

# **Environmental Education: Now, more than ever**

**Reflections on the eve of our Recharge conference**

**By: Gareth Thomson**

As we all busily prepare for our annual conference, I want to talk about the importance of environmental education, and the importance of our community. And I want to talk about how we can survive and indeed THRIVE, despite the challenges we sometimes feel when doing our work in this province.

And to do all this – perhaps somewhat unexpectedly - I am going to talk a lot about boats.

I want to remind you of the scene in the movie Jaws that features a fisherman, who finally sees for the first time the enormous shark they are trying to catch. He backs into the boat's cabin, eyes wide, and says to the captain: "We're going to need a bigger boat!"

I would put it to you that now, more than ever before, we who are so passionate about our kind of education need to build a bigger boat. We are facing some challenges in this province. The economy is slow, and many families are struggling. The resources we need to do our work are fewer. And a juggernaut called climate change is bearing down on all of us. Given that, I encourage you to ask yourself: What does this mean for you and your organization? What could you do in some collaboration with a new partner? And – thinking of the whole group - what can we do together that we can't do separately? What if we who attend the conference developed a network? What if that network started to act like a movement? This is why we are holding a preconference summit. This is why we are considering the creation of a Charter that might be part of our rallying cry...

Here's another boat theme, one you've heard before: "A rising tide lifts all boats." I hope during this conference you feel that tide lifting you, as you learn from others, exchange ideas, get inspired, and know that your practice will be better post-conference, and that your spirit. Too, will become more buoyant as it feels that rising tide.

(We've committed to another Recharge conference next year, too: 16-18 April 2020, at the Coast Hotel in Canmore. And we're determined that these conferences MUST meet your needs! Next year we'll have a number of conference strands, and a number of pre- and post-conference full day workshops - and quite frankly the topics we cover will be determined by you, as you fill out our post-conference survey, or as you come talk to me or other ACEE staff).

I want to make a point about culture – and I'll again ask you to think about boats! Please imagine that the boat YOU are in is a sailboat. Long ago we could only sail with the wind directly behind us; then we learned to sail perpendicular to the wind; now of course we can sail at an angle into the wind, close-hauled...

In this metaphor, the wind is our prevailing culture here in Alberta: exemplified, perhaps, by the recently elected United Conservative Party; and the boat is the one that you sail, both

personally and professionally. The wind here in Alberta is different from other provinces, and perhaps you'd prefer a different wind, but you know what - it is OUR wind, it's the only wind we have, and we can SAIL on this wind. But keep in mind that culture is powerful. Keep in mind that culture eats strategy for breakfast. Sailing boats cannot sail directly into the wind: if you try this your sails just flap and you lose speed; please don't try this, because learners, and indeed the planet, need you to be gaining speed right now. We need all of our boats on the water, sailing hard. If you want to sail into the wind - if what you want to do is a little bit – or a lot! – at odds with what culture tends to do, you'll need to tack into the wind. I need to tell you that I personally feel that I need to Up my Game – I need to become a better sailor. Perhaps I'm not the only one who feels this way.

What does this look like? Perhaps you take an imperfect curriculum and torture it a tiny bit to ensure the sort of student learning you know is important. Perhaps you weave the findings from the Climate Narratives project into your work. Perhaps you get a grant from an oil and gas company - and use it to do some amazing things that give students hope and help heal some small part of the earth. Perhaps you help people do things that look and sound like climate action - but the card you lead with is renewable energy, or environmental protection, and you actually never mention climate.

As you tack into the wind, yours will be an indirect course, but you can end up where you want to be. Perhaps the tide will help you, too. I'll remind you that Shakespeare had a thing or two to say about tides:

“There is a tide in the affairs of men.  
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune...  
On such a full sea are we now afloat,  
And we must take the current when it serves...”

And I've got some good news, because maybe, just maybe, the tide is turning. Greta Thunberg sparked a worldwide student movement that led to climate strikes by 1.4 million people - most of them students - last Spring. Vancouver, Montreal, Halifax, Kingston – and most recently Ottawa - have all declared Climate Emergencies. When you turn on Netflix these days you can watch 'Our Planet' and hear David Attenborough talk with unprecedented focus and passion not just about the beauty of nature - but how climate change threatens nature, AND what we can do about it.

I believe that the tide is turning, and creating valuable space for us in which we can do our critically important work.

So, to recap: If you're a good sailor, and you're sailing on that bigger boat, and if you catch a favourable tide - you'll get there. **We'll** get there. Our children, our students, our cities, the people of Alberta, and yes the planet – I believe they all NEED US to get there.