

CELEBRATING EARTH DAY... NATURALLY



Photo: Ted Lafranchise

No plans yet for Earth Day? Try these family-friendly ideas.

by Donald Fraser

Last year, three-year old Alder Clark had an Earth Day to remember.

Hiking through a local forest with her mother, Alison, Alder was fortunate enough to witness several small snakes acting most peculiarly.

“We were lucky to come across a group of male garter snakes performing their nuptial dances around a single female,” explains Alison, an environmental educator, botanist, and owner of Good Nature Ecological Services. “With the snakes and the first tender blossoms of hepatica and other short-blooming forest flowers, it was a wonderful way to explore the natural cycles of a forest ecosystem.”

For Alder, it was part of a full day of environmental adventures that had started early that morning at a large community stream clean up. “Between learning about the natural world and helping to take care of it, I think she had a pretty successful Earth Day,” beams Alison.

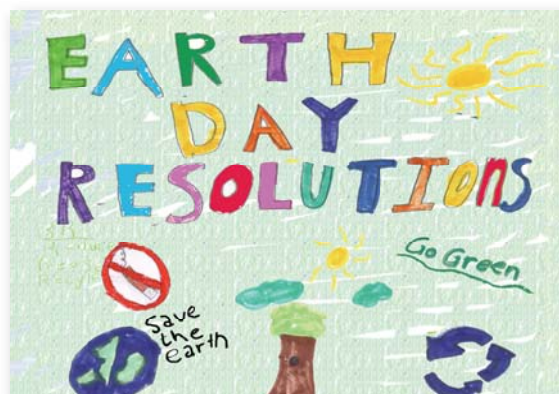
For many parents and educators, this is exactly what Earth Day is all about. “In a lot of ways, I think Earth Day is really geared towards children,” says Rachel Wraith of Durham Sustain Ability. “Kids see special days and events as more of a big deal than we

grown-ups do. And because it is seen as special, it has some resonance.”

Of course, children are even more likely to adopt practices and ideas if they see adults leading by example. For this reason, Wraith has a number of ideas to engage both families and neighbourhood groups in celebrating Earth Day on April 22, 2011.

Hold an Environmental Fair

“Having a neighbourhood environmental fair is a great idea,” says Wraith. “You can get your friends and neighbours together and have a great time while promoting sustainable lifestyle choices.”



Wraith suggests that the fair would be a great place to hold a street sale, clothing swap, or electronics and household goods swap. “We all have items that we don’t use anymore,” she explains. “And too often, these items end up in landfill. Or they sit in the closet while someone right next door is out buying new products.”

Clothing swaps are particularly beneficial to parents. “Kids don’t stay the same size for very long – particularly infants and toddlers,” notes Wraith. “There is often very little wear and tear on clothes before a child grows out of them.”

Electronic swaps are also becoming more common. “In many cases, people upgrade to new phones, mp3 players, computers, and televisions, long before their previous goods become obsolete or unusable.” While you may have moved on to “the next great thing,” your cast-off may be the piece of technology that your neighbour is looking for.

Your environmental fair could also include a pledging station for taking action.

“At Durham Sustain Ability, we had a wonderful program, ‘We Have the Power’, where people pledged to reduce and conserve in four key areas: waste, water, transportation, and energy.



“It is really easy to set up a simplified version with your friends, family, and neighbours,” says Wraith. “Just make up some pledge cards with do-able environmental activities, have people fill them out, and then post them on a bulletin board during the duration of your event.” Sample pledge ideas could include using reusable water bottles, not idling your vehicle, or shifting laundry over to non-peak hours. There are limitless ways to pledge for your environment.

You can spice things up by serving local foods and providing local children’s entertainment at your fair. “You could also invite environmental groups from your community to take part, speak, or have a display. This includes school environment clubs. You could even have the kids in your neighbourhood create displays or posters.”

Adopt a Greener Lifestyle

Joanna Hart, an environmental educator with Peterborough Green-Up, believes that Earth Day is a good opportunity to introduce the entire family to sustainable lifestyle choices.

“It is the perfect time to make a family pledge,” she says. “Something that can make an impact year round.” Hart suggests using Earth Day to launch practices such as waste free lunches, local and/or vegetarian eating, or car-free days, and to get the kids involved in helping to plan them.

“Try to make a big deal out of it so that every family member will remember the importance of your decisions,” she advises. “If you make a family Earth Day promise to have one car-free day per week, put a homemade poster on your fridge as a reminder. Decorate a calendar. Make your ‘Walking Wednesday’ or ‘Gas-Free Friday’ a celebration of environmental awareness in your household.”

Other sustainable suggestions include going vegetarian one day per week (Meatless Mondays!), eating local foods one day per week, or getting rid of waste in lunch boxes (both for school and work).

“Consider them Earth Day resolutions,” she says. “Like New Year’s, only ‘greener.’”

Plan a Garden

Hart believes that Earth Day is also an opportune time to introduce gardening to both the family and the neighbourhood.

“Kids, particularly little ones, love to help in

gardens,” she says. “What is there not to love? You get to play with dirt, with worms, with tools. Taking your kids out to prep a garden and to plant early seed is as educational as it is fun. You get the opportunity to talk about where food comes from, as well as to discuss things like habitat for birds and insects.”

Why not give the kids their own garden patch? “You can portion off a bit of your own garden and put some fun kid-friendly plants in there,” says Hart. “This can include plants that are fun to touch and taste, such as mint, lemon balm, or aromatic herbs. Or you can plan a ‘pizza garden’ with tomatoes, basil, peppers, or whatever else you’ll need for making a pizza in the fall. The options are endless. While not all of these plants will be ready to go in the ground on Earth Day, you can still get started.”



Hart’s third idea is to use the day for some car-free adventures.

“A lot of people will be celebrating Earth Day on the Saturday (Earth Day is a Friday this year), which in Peterborough, is the day for the Farmer’s Market. Biking to market with your family is always a great way to celebrate sustainable lifestyle



practices. You cut back on greenhouse gas emissions by leaving the car at home, and you focus on local, seasonal food.”

Other options: ditch the car and explore trails, the downtown areas of your community, or country roads. Walk or bike to friends’ houses. Or even plan a picnic if the weather is nice.

Take a Field Trip

Judy Smith Torrie, CEO of Go Green Together in Cobourg also suggests family field trips. Like other educators, she believes some quality time in nature is beneficial.

“Exploring forests, wetlands, and conservation areas helps with basic environmental literacy,” advises Torrie. Particularly if parents offer some little lessons along the way. This “helps children make connections with nature,” she says. “It is important to help kids realize that they are a part of the natural world, and that they depend on it. I think it is important to start with these simple themes, rather than scare them with the big issues. If you let them celebrate their place in the environment, they will take to tackling larger environmental issues more naturally.”

Smith Torrie’s field trips have an urban element as well. “Take your kids to tour a ‘green’ building,” she says. In Peterborough, there’s the Camp Kawartha Environment Centre which bills itself as “Canada’s Most Sustainable Building,” and features a straw bale building, solar panels, a living green roof, a rainwater collection system, and a host of other examples of sustainable building details. (For more information on the Environment Centre, please visit www.campkawartha.ca or call 705-652-3860.)

A Day to Remember

This year, Alison will be taking her kids, Alder, now four, and 18-month old Severn, to the Jackson Creek Clean-Up and then out for another forest adventure. While last year will be awfully tough to beat, she is sure that it will still be a day to remember.

“We’ll be together, outside, surrounded by the awakening of spring,” she says with a smile. “What’s not to celebrate?”

Donald Fraser is a freelance writer and consultant with a love of the outdoors and a good sense of adventure.