promoting outdoor play and learning, we do also have to recognize that our roots as an organization are colonial, and that we are not the first people to be doing something like this here on this land.

C

**Cherlene 11:03**

Thank you so much, Mark. Yeah, that that's a really, really important point. And I'm glad we emphasize that or you emphasized that right up at the top to really set the framing behind this conversation. Yeah, so I guess my question off the top of my head is: Do forest school communities in Canada want to mainstream? And if so, why are we the ones collecting this data?

P

**Petra 11:31**

Yeah, that's such a great question. Thanks for asking that, Cherlene. So, maybe I'll start with: do forest and nature school practitioners want to mainstream? That's such a good question. What you're asking me is like, "Why us and why now?" So why now? I'll sort of build on what Mark said, which is that, when I started in this work, approximately 10 or so years ago - and forgive me, everybody who has heard me tell this story so many times. But when I started in this work, 10 years ago, when I told people that I work in forest school or outdoor kindergarten people were like, "you work at a what?" But now, if I say, like, "Oh, I work in forest school, I'm involved with forest schools." Everybody knows what that is or seems to know what that is. But then as we start to talk about it, we realized quite quickly we're talking about different things. So do folks want to be mainstreamed? I think there's probably a range of answers about that. And we've heard from the community a range of responses and in the sort of pro column of, yes, we we would like to be incorporated in the existing publicly funded systems. We would like legislation that supports us. Folks are in that camp, largely because it would help with issues of access and equity. So right now, we know that forest and nature school programs in Canada are mainly fee based. Like families pay tuition for their children to attend, mostly part time, I would say. And so we know that that makes it very difficult for many families to access programs. So if the programs were more integrated into the public school system, or into funded or subsidized childcare situations, that would really open up access for a lot of people. So that's sort of one mark on the pro side. But certainly there are concerns and hesitations. I think that one of the things that attracts many folks to forest school, including myself, is the freedom of it. The freedom to respond to the children in front of you, to arrive at curriculum in a creative way, to the freedom to sort of manage our own time, the culture of our programs. And so there's a lot of worry, I think about losing that heart. And that's a big motivator for why we're doing this project as well. We're really not trying to dictate what forest and nature school means, but to really hear from the folks who are on the ground. So that we can draw out like what is common among us while preserving what's unique about each program based on the land that it's on, the communities that they work with. Yeah, so I think there's some tension there. There's pros and cons. Mark, would you build on that?

M

Marc 15:46

Yeah, thanks Petra. That's certainly what I've been hearing in conversation with the practitioners as well as our own facilitation team, is that there are definitely hopes for how quality indicators for forest school could benefit the sector. And at the same time, there's also concerns. Especially like, as you noted, people are wary of creating a system of check boxes. And so as we go forward in this project, that's actually part of the conversation we're having - about that direct question of "what are the pros to this sort of approach? And what are the cons?" And this is something that we want to co create as a community, including how the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada moves forward with this information. We are going to take the lead from the community of practice of educators and forest nature school practitioners who are doing this. Because that's why we exist as an organization: to support the sector in the work that they are doing on the ground. So that sort of answers your question, Cherlene, about why CNAC? Why are we the ones doing this collection of data? And I think it's because forest and nature school practitioners, they're busy. They're busy running their own programs and it's more than a full time job to do that. And they are on the ground with the kids, they're playing, they're getting muddy, and they're just having fun. But I think what we offer as an organization is the ability to hear from those folks, take that information, and be a bit of a thought leader and promote the forest and nature school method, practice, pedagogy - whatever you want to call it - to the wider community. And this could include having conversations with those folks who are now starting to become interested in forest school, but they're the ones that might want to start regulating it. And so I mean, those practitioners, they don't have the time or the energy to be leading those conversations. So, we are hoping that we can step in and fulfill that role on their behalf.

P

Petra 18:18

I would just build on that a touch and say Forest School Canada was founded because Marlene Power, the founder of Forest School Canada couldn't find outdoor childcare for her own children. So she decided to start one and then she couldn't find staff. So, the organization was founded to train educators in this approach. And we've reached a really critical mass of trained people or interested people - and trained not just trained by CNAC. But you know, trained by their life experiences, by their families, their communities, their culture. As Mark sort of referred to, there is increasing interest from regulating bodies and governments around what is this, you know, outdoor preschool or outdoor kindergarten or forest school? And usually the response is concern. And we understand that and actually, we really embrace that. And that's why we're also looking to create the quality indicators so that when policymakers and legislators come to a forest school and say, "well, this can't be safe or this can't be up to health and safety standards." We're ready to support that forest school to say, actually, "we've thought about that and here's

how we deal with it. Here are our risk assessments. Here are all of our policies and procedures." And we're in line together. We're all sort of coordinated with our approaches. So that we can stand united and advocate for ourselves so that we can be legislated in a supportive way, if that's ultimately what we find the community wants from CNAC is to move forward in that sort of advocacy role. So, the role of Forest School Canada, in terms of that, "Why us?" It's really changed. We've really heard over the years more and more that folks are looking for more of that kind of support. We've been a training body since our inception and that's really what we've invested in and focused on and grown. And at this point, folks are looking for more than training. They're looking for that kind of support and advocacy at the policy level. Because as Mark said, running a forest and nature school can be more than a full time job.

C

Cherlene 21:33

Yeah, so we touched on why we want to collect the data, but I'm hoping we could tease out a little bit more about who we're collecting it for. So from what you both said in the past couple of minutes, I could say we're collecting it for forest and nature school practitioners themselves, for us, for policymakers, but who else? Who might benefit from the collection of this type of data? And we'll talk a bit about what type of data we are collecting later on. But yeah, who are we doing this for?

M

Marc 22:06

Yeah, that's a great question as well, Cherlene. Thank you. I think my first thought is that children are the primary beneficiaries of the collection of this data. I mean, ultimately, that is what we all want, is for the children in our lives to thrive. And we believe based on research that's been done as well, that when children can be outside, on a regular basis, and when children are given the freedom and empowerment to choose how they are going to learn, and to take risks climate tree, just get muddy, have some fun, we know that they thrive. And so by doing this work, we are also taking a step towards that mainstreaming - that systems change where hopefully, this means down the road that more and more children in Canada can have access to these types of experiences, and hopefully have equitable access to these types of experiences. And so this project is part of that particular journey.

C

Cherlene 23:30

Yeah, I'm sort of thinking back to myself as a kid and how much I would have loved being in a forest school program. But if it wasn't introduced in my school, or if this pedagogy wasn't practiced in my school, which it wasn't, my parents probably wouldn't have thought

it was a legitimate way to learn. Coming from a different country and moving here, being outside was seen as dangerous. You should stay home, do your homework and not really go outside. So I kind of see for kids who grew up like myself, how being introduced to this type of play, this type of learning would only really happen if it was mainstreamed at an elementary school. Yeah, I just wanted to share that. Petra, did you have anything to add to what Mark said?

P

Petra 24:22

Oh, I just I was doing deep nods. When Mark said children, I wholeheartedly agree that children are first and foremost who benefits from this and then it's the adults who care for them. It's knowing when you sign your child up for a program or when you learn that your child's class is going to be doing forest school as part of their learning that year, it's either knowing what that means, both in terms of the learning, in terms of the health and safety considerations, the risk benefit analysis. Or being able to access more information about what that means. So it's children, it's their adults. Mark mentioned how much the research backs up the benefits of playing and learning outside. And there's research that it benefits the teachers, too. So yeah, there's potential for this project to benefit a lot of people from children through to their caregivers and their educators.

M

Marc 25:35

One of the other beneficiaries to this project is the land itself. Because what we are trying to do in forest school is nurture that sense of reciprocal relationship with the land, both with the children as well as the adults who are a part of those children's lives. So when we have more folks in the country who are engaged ethically with the land, and they're engaged in that reciprocal relationship, then the land itself also benefits. And you can actually see this. We've heard some stories from the practitioners when we were talking with them and one of the stories that stuck out for me was when I heard about a child at forest school, who, when they were first introduced, was just running amok and tearing things off trees and pulling the plants out. And then after a couple of weeks of regular attendance, the same child started to see the forest and the land in a different way, and was watching that the squirrels and the birds liked to rummage around the undergrowth looking for food. And so this particular child took some of their own granola, I think it was, and just left it on the ground for the animals to receive. It was a bit of an offering. These kids, when they start learning these things just through experience, they start taking it back to their peers. I have also heard stories of where the children start telling their parents how they're supposed to behave on the land. They tell them "hey, you can't do that. That's not a good thing. This is how you're supposed to do it." So it really benefits everybody in the long term when kids are outside, and they're learning to engage with the



land in a meaningful and reciprocal way.

C

Cherlene 27:46

Yeah, that's an awesome answer to this question. So who are we collecting this data for? I've heard the children, the adults who care for them and the land. I think maybe we should move into the specific goals of the project. We've been talking about the Community Consultation Project in broad terms, but how about we take a micro lens and talk about the specific goals or the activities of the project themselves? For the folks listening at home, you might have heard Mark or Petra referred to "quality indicators." So maybe let's start there. What are quality indicators? And what why do we need them?

M

Marc 28:26

I can take a stab at that. So I am not an evaluation expert. So my understanding of what a quality indicator is, is influenced by my own experiences. But what I've heard, because we have actually partnered with professional evaluators to help us with this project. It's Taylor Newberry Consulting. And the way that they have explained it to me is that a quality indicator is something that you can measure. So, for example, when we were looking at having conversations about relationship with land, with the forest nature school practitioners, one of the questions that we posed was, "How big does the space have to be? Is there like a certain size of land that is necessary for it to be called a forest and nature school? Does it have to have a certain amount of trees that you can consider it a forest? Or can you do it in an asphalt parking lot where you bring the pedagogy and the materials into the space? Do the children have to go to that same site? Or can they go somewhere else? How many times do they have to go to that same site? So it's things that you can actually observe and measure. And then what we look for is patterns from those conversations and themes that will arise. And then we can say, based on those, okay, we have some quality indicators here that all of these practitioners, these educators who are doing forest and nature school, are saying the same thing here, here and here. And they're saying that this is how you can measure that. And so from there, we can pull those quality indicators. And the whole point of this is that we can then create this kind of like spectrum of what a quality forest and nature school in Canada can look like. And so we don't envision this as a prescriptive thing. We're not saying like, everybody has to do every single one of these things, and they have to do it perfectly in order to be considered a forest and nature school. We're just looking at the common measurements that do arise, and saying that if a forest school is doing, you know, a certain number of these, or they're working on this particular measurement and they're trying to improve it, then we can say with confidence that this particular Forest School is, you know, quote, "a quality Forest School." Would you add anything, Petra?

P

Petra 31:13

Yeah, my mind sort of going in a number of different directions. So I'll try to be as clear as possible. I think I would emphasize that same piece that you're emphasizing, Mark, which is, I think that the term evaluation and measurement, maybe make some people's skin crawl, including mine, to be honest. And I think it's important to constantly reground ourselves in the "why." The idea of measurement - finding indicators that are concrete enough that we can measure is because it matters to us, right? We measure what's important to us. So we're trying to find out what's important to forest and nature school practitioners? What's important to the people doing this on the ground? What are the pieces that the community really wants to hold on to, to stay true to what they hold dear about the forest and nature school approach. So it's really not about policing who is and who isn't a forest school, but it's about giving voice or sort of bringing together the voices of the forest and nature school movement to say, this is what's important to us. This is how we define and describe ourselves. And you know, Mark and I have been talking so much about mainstreaming and integrating ourselves into existing systems. But what's also a possibility on the table, and something that we've heard from the community that was part of the reason why we started this project was also this idea of accreditation. Folks have looked to us and said, like, "Can we have an accreditation model?" So that we can just really stand strong on what it is we're doing. And then we can differentiate ourselves from what other folks are doing, which may be equally as valuable, but is different from what we're doing and what we mean when we say, "forest and nature school." Mark mentioned we want to use this project to inform the direction of CNAC in the future. I would say that's another one of the overarching goals is we're consulting with the community about these quality indicators. So what's important to you about the forest nature school approach, but also what do you need from CNAC? Where do you want to see CNAC going? And that sort of relates to two of the other project activities. So one is strengthening our facilitation team which, as I mentioned, they're the infrastructure. So making sure that facilitators feel supported and really well equipped to deliver training, and then making sure that the training is really coordinated with the needs and the reality of practitioners on the ground in Canada. So we've been doing that informally, over the last, you know, nine years of of delivering this course. We read all of the feedback, we implement everything that we can. The course curriculum has changed almost every year to reflect that feedback. But this is just a really broad and formalized way of figuring out are our courses high quality? Are we supporting high quality practice? So those are two other activities is the strengthening our facilitation team and then the internal quality assurance mechanism for our own programs. And Mark, what's the fourth project activity I'm forgetting? The fourth project activity is to conduct a forest nature school practitioners needs assessment, which is actually kind of closely tied to all of the other activities. Because while we are exploring the quality indicators as a group, just those needs naturally arise through conversation. So I can give an example. In our conversations with

practitioners, we are learning that there is a need in the sector for more support on access and equity. And we're also learning there's a need for more support for how to engage in a nation to nation relationship with First Nations, Métis and Inuit. From these conversations, this gives us an idea of offerings that we may be able to provide in the future, in order to support the practitioner so that they can fulfill those needs in the best way possible. Because I know that every single practitioner who is working in forest and nature school, they want to do all of these things. They're so passionate and they're so kind and caring. But it's hard to know how to do absolutely everything. And you know, it's a lifelong journey of learning and that includes educators. We learn with the children while we're on the land. The other way that the needs assessment is incorporated into some of the other activities is, we are also doing an evaluation of our own offerings. So our own workshops, our own Practitioners Course that we offer. And so we're looking at the feedback from those folks who attend those courses. And we are looking at how we can improve our course to meet their needs. What are the common questions that keep arising: "hey, maybe you can do a little bit more of this or that I would like to learn more about one of these topics." And so we look for those patterns, and then we try and implement it so that we can meet the needs of those practitioners who are taking the course.



**Cherlene 38:40**

I could listen to you both talk all day. Thank you both for that information. And you keep talking about conversations with practitioners. How are these happening? How can people join in? How is this data being collected?



**Marc 39:04**

Yeah, this is the fun part of this project is actually engaging in these conversations. So right now, the way that we are doing this is through our Fireside Chat Series. So this is a series of online events using the Zoom platform, where we invite forest and nature school practitioners to come together in a space for about an hour and a half. And each one of these events, these conversational sessions, is based around a particular theme. So far, we have done: Relationship with Land, Relationship with Play and relationship with Risky Play. And during the session, we have a bunch of questions about that idea of land, play or risky play, and we try and tease out from the conversations with the community - in breakout rooms, as well as the guest speakers that we invite to share some of their experiences - what those quality indicators might be. And then we also have a corresponding survey, which you know, is not everyone's cup of tea. But for those who aren't able to attend the live event, they will still have an opportunity to respond to the survey - whether it's before the Fireside Chat, during the Fireside Chat or after the Fireside Chat. Everything that folks submit to us does get considered. And there's other ways that

people can get in touch with us too. I mean, we're not just saying those are the only two options. If people just want to send us an email, we actually do have email for this project, it's [community@childnature.ca](mailto:community@childnature.ca). And people can give us a call, do a phone call, one-on-one interviews. We are having to be a little creative, because we started this project in the very beginning of the pandemic. And so we quickly had to move away from what we wanted to do, which was in person gatherings. So now we've moved to, you know, a socially distanced, technologically based process. And I think what we want to do, because the project is going to last for another couple of years, is we're going to continue to look at ways that we can creatively meet with the practitioners and the folks who are interested in forest school to learn from them. I don't know what that might look like yet, but there's a couple ideas brewing.

P

Petra 41:43

Yeah, when we first conceived of this project, what is now the Fireside Chats on Zoom happening every other month was first called the Bonfire Tour. And I was envisioning, you know, like a band t-shirt with all the tour dates and locations on the back. And so yeah, COVID threw a wrench into my tour t-shirt idea.

C

Cherlene 42:11

But that's such a good idea! Yeah, it's not like we can do that with the Zoom links.

P

Petra 42:21

But hopefully, we can do some in person consultation. And yeah, in addition to the Fireside Chats, which are happening every other month and the survey, we're also doing key informant interviews, as Mark mentioned. So those are one-on-one conversations happening where we're sort of pulling on the threads that get mentioned in those chats. And drawing people out into deeper conversation about what they may be mentioned in the chat or breakout room.

M

Marc 42:59

Thank you. Yeah, for those of you listening at home who would like to attend one of our Fireside Chats. If you head over to our website, [www.childnature.ca](http://www.childnature.ca), on our Community Consultation Page, you'll be able to see all the upcoming Fireside Chats we have going on and register for those ahead of time, as well as answer those surveys Mark mentioned earlier.



Cherlene 43:22

I want to ask, how are we ensuring that diverse voices are represented in these discussions?



Petra 43:30

I can jump on that. Or just kick us off on that. So one really concrete way is in the Fireside Chat. So Mark mentioned that we have panelists who speak to some of the questions and some of the principles of forest and nature school that we're examining in those chats. And I should mention that that's another sort of piece of the quality indicators is that CNAC has come up with a list of 10 Principles of Forest and Nature School, but those are really up for debate. We're really looking to the community to pick those apart and challenge them and let us know if they really speak to the work that they're doing. So for the panelists, we're really trying to ensure that there are diverse worldviews and lived experiences represented on all of those panels. And so actually, I guess it was our last chat on risky play, it was scheduled to happen I think in April and you know, in the lead up, we realized like we only have you know white settler perspectives who are willing to speak on this panel and I think we made the really difficult for us decision to sort of let go of the timeline that we had set for ourselves. And to say, you know, obviously we haven't built the relationships necessary so that folks with different life experience and different worldviews feel interested and comfortable and safe to participate in this panel. So instead of forging ahead with that timeline, we pressed pause and we went sort of backwards to deepen some relationships. And yeah, try to create the conditions so that we could hear from different perspectives. So that's one way is that we're not moving forward with any Fireside Chats unless we have diverse worldviews represented on the panel. And another piece, I think that speaks to that is our Advisory Circle and Mark's been doing a lot of the heavy lifting on that. So I'll let Mark speak to that.



Marc 46:12

Sure. Thanks, Petra. Yeah. So as an organization, about a year ago, we came to the realization that we've perpetuated harm, specifically against First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities, in this land that's now known as Canada, because we sort of, swooped in and took up space as a leader in outdoor learning that perhaps wasn't necessarily warranted at the time. Even today, I don't like using the term "leader," necessarily. But what ends up happening is that we brought in this European pedagogy, about forest and nature school, and we sort of just planted it here, not recognizing that some of the language we're using, the processes that we're using were harmful. And so we've been doing a lot of work and by no means are we perfect at this - this is a learning process for us, and we're stumbling along the way. But what we're trying to do is create an ethical

space where we can work with Indigenous partners in a way to ensure that all of our offerings going forward don't cause harm. And so with this particular project, one of the ways that we have sort of just stumbled into is having an advisory committee. So a lot of projects will have have an advisory committee. And you know, this is very like bureaucratic Western kind of academic style. And so we knew that we wanted to have some sort of group of people who were not with the organization who could advise on the project. But we didn't really like the idea of a committee. And so we were speaking with Algonquin Elder, Annie Smith, St-Georges, who is close to where both Petra and I live. And she was recommending some ideas to us. And we eventually landed on having an advisory circle. And so the Advisory Circle constitutes our group of folks who are - they could be experts because they practice forest nature school, or perhaps they're just people who are really interested in the idea forest school but do it a little bit differently. We also have a lot of Indigenous folks on the panel, too. And what Annie actually suggested to us was that everyone that we invite to this Advisory Circle should also invite an elder from their particular territory to attend but not in a tokenistic way. So what Annie is suggesting is that all of the elders will be coming together, I think, in June to have an initial meeting together. And so the elders are actually going to establish the procedure for the Advisory Circle, what the Advisory Circle will look like, how it will work. And what's kind of exciting about that for me, at least, is because I've been raised with this Western white supremacist way of doing things, I sort of had these expectations about how things are done. So what's exciting for me is actually like letting go of that control. And the best image I can come up with for this is, is that for a long time, the organization sort of had this relationship where we were trying to walk in front of Indigenous folks, trying to lead the way, even though this is their land and they know best how to interact with the land. And so then we kind of had that realization, okay, so we're causing harm. So how about we walk next to them. But the problem with just walking next to Indigenous folks, especially when we're talking about land-based work, is that we're still sort of assuming that we can just take some knowledge and ways of being, and just sort of sprinkle it into our work. But it still leaves us with this idea that the Western way of being is superior. And so now, I think where we're at is we're trying to take a step back and actually walk behind Indigenous folks, and let them lead us to where we need to go. And so with this particular project and this Advisory Circle, that's what we're trying to do. I don't know if it's going to work. I've never tried anything like it before. But I'm quite excited to see how it goes. And I'm almost certain, it's not going to go as I expect, which I think is great. I think we're going to learn a lot as an organization. And I think it's going to have a wonderful benefit for the project. And I think it's going to have a wonderful benefit for the children who are at the heart of what we are doing.



Cherlene 52:12

Thanks so much, Mark. Petra, before I go to you, I just want to say what Mark said reminded me of what you said during one of our team calls a while ago, like months ago. Petra, you said something like I hope in the future we won't even recognize who we are as an organization. And I think that's really powerful. And it speaks to like being led by the community, it speaks to having the goals and the needs emerge and not being prescriptive. But yeah, before before we end, Petra, did you have anything else you want to add to that?

P

Petra 52:47

Yeah, I just wanted to add that, you know, when we set out to find participants for the Advisory Circle. As Mark mentioned, we wanted to engage with folks that we don't know super well. And we also wanted to engage with folks from all different language communities, newcomers to Canada. Mark has spoken lots to Indigenous members, but we wanted to reach out to Black folks and other People of Color. And so having all of those folks bring an elder, as Annie suggested to us, it really allows us to have our blind spots challenged or made visible to us. And with everybody bringing an elder, it allows us to, as Mark said, take their lead. It allows us to follow where they lead us. And so, you know, we we sort of envisioned the Advisory Committee as being sort of a check and balance system, like a check on each stage and output or, you know, document that that emerges out of the project. So we'll see if that's what ends up happening. But that was the intention there.

M

Marc 54:17

Yeah, I'd also like to add too that, we are trying to be as transparent as possible throughout this entire process. So right now, we do have a web page on our website that's dedicated to the Community Consultation Project. I would say it's in its infancy in terms of the content that's on it, and we are hoping to continue to add more and more. So my request to anyone who's listening and is interested in this project is that if they see anything that is concerning to them, absolutely let us know. We are trying our best to be as open and incorporate folks' feedback as best as possible, but of course, we do have blinders, we all have them. And so we appreciate when people call us out. And so we do have, like I said earlier, we do have an email address [community@childnature.ca](mailto:community@childnature.ca). And if you have any questions, concerns, feedback, you know, cool stories that you'd like to share, absolutely get in touch, we would love to hear from you. So as sort of a final question for our time together today, I want to ask you both: Where do you hope we are in, you know, a couple of years when this project ends? Where do you hope we are as an organization or as a sector? And Petra, I think I'm going to ping pong that first to you, you know, being embedded in this work for so long and being with CNAC the longest out of



the three of us. Yeah, where do you hope we are as an organization and as a sector in a couple of years? And beyond.

P

Petra 56:09

Yeah. I hope that we're in a similar place in that I hope that we're a sector and a community that's actually much more coalesced than we are currently. I think a lot of what I've heard from a lot of practitioners is that they feel pretty isolated, and they feel pretty siloed. And so what I hope for CNAC and what I hope for the sector goes hand in hand, which is that I hope that CNAC is really rooted in what the community needs and that the community really sees CNAC as truly representing them and supporting them and responding to the needs that they're bringing forward. So that the forest and nature school community can continue to grow. And whether that's growing into the mainstream or continuing to grow, you know, in parallel to the mainstream. I hope that that happens. So coalesced and maybe in a more reciprocal relationship, actually, with each other: CNAC and the community. And I also hope that we are a more accessible and equitable and diverse sector, where folks from all sorts of backgrounds, all sorts of races, all sorts of abilities, gender expression, sexual orientation, feel safe and welcome in the forest to nature school movement. Marc?

M

Marc 58:04

Yeah, sorry, I lost my train of thought because that was so amazing. I think for myself, I would love to see the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada embrace change in a good way. I think that we are going to learn a lot from the community of practice, things that we may not necessarily expect. And I hope that we can embrace that. And I hope that we can continue to grow our aspiration to engage ethically with folks from all walks of life. I hope that we can continue to support children, and their well being. And I hope that we, at the end of this project are in a position to help more kids get outside and experience the wonders of forest and nature of school.

P

Petra 59:07

So just some like minorly lofty goals over here.

M

Marc 59:12

Yeah, just little ones.



**P** Petra 59:14  
Should be fine in two years.

**M** Marc 59:18  
Well, thank you so much, Petra and Marc for joining us on the podcast today to really dive into the Community Consultation Project and to share a bit more with our community about what we're trying to do here. And yeah, any any last words or messages for the community before we sign off?

**P** Petra 59:33  
Keep the questions coming. If we need to do another podcast, we will.

**M** Marc 59:39  
Yeah, absolutely. We would love to hear from you. As Petra said, get in touch. We can do more of these or maybe other ideas. Who knows? Yeah, ne last plug in for our community email. So if you have anything you want to add to this conversation, any questions. If you're interested in being part of a key informant interview or just would like to share your experience, please send us a message at [community@childnature.ca](mailto:community@childnature.ca).

**C** Cherlene 1:00:15  
And that's all for today's episode, folks. I hope you've learned more about the community consultation project, why it matters and how to get involved. Thank you so much to Petra and Marc for joining us and for all of you listeners who are tuning in at home. If you liked what you heard, be sure to subscribe because we've got more great guests coming your way. If you have any topics you would like for us to cover, feel free to reach out to us on social media. This is Cherlene for the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada podcast, signing off!