



Liam O'Callaghan, an artist from Ireland, talks to students at Straits Elementary School in Flowers Cove about how the limestone barrens are a thriving place of growth in contrast to the general view of these landscapes as barren places.



Students at Straits Elementary School in Flowers Cove learn a few basic photography skills from Greg Staats (left), a visual artist from Toronto.

PRESERVING SPECIAL HABITAT INVOLVES STUDENTS, ARTISTS, CONSERVATIONISTS

Limestone barrens 'teeming with life'

Local residents are learning the importance of the limestone barrens habitat of the Great Northern Peninsula on a global scale.

In an effort to protect this unique habitat, many partnerships have been formed, including government agencies, community groups and individuals, who are working together under the Limestone Barrens Habitat Stewardship Program (LBHSP) in a concerted effort to raise a greater awareness of the limestone barrens habitat.

One of these opportunities includes the converging of the LBHSP, part of a national program to preserve the habitats of endangered and threatened species of plants and animals, and the Limestone Barrens Project.

Dulcie House, program co-ordinator for the LBHSP, says the Limestone Barrens Project is a creative exchange between Canadian and Irish artists working in lens-based media, writers and composers, in partnership with scientists and conservationists. The project uses as its basis the limestone barrens of the Great Northern Peninsula, the Bruce Peninsula in Ontario, and the Burren in County Clare, Ireland.

Ms. House was given an opportunity to be involved with the LBP early in 2003 when she received a message from Henry Mann, a professor at Sir Wilfred Grenfell College in Corner Brook and a member of the Limestone Barrens Species at Risk Recovery Team, informing her about the LBP.

"Our program emphasizes community education to increase awareness in the local communities and encourages residents and visitors alike to use the barrens responsibly, so I knew there were dual benefits to be derived from such collaboration," she states.

"As a direct result of this teamwork students at Roncalli Central High School in Port Saunders are now working on an international, online collaboration that will continue for the remainder of this school year. It's very exciting to see high school students so involved and wanting to learn about 'species at risk', and their habitat.

The LBP is using science and technology to promote and protect the limestone barrens, linking communities in Ireland, Owen Sound, Ontario and Newfoundland together via the Internet.

Charlotte Jones, one of the curators of the project, states, "The limestone barrens as habitats or ecosystems are globally rare and at risk from both natural and human intervention; therefore plants found there may be common in those locations but rare or endangered because the habitat is rare."

She adds, "Limestone barrens are protected worldwide, they are unique ecosystems as they support unique flora in particular. For instance, on the Great Northern Peninsula, our limestone gardens have several plant species that are either endangered or rare. Two of three species are only found there worldwide."

Having spent time in Ontario, Ireland and on the Great Northern Peninsula, Ms. Jones noticed the similarities between the areas.

She says all three areas are important as their systems and inhabitants are valuable indicators of climate change. As a result, these three regions stand as metaphors for survival and adaptation, on the one hand, and, on the other, fragility. Artist and students agree that the loss of any one element drastically affects the overall ecosystem.

"When you take one thing out of the cycle of life it affects something else," explains Brent McCarthy, a Grade 8 student at Roncalli Central High School.

He says every living thing has its place in the cycle of life and when one organism is removed there is a chain reaction disrupting the normal cycle.

"You don't know what the outcome will

be," he states.

"Eventually it may affect humans. Perhaps plants will get destroyed that could hold the cure for cancer or diabetes or something."

The world's total population of Long's Braya, Fernald's Braya and the Barren's Willow are found only on the Northern Peninsula.

The coastal limestone barrens of the peninsula are located in the Strait of Belle Isle ecoregion. The area from the Port au Choix National Historic Site to the Burnt Cape Ecological Reserve at Raleigh is the "hotspot" of vascular plant diversity on the island. Out of the 298 species of vascular plants considered rare in Newfoundland — 104 occur in this region — 22 are found only in the Strait of Belle Isle Ecoregion.

Ms. Jones describes the limestone barrens as special areas and hauntingly beautiful.

"They are not spectacular like the Rocky Mountains, but there is something about them. Initially, they look completely barren, like there is nothing on them, but as you look closer you realize that they are actually teeming with life that is uniquely adapted to living in these harsh conditions."

She explains that in 2003, between July and November, artists, writers and composers walked the limestone barrens in at least one of the three regions. Based on these walks and briefings by scientists and conservationists, they produced original artwork for an international touring exhibition.

An international symposium, 'Limestone Barrens: A Landscape Under Stress', was held last July at Corner Brook. Its focus was on appreciation and understanding of the fragile nature of the limestone barrens and on issues surrounding stewardship and conservation worldwide. Other components of the project include a publication and school projects.

The touring exhibition opened at the Tom Thomson Memorial Art Gallery in Owen Sound earlier this month, and in March, the exhibition begins its tour of Ireland. The first exhibition venue there will be at the Model Arts and Niland Gallery in Sligo.

Following the tour of Ireland the exhibition will return to Newfoundland, where it will be on view at the Art Gallery of Newfoundland and Labrador.



Artist Liam O'Callaghan, curator Stuart Reid, artist Har Prakash Khalsa from the Limestone Barrens Project and Dulcie House, program co-ordinator of the Limestone Barrens Habitat Stewardship Program, visited the limestone barrens at Port au Choix National Historic Site during one of the artist stopovers to the Great Northern Peninsula.