

Project Overview: Outdoor Learning Classroom & Amphitheatre at Helen Schuler Nature Centre

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Helen Schuler Nature Centre Outdoor Learning Classroom and Amphitheatre replaces an aging Outdoor Amphitheatre that is at the end of its life-cycle. The new Outdoor Classroom will provide:

1. Universal accessibility.
2. Functional outdoor space for both small and large groups of students to gather and engage with HSNC staff.
3. Presentation and event space for large gatherings.
4. Flexible, social space for all park users.
5. Tranquil location to pause and view the surrounding landscape.

It will allow both students and other visitors a space to slow down, explore, and reflect upon their natural surroundings. This experience will create an emotional connection between people and nature. This could lead to behavioural changes that encourage support for further similar sustainable practices in the area.

The Outdoor Learning Classroom and Amphitheatre will also serve as a demonstration site for our community. This unique space will encourage further development and support for similar outdoor learning classroom sites throughout Southern Alberta.

PROJECT BENEFITS

Located on the northwest side of the Helen Schuler Nature Centre, the Outdoor Learning Classroom and Amphitheatre serves as part of the gateway entrance to the Nature Quest and Oxbow Loop trail systems. Since its construction, the Outdoor Amphitheatre has served as the start or endpoint for most of the Nature Centre's programs. After 35 years of consistent use, the wear and tear is clearly evident and a replacement is overdue.

The project will improve the comfort and functionality of the space, increase the accessibility for visitors in wheelchairs/walkers/strollers, reduce maintenance costs, and provide a more conducive outdoor space for Nature Centre programs to connect visitors with Lethbridge's river valley. The project will refresh the exterior space of the Helen Schuler Nature Centre, ensuring the surrounding features of the building match the newly renovated and expanded Nature Centre facility. We are confident the project will enhance the interpretive and experiential value of the Helen Schuler Nature Centre site.

PURPOSE & IMPORTANCE

This project shows the importance of connecting with nature and the benefits of learning outside. Research confirms that spending time in nature improves children's academic performance, focus, behaviour, and love of learning.¹ There is a large body of evidence indicating that learning outside has a positive impact on human health and wellness, from infancy to adulthood. The list of benefits is extensive, including everything from mental wellness to physical health.

Encouraging individuals to spend more time outside has never been more important! The report *Youth Engagement with Nature and the Outdoors – A summary of survey findings* estimates Canadian children and youth are increasingly sedentary in their behaviour and spend less than one hour outside each day. Of even greater concern is that nearly half of all Canadian children are active outside for only 3 hours or less per week.

The Outdoor Learning Classroom and Amphitheatre will provide a demonstration and learning space for our community. It will serve as an example for local schools to realize the benefits of outdoor learning spaces. Additionally, it will help teachers and educators to understand how to use such spaces to their full potential and to engage students in cross-curricular active learning outside.

The Helen Schuler Nature Centre is uniquely positioned to help our community realize the benefits of time spent with nature. Every year the Nature Centre hosts over 51,000 visitors, including over 12,000 students! The Nature Centre delivers curriculum-linked environmental education programs that help to build a connection with “here” while highlighting the natural history of Southern Alberta. It is our goal for every visitor to the Nature Centre to be inspired by memorable moments of discovery in the great outdoors. Part of this experience is facilitated by beautiful public spaces that create a comfortable gateway for visitors to spend time with nature.

OVERVIEW OF USERS

The location of the Outdoor Classroom and Amphitheatre will allow all visitors to the Helen Schuler Nature Centre to enjoy this space. With average on-site visitation of 51,000+ per year, we estimate over 1,000,000 visitors will enjoy this space over the next twenty years. More specifically, the Outdoor Classroom space will be used as the initial meeting point for most Nature Centre programs – including school field trips (approximately 12,000 per year), and onsite public environmental programs (approximately 12,000 per year). We estimate that 65% of our visitors are from the Lethbridge area, with the remaining visiting from all over the world. The majority of visitors to the Nature Centre are families.

¹ Children & Nature Network Infographics (attached)

ANTICIPATED PROJECT OUTCOMES

Aesthetics

The new Outdoor Classroom will complement the recently refreshed Helen Schuler Nature Centre (renovated and reopened in 2014 after a \$4.5 million renovation). This renewed space will help to increase visitation to the site and may lead to overall increases in tourism to Lethbridge. The current amphitheatre is well-worn and shows its age. The amphitheatre wood structure is now rotting and rapidly decomposing since it was originally constructed in 1982 of pressure-treated posts.

Accessibility

The new Outdoor Classroom will improve accessibility to the site by moderating the existing slope access, making it easier to approach for those in wheelchairs, walkers, or with strollers. The new space will feature wider entranceways and a bigger turnaround radius for ease of movement in the space for those with mobility aids. The current amphitheatre has a very limited accessibility and features a considerable slope that can be challenging for independent universal access.

Functionality

The Outdoor Classroom will feature new embedded interpretative elements that will enhance and complement school programs and the organized group tours that take place at the Nature Centre. These may include: animal tracks stamped into concrete; native vegetation; enhanced insect habitat; interpretive panels; removable poles that can be used with exhibition posters/backdrops. These elements will provide experiential learning opportunities for all visitors. The design will expand the outdoor amenities at the Nature Centre and will provide a comfortable seating area for park users.

Capacity

The new Outdoor Classroom will feature increased capacity which will accommodate typical class sizes and their accompanying parent chaperones, teacher's aides, and teachers. The project will increase seating capacity from 22 seats to 49 total.

Comfort

The new Outdoor Classroom will feature cedar slat seating that will provide comfort for visitors. The existing amphitheatre is constructed with pressure-treated posts that provide a small relatively uncomfortable seat. Increased comfort of the space will allow participants to focus on the program topic rather than the discomfort of the space.

Reduced maintenance costs

Currently the amphitheatre poses considerable access challenges for snow removal machinery in the winter time which increases ongoing maintenance costs and chance of injury to snow removal personnel. The new Outdoor Classroom will ensure ample space for snow removal equipment to enter and exit the space which will help to reduce ongoing operational costs.

ANTICIPATED PROJECT ACTIVITIES

Conceptual Design of the project area has been complete. The concept was completed by O2 Planning and Design Inc. who were also the landscape architects for the Helen Schuler Nature Centre facility upgrade project (2012 – 2014). This was done to ensure a seamless and comprehensive look and feel of the outdoor spaces at the Helen Schuler Nature Centre.

Further activities to be undertaken:

- Complete fundraising for project (\$200,000+);
- Topographical survey;
- Final design and accessibility consultation with stakeholders;
- Finalize design;
- Deconstruction and waste streaming of existing amphitheatre;
- Site preparation, grading, and backfilling (slope remediation);
- Concrete and concrete pavers installation;
- Concrete seat wall with cedar slats for curved bench seating installation;
- Corten (steel) and cedar railing installation;
- Stormwater swale contouring;
- Feature rock installation;
- Embedding interpretive features into classroom space (e.g. animal tracks, information panels, etc.);
- Planting beds, landscaping, and replanting of disturbed areas;
- Replanting and monitoring site to ensure successful establishment/reclamation of native plants;
- Grand opening of classroom space and media event.

TARGET PROJECT TIMELINES

- Conceptual design - Spring 2018
- Fundraising begins - Summer 2018
- Final design - Summer 2019
- Construction - Fall 2019
- Final reporting - Spring 2020

PROJECT SUPPORTER BENEFITS

- Permanent onsite signage will be installed to recognize major donors to the project;
- Recognition on Helen Schuler Nature Centre donor display;
- Recognition and logo inclusion on website (NatureCentre.ca AND Lethbridge.ca/HSNC);
- Press release announcing support;
- Social media recognition;
- Contribution over \$25,000 will provide naming opportunities to all or part of the space.

CONFIRMED PROJECT SUPPORTERS

- City of Lethbridge - \$65,000

COST ESTIMATE

02 Planning and Design Inc. provided a Class D Cost Estimate through the Concept Design Phase in order to provide a funding target for the project. The cost estimate is based on the initial functional program as outlined in the Draft Concept Package March 2018 (attached). We recognize that these estimates are based on elemental summary and a rough cost per square metre. We estimate the figures presented are +/- 25% accurate and are subject to change based on the Final Design Phase.

The overall fundraising target for the Outdoor Learning Classroom and Amphitheatre is \$200,000+. Additional funding generated over and above will allow more embedded interpretive features to be added to the final design. Any unused surplus funding for the project will be returned to grant sources.

• Concrete work (pavers, walls, headers)	= \$31,000
• Seating	= \$17,000
• Railings	= \$11,000
• Corten (steel) Poles	= \$12,000
• Stormwater swale with river rock	= \$7,500
• Feature rocks and donor plaques	= \$9,000
• Planting beds and planting material	= \$8,500
• Topographical survey	= \$3,500
• Demolition and site preparation	= \$17,000
• Grading and backfill	= \$12,000
• Replanting disturbed areas	= \$5,000
• Mobilization and demobilization	= \$5,000
• Landscape maintenance and warranty (2 year)	= \$10,000
• Design & Project Management	= \$30,000
• Contingency	= \$20,000
• Total Class D Cost Estimate	= \$198,500.00

EVALUATION PLAN

The project evaluation will provide a framework to understand how a renewed Outdoor Learning Classroom and Amphitheatre space impacts our visitors and their perception of this place. The project evaluation will be available to project funders and stakeholders to assess the relative success of the new renewed space at the Helen Schuler Nature Centre.

Overview

Evaluation Objectives	Data	Indicators of Success
The new Outdoor Learning Classroom and Amphitheatre motivates Nature Centre visitors to spend additional time outside.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct observation • Onsite survey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in relative duration of use of space • Increase in variety of activities/space usage • Visitors indicate interest in spending time outside
The new Outdoor Classroom motivates teachers to use outdoor learning spaces in their teaching practice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Face-to-face interviews with Teachers • Onsite survey of staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers understand benefits of outdoor classrooms • Teachers indicate interest in utilizing outdoor learning spaces for their classes
The new Outdoor Classroom facilitates visitor connection with nature.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct observation • Onsite Surveys 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visitors respond positively when asked about their experience in the Outdoor Classroom space • Visitors spend more time outside when visiting the Nature Centre • Visitors indicate interest in returning to Outdoor Classroom space
There is an increase in visitation to the Nature Centre.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Statistical analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of visitors to the Nature Centre is increased • Number of booking requests for the Outdoor Classroom space is increased • Number of outdoor interpretive elements available to visitors is increased

Evaluation focus

Our evaluation will primarily focus on five user groups of the Outdoor Learning Classroom and Amphitheatre space at the Nature Centre, including:

- Teachers and students
- Drop-in visitors
- Facility rental user groups
- Nature Centre Volunteers
- Nature Centre Staff

Methods

- **Face-to-face interviews** with teachers attending the Nature Centre with Field Trip classes
 - o To be completed by Nature Centre staff.
 - o Questions to focus on teacher's knowledge of outdoor classroom spaces, how to activate outdoor learning spaces, any noticeable difference in student behaviour (outdoor classroom versus indoor classroom), and whether the teacher is more likely to utilize outdoor classroom in future lesson plans.
- **Direct observation** of visitors in the space
 - o To be completed by Nature Centre Exhibit Roving volunteers and staff.
 - o Observations to focus on: the number of visitors utilizing the Outdoor Classroom space (aside from Nature Centre programs), types of usage, relative duration of use, and commentary on accessibility of the space.
- **Onsite Survey**
 - o To be completed by facility rental groups, and Nature Centre staff and volunteers.
 - o Survey questions will assess user opinion on the accessibility and comfort of the space, whether their usage requirements were met, and how likely a user would be to utilize the space in the future.
- **Statistical analysis**
 - o To be completed by Nature Centre staff.
 - o Comparing statistics from before and after renovation for total on-site visitation and total field trip program visitation.
 - o Comparing metrics of before and after: total Outdoor Classroom seating capacity, total accessible seating availability, total embedded interpretive elements in space.

Analysis and Interpretation

Face-to-face interviews will be conducted randomly with 20 visiting classes between September and June (minimum of 2 interviews per month). Nature Centre staff will meet with Teachers to conduct short (10 minute) standardized interview. Staff will take notes during the interview and

will summarize information provided for clarity and length. Information will be compiled and analyzed to identify patterns or commonalities in response as well as noteworthy observations.

Direct observation will be conducted by Nature Centre Exhibit Rover Volunteers and Staff as part of the daily statistics through the month of July – both before and after the space has been renewed. Observation notes will track any relative increase in space usage, type of usage, and relative duration of space use.

Onsite survey will be conducted by the Facility Rental Coordinator as part of existing evaluations completed by rental user groups. The survey will be administered for 6 months after project completion with any user group that has booked the space. In addition, Nature Centre staff and volunteers will be asked to complete the same survey within 6 months of completion of project. Information will be compiled to understand how different user-types assess the space's functionality and accessibility.

Statistical evaluation will be conducted by Nature Centre Information Assistant as part of the end-of-year analysis. On-site visitation for the Nature Centre for the year prior to construction will be compared with visitation for the year after construction. We will compare school field trip visitation and overall drop-in visitation to the Nature Centre. Further we will do a qualitative comparison of the total site capacity and embedded interpretive features.