

At home with nature

Hartley Bay is a tiny school, just 34 students from K-12, but its innovative programs introduce students to skills that allow them to thrive in the wilderness.

by Leslie Dyson

Hartley Bay School students have felt the impact of a relatively small oil spill on their way of life. Now, they're concerned that hundreds of super tankers carrying crude oil could be plying the waters close to their homes. So they are helping to gather scientific evidence related to the impact of tides, currents and weather on items in the sea (whether bottles, young fish or spilled oil) and working with other groups to explain why it is so essential to preserve the habitats of northern communities — on the coast and in the sea.

Encouragement for their efforts



Raincoast Conservation Foundation, sailed out a few kilometres and tossed the bottles into the ocean.

The school has used previous bottle launches as a teaching tool for developing literacy skills and understand-

and confirmation of the urgency of their work came from a surprising source.

In late September, 20 students took part in the drift bottle project led by Fisheries and Ocean Canada. In each of the 700 bottles, they placed a message noting the date and location and requesting a reply. They and their teachers then boarded a boat, captained by a member of the

ing geography and ocean currents and as a way to connect with others living in remote areas. Some of the castaways show up days later, some travel great distances and take years to surface and others are never seen again.

Not long after the bottles were sent on their way, a mother humpback whale and her calf approached the boat. The captain cut the motor



and drifted with the two whales.

“I heard people say, ‘They know what we’re doing and they’re saying thank you,’” said Rachel in grade 10. “I think it might have been that way too.”

Grade 8 student Jenelle said, “by trusting us and coming up to the boat, they were saying thank you for fighting Enbridge.”

Ernie Hill, hereditary chief of the Eagle Clan at Hartley Bay and principal of the school, said everyone in the community is greatly concerned about the federal government’s Northern Gateway Project and specifically the proposed Enbridge pipeline which would carry unrefined crude oil from the Alberta tar sands to the container port in Kitimat to be loaded onto supertankers and taken to Asia and the US for refining.

Cam Hill, the school’s administrative assistant and son of the chief, said he’s convinced that “the whales knew exactly what we were doing and how personal it was for the students and everyone on the boat ... There’s still a buzz and a twitter.”

The whales stayed with the boat for almost an hour-and-a-half, swimming underneath it, breaching out of the water, diving deep down, spiraling up and then leaping out of the water. At one point the mother, with her head above the surface clearly “had one eye zoned in on the students,” the younger Hill said. “She was paying as much attention to us as we were to her. We could have touched her but we have too much respect for that.

“We were all speechless and in awe,” he continued. “It showed us how precious Hartley Bay is and just how lucky we are in our area and that there’s someone else that loves it as much as we do.”

Hartley Bay School, serving 34 students in kindergarten to grade 12, is unlike any other school in the province. Students are introduced to skills that will allow them to thrive

in a wilderness environment. Eco-tourism around whale and bear watching is growing in the area. So the students receive training in navigating swift water, gun proficiency, radio operation and marine emergency preparedness.

Isolation brings some difficulties and great advantages too.

Jenelle said that she likes the fact that “there are no cars so it’s not so loud and that there are hardly any lights so you can see the stars—and there are no murderers! I know everybody here.”

On the other hand, there is a 69 cent per pound surcharge on everything that has to be flown into the village and, even then, it only arrives if there is enough room on the plane. A 29 cent a pound pumpkin brought in from a Kitimat market for Halloween becomes 98 cents a pound by the time it’s unloaded at Hartley Bay. “We supplement our diet from the sea and we really value that,” Chief Hill said.

School staff and students and other band members went to Kitimat to hear speakers explain the federal government’s Northern Gateway Project and possible impacts of the plan.

If there was an oil spill, Rachel said, “it would will kill the animals and the food we get from the ocean. We wouldn’t be able to live here and we would have to move. I wouldn’t like it.”

Even the promise of double hulls offers no comfort to Chief Hill. He explained that poorer grade steel is used in the construction of these vessels to keep them as light as pos-

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sible and the sealed units can't prevent the corrosive nature of the seawater. "All you need is one spill and our village will be no more.

"The federal and provincial governments should look at a moratorium [on supertankers going down the BC coast]," he added, "It's a great concern for the Vancouver harbour and it's the same concern that we have.

"We're just a little band of 650 to 700 people and three-quarters of them live off the reserve. We have a little less than 200 people living here."

However, once the government's plan was announced, offers of help arrived quickly. The Sierra Club and David Suzuki Foundation called the band office wanting to know what they could do to help the band's efforts to alert the federal and provincial governments about the accompanying dangers.

"It means 250 tankers per year just one mile out," Hill explained. A stopping range of 10 miles while in a three-mile wide channel, is frightening for community members to contemplate. "We have to let our voices be heard," he said.

Hartley Bay made the headlines in 2006 when the Queen of the North ferry went down. The people in the town answered the late-night distress call and raced out in small boats to rescue the 101 survivors. But the story didn't end there.

"There was an oil spill," said Morgan, in grade 8. "It wasn't good. The clams and the cockles weren't good. They were contaminated."

Rachel explained, "We have fish almost every night." At this time of year, people are eating halibut, spring salmon, coho and octopus, she said.

The collision with rocks on the rugged coast resulted in the release

of "relatively clean diesel oil," Hill said. Weather, currents and time played a role in how it was dispersed. It didn't always show up as predicted and the community lost a valuable clam bed. It's taken four years for the shellfish to show signs of recovery. "This was the first year we could harvest clams," said the chief, "and it wasn't what it used to be."

Band members are also seeing the effects of climate change. Warmer

water temperatures and an altered Ph level have reduced the nori harvest that the band relies on for income.

"We have to look after what we have here," said Cam. "We can't risk our livelihoods and the lives of everyone else who shares this habitat with us."

Ernie said simply, "Our culture is alive and well and we want to keep it that way." 

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