

Stewards of the barrens

Students at Straits Elementary pledge to preserve rare plants, unique habitat

The Limestone Barrens are in Newfoundland. So you should come and see, Some plants are endangered and some are not, So we will take care of them no matter what. Stay to the trails when you're riding bike, Or even when you're taking a hike. Protect the Long's Braya, the shrubs and the Newfoundland Orchid too. So they will be there for everyone to view. The Thrombolites are found right by our sea. In a million years they will still be there to see.

**Blaine Genge
Grade 6, Straits Elementary
Flowers Cove**

A cheer goes up from the students at Straits Elementary School at Flowers Cove, filling the crowded auditorium. Some of the younger students seated on the floor raise their arms, bouncing up and down with excitement.

Some 300 people, including 108 students, have gathered to celebrate a day like no other at the school.

"Today is a special day," principal Geneva Woodward says as she addresses the crowd. "Today, Straits Elementary School agreed to incorporate the preservation of the limestone barrens into its curriculum."

It has the distinction as the first school in Canada to sign a land stewardship agreement. The agreement commits the school to an active role in preserving a unique ecosystem on the Northern Peninsula — the Limestone Barrens.

The agreement between the province and the school is one of three stewardship agreements being signed today. The school, the Town of Flowers Cove and landowners in the area have agreed to actively conserve the Limestone Barrens. These agreements are in partnership with the Limestone Barrens Stewardship Program, which is funded through the Government of Canada's Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk.

The students' enthusiasm for their new role is evident on their smiling faces. Their pledge to act as stewards of the limestone barrens will help preserve a rare and fragile ecosystem for future generations.

The coastal limestone barrens extend from Port au Choix to the Burnt Cape Ecological Reserve at Raleigh. Protecting these ecologically sensitive areas is the goal of the Limestone Barrens Habitat Stewardship Program. The program's coordinator, Dulcie House, gives a slide presentation to the audience at Flowers Cove.

She shows the crowd some of the rare plants and flowers that make the limestone barrens their home, as well as some unique geological features of the area.

"There are plants here on the Northern Peninsula that can't be found anywhere else in the world," Ms. House says.

There are 271 rare plant species on the island of Newfoundland. Of these, 114 are found on the Northern Peninsula and 29 of them are species that can only be found on the Northern Peninsula. In addition, there are four species on the Limestone Barrens that can't be found anywhere else in the world.

Ms. House explains that the main threat to these plants is habitat loss. She says that when people are made aware of what "special" places the limestone barrens are, they are enthusiastic about protecting them.

"Residents take pride in the fact that they have something unique in the world, right in their backyards," she explains. The students exemplify this pride and enthusiasm. Ms. House made a presentation at their school last year and the interest it generated among the students set the ball rolling for the stewardship agreement.

Educators at Straits Elementary noted the interest of the students and decided to incorporate the limestone barrens into their curriculum.

They submitted a proposal to the ArtsSmarts program, which emphasizes innovative and creative learning. The school received a \$3,710 grant to implement the program last spring.

Ms. Woodward explains how students have benefited from the program.

"Our students gained self-esteem and self confidence — they became more engaged and they didn't even realize that they were learning," she says.

The students' work is everywhere in the auditorium. Pictures of the limestone barrens and paper flowers, drawn by the students, adorn the walls.

Primary students perform a skit about the importance of not picking the flowers, while the older students sing a song that they wrote about the limestone barrens. Grade 6 students Blaine Genge and Jonathan Gould recite a poem written by Blaine.

The projects and performances show how much the students know and care about the limestone barrens.

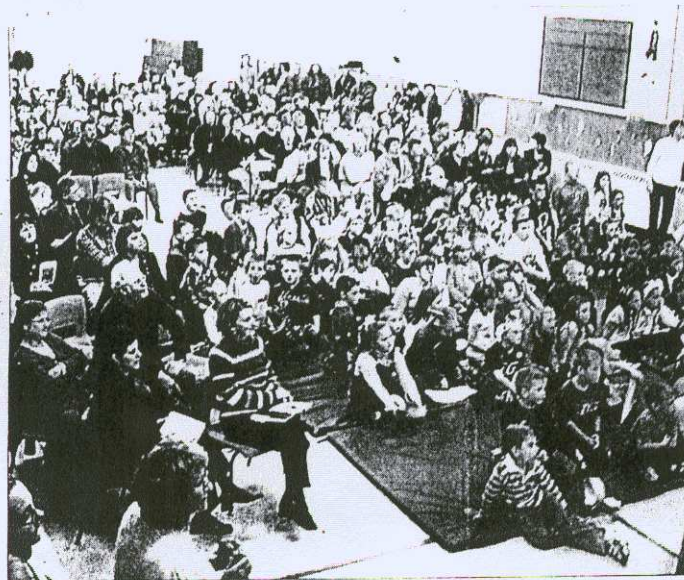
A special guest is at the school to sign the stewardship agreements on behalf of the provincial government. Julie Bettney, Minister of Tourism, Culture and Recreation, joins Flowers Cove Mayor Lorne Whalen in the signing ceremony. Ren and Madeline White, landowners in the area, are unable to attend the ceremony, but they have agreed to sign the documents to demonstrate their commitment to conserving the area.

Ms. Bettney tells the students they should be proud of their accomplishment.

"Everyone knows about the good things going on in Flowers Cove," she says.

It's Ms. Bettney who prompts the students to let out a cheer. She tells them that the next time she meets with federal and provincial ministers, she's going to tell them about what is going on at Flowers Cove.

"I'm going to tell them that the kids here have signed an agreement and then people all across the country will give a cheer."



Some 300 people gathered in the gymnasium of Straits Elementary in Flowers Cove to see the students perform and witness the signing of the land stewardship agreements.

(Dulcie House photo)



Taking part in a cake-cutting ceremony to mark the signing of stewardship agreements at Straits Elementary are: (l-r) — Geneva Woodward, principal of the school; and students Brandon Genge, Rendell Coombs and Jeneta Hughes. At right is Julie Bettney, Minister of Tourism, Culture and Recreation.

**Story & photos
by Natelle Fitzgerald**