

MARCH 2026 NATIONAL FORUM FOR ENVIRONMENTAL LEARNING

March 23-25 2026

Enoch Turner Schoolhouse

Toronto, Ontario



*Photo courtesy of EECOM

At a time when global uncertainty is reshaping priorities, this Forum affirms a simple but urgent truth: environmental education is foundational for resilient, equitable societies.

This Forum was developed through a process of co-creation and collaboration. More than 29 organizations came together to form an advisory committee to guide the design of this year's event.

Central to the Forum's approach was a commitment to recognizing the importance of Indigenous ways of knowing and being, and to creating space for meaningful intergenerational dialogue. Throughout the Forum, youth voices were intentionally elevated, offering perspectives that grounded discussions in lived experience while pointing clearly toward the future.

This marks the second edition of the Forum. While the first focused on presenting a draft of the [National Framework for Environmental Learning \(NFEL\)](#), including its principles and key action areas, the 2026 Forum focused on the role of cross-sectoral partners in the implementation of the NFEL moving forward, and the draft Learning Outcomes and Principles.





The initial intention of the NFEL was to highlight the co-benefits of environmental education, organized under four key themes: health and well-being; academic and behavioural outcomes; pathways to reconciliation; and workforce readiness for green careers.

This focus stemmed from a shared understanding that education systems are already navigating competing priorities, where environmental education is often perceived as a “nice-to-have” rather than a necessity. A similar dynamic exists among decision-makers at all levels of government: municipal, provincial and territorial, and federal.

This reality was brought into sharp focus following the federal government’s Comprehensive Expenditure Review, which resulted in the discontinuation of the team responsible for advancing the NFEL, as well as the Minister’s Youth Council and associated programming in 2026.

As the driving force behind the development of the Framework and the convener of a broad network of partners, Environment and Climate Change Canada’s (ECCC) shift in role prompted a rethinking of the Forum’s purpose and design.

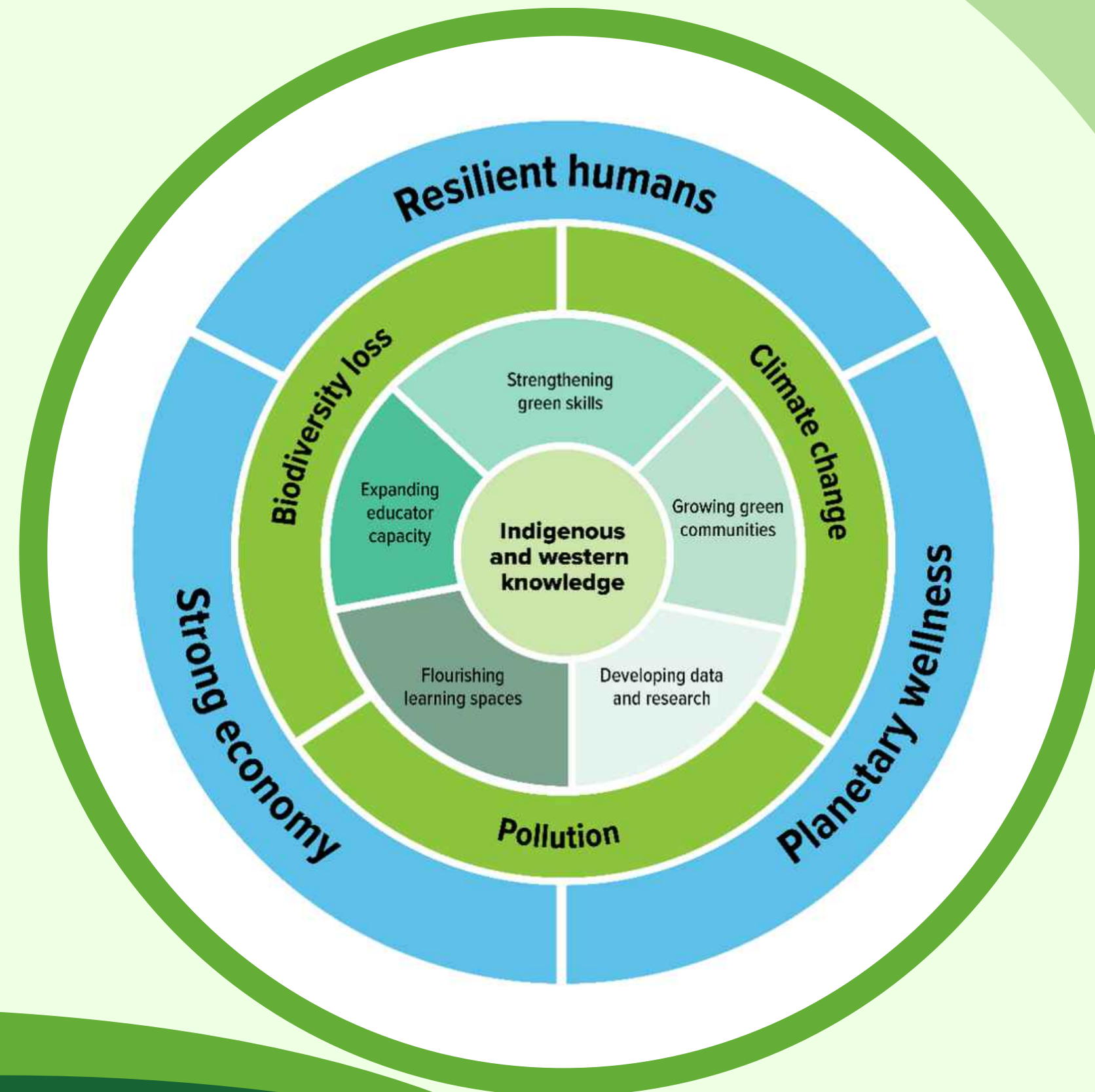
In response, the advisory committee quickly mobilized, reaffirming that this work remains essential to the future of young Canadians and must continue under a new model of shared leadership rooted in collective impact.

The Forum was subsequently redesigned around two core objectives.

- First, to deepen understanding of the co-benefits of environmental education, supported by strong calls to action from experts and panelists. These insights are intended to resonate with decision-makers across all orders of government, alongside leaders within organizations and institutions.
- Second, to create space for the sector to begin self-organizing into a coalition, fostering a more coordinated and strategic approach to advancing this work. Participants explored key questions such as:
 - What are the next steps?
 - What could an effective governance structure look like?
 - How can the sector collectively respond to ongoing funding challenges?

The summary below provides an overview of the key themes emerging from each panel and workshop from the 2026 Forum.

Sincere thanks are extended to the members of the advisory committee, whose time, expertise, and commitment not only shaped this Forum, but continues to chart a path forward.



DAY 1: YOUTH DAY AT TORONTO ZOO

Youth Day was hosted by the Toronto Zoo in collaboration with the Centre for Global Education (CGE). Approximately 50 students from nine schools across the Greater Toronto Area gathered to workshop a presentation focused on their hopes and recommendations for strengthening environmental education.

The day featured a series of interactive activities where students were introduced to the environmental education framework by Dr. Ellen Field (Lakehead University), exploring its key components, in particular the Learning Outcomes and Principles, before contributing their own perspectives as current environmental learners. They collaboratively developed a set of case studies highlighting strong examples of environmental education to share at the Forum and participated in a “blue sky” activity to imagine what more can be done to achieve environmental education goals.

“I remember middle school me feeling so much hopelessness when I saw the wildfire smoke cover the skies because I felt like couldn’t do anything....I feel like stepping into this Forum was just one way of creating a future where students look at challenges and don’t feel scared, don’t feel helpless, And instead feel that they’re connected to a wider community of people who are dedicated to making the world a more sustainable place.” - Sophia, Grade 11



Overall, the group brought forward a diverse range of perspectives, including the need for more equitable access to environmental literacy and nature-based learning, the impacts of AI and emerging technologies in classrooms, and ideas for addressing growing climate anxiety and disconnection from the natural world.

The day concluded with a panel featuring Dolf DeJong (Toronto Zoo) and Jennie McCaffrey (BC Parks Foundation), which allowed students to engage directly with professionals working in conservation, ask questions about pathways after high school, and learn about the diverse roles that contribute to environmental protection.



DAY 2: 2026 NATIONAL FORUM FOR ENVIRONMENTAL LEARNING

The March 2026 National Forum on Environmental Learning, the second of its kind, brought together educators, youth, Indigenous leaders, policymakers, researchers, and NGOs to advance a shared national vision for environmental learning. Elder Jimmy Dick (Moose Cree First Nation) opened the Forum with a land acknowledgement and reflections on his lived experiences, emphasizing healing, truth, and shared purpose. Haley Guest (Canadian Network for Environmental Education and Communication (EECOM)) welcomed participants, framing the Forum as a collective effort to align on a national “north star” for environmental learning.

Youth from CGE, led by Sarah Flynn, presented a series of student-derived insights and concerns. They identified gaps in policy, funding, and clarity around climate action, expressing the need for experiences that build agency rather than passively receiving information.

They highlighted the importance of holistic learning, justice, inclusion, and recognition of the disproportionate impacts of climate change on marginalized communities such as Africville, Nova Scotia. Further, they emphasized the power of unlikely messengers like social media influencers for sharing environmental actions.



*Photo courtesy of EECOM

Toronto Mayor Olivia Chow followed with remarks about the reality of triple planetary threats and their impacts on municipal infrastructure, public health, and economic resilience. She pointed to local Toronto initiatives such as Better Homes TO and the Ravine Youth Team, underscoring the need for climate-aware education and green jobs.

A panel, facilitated by James Bartram (International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)) featuring Maya Eyssen (ECCC), Haley Guest, and Dr. Ellen Field outlined the development and intent of the draft National Framework for Environmental Learning, published in December 2025. The panel emphasized grassroots' origins, the importance of international alignment, and the five key focus areas. The panel also described the Landscape Review informing the Framework, noting the importance of system-level transformation rather than only individual learning outcomes.



*Photos courtesy of EECOM



Subsequent workshops and panels focused on potential governance structures for a future coalition, sector collaboration, and practical barriers. Speakers including James Bartram, Colin Harris (Take Me Outside), Dolf DeJong, and Sean Southey (Canadian Wildlife Federation (CWF)) emphasized the need for strong cross-sector relationships, equity in student access to outdoor learning, and recognition that environmental education funding is essential rather than charitable. Barriers such as siloed sectors, limited field trip funding, and inconsistent support across provinces were recurring themes.

A Health panel highlighted intersections between environmental learning, public health, and community wellbeing. Dr. Erica Phipps (The Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and Environment (CPCHE)), Dr. Louise de Lannoy (Outdoor Play Canada), Helen Doyle (Canadian Public Health Association), and Jennie McCaffrey underscored the impacts of pollution, extreme heat, artificial turf, and limited nature access on children's learning and health. They advocated for setting specific temperature and non-toxic material standards in places where children learn and play, both indoors and outdoors, normalizing outdoor time as quality learning time, addressing parental fears, and reframing nature as essential to healthy development.



Funding discussions facilitated by James Bartram, brought together Ryan Dymont (EcoSchools Canada), Jennie McCaffrey, Tovah Barocas (Earth Rangers), and Robin Lawson (Wildlife Habitat Canada (WHC)). They emphasized diversifying funding, aligning with funder priorities, telling compelling impact stories, and navigating value alignment when accepting corporate contributions.

*Photo courtesy of the Re-Nature Foundation

*Photo courtesy of EECOM

A panel on reconciliation featured Dr. Lindy Phelps-Henderson, Meagan Lortie and MJ Torres (Jane Goodall Foundation), Jennie McCaffrey, and Beze Gray (Armstrong First Nation). They spoke about the responsibility to avoid tokenism, barriers rooted in colonial systems, and the importance of local Indigenous knowledge, fair compensation, and building trust over time. Audience questions highlighted issues of pan-Indigenous representation, curriculum gaps, and the persistent disconnect for urban Indigenous youth.

Assistant Deputy Minister Michael Zinck (ECCC) closed Day 2 with reflections on federal support, speaking of transformation and collaboration, and encouraging collective perseverance. Further, he emphasized the importance of inviting ECCC to the table in the future.

“In 10 years, there is a very personal change I would like to see come out of the NFEL. I want to make sure Indigenous people’s rights and sovereignty are respected, but I also hope Indigenous people can be more humanized in the classroom. Not all of us are spiritual. Not all of us are connected to the land. And that doesn’t make us any less Indigenous. We’re still dealing with the fallout of hundreds of years of genocide. And as our communities reshape, I think it is still important that they’re still recognized as the original peoples of this land.” - Quinn, Grade 12



*Photo courtesy of EECOM

DAY 3: THE NFEL PATH FORWARD

Day 3 opened with a Green Careers panel facilitated by James Bartram, featuring Cassidy Friske and Sam Bienenstock (Re-Nature), Alissa Gallizzi (WWF Canada), and Raz Akhbarizadeh (Eco Canada). Panelists described the value of green careers, including meaningful work, field-based experience, travel opportunities, and the need for interdisciplinary skills, data literacy, and resilience. Audience questions emphasized the importance of mentorship, exposure to nature, hands-on learning, and stronger bridges between universities and environmental industries.

An Education Outcomes panel followed, with speakers Rasulan “Q” Hoppie (Peel District School Board), Colin Harris, Terry Godwaldt (College Board), and Sarah Flynn, facilitated by James Bartram. They discussed how environmental learning can reinforce academic performance, mental health, and post-secondary readiness—provided programs meet existing educational mandates and do not add administrative burdens for teachers. Breakout discussions emphasized the need for culturally relevant approaches, supporting diverse learners, recognizing outdoor learning as effective learning, and building third-spaces such as museums and aquariums for intergenerational connection.



*Photo courtesy of the Re-Nature Foundation



*Photo courtesy of EECOM



*Image courtesy of Dr. Ellen Field

Next, Dr. Ellen Field led a participatory session on Learning Principles and Outcomes within the Framework. Attendees reviewed principles focused on holistic, systems-oriented, and place-based learning, and provided feedback on clarity, audience, developmental appropriateness, and alignment with provincial curricula. Some participants suggested stronger emphasis on civic engagement and democratic participation within the learning outcomes.

Breakout discussions then explored what successful implementation across five focus areas - educator capacity, green skills, green communities, flourishing learning spaces, and data and research - would look like over the next decade. Participants identified potential indicators, highlighted challenges in measurement, and emphasized the importance of developing realistic and inclusive metrics.

Youth then presented case studies developed in their session at the Toronto Zoo the previous day, showing the Framework already in action: analyzing climate data; winter field trips promoting unplugged nature immersion; sustainable fashion clubs; plastic-free lunch initiatives; and school-level collaborations to reduce food insecurity.



*Photo courtesy of EECOM

“...meaningful change doesn’t just come from one person or one group of people. It comes from students, educators, policymakers, all working together as one... 10 years from now, I hope to see a national framework that fully integrates climate education into all schools, not just as a separate topic, but as something connected to every single day learning and decision making.” - Leena, Grade 11

The final large-scale discussion, led by Haley Guest and Elysa Vaillancourt (Lab 22), explored governance, funding models, measurement needs, advocacy strategies, and advancing the framework at the provincial-territorial level. Participants identified the need for a convening organization, shared messaging, a benign host for pooled funding, regular national reporting, and ongoing collaboration across NGOs, governments, and educators. EECOM committed to hosting Framework resources to collect contact information for further coordination.

The Forum concluded with CGE youth delivering final calls to action:

- equip teachers through proper support; expand environmental and outdoor learning;
- create and sustain student-led initiatives; increase organizational outreach to youth;
- build long-term partnerships with schools; and reduce plastic waste in daily life.

Elder Jimmy Dick closed the event, grounding participants in gratitude, responsibility, and shared purpose.



WHAT'S NEXT?

Even as structures shift and mandates evolve, the responsibility to equip current and future generations with the knowledge, skills, and perspectives to navigate a changing world does not.

There were promising discussions with several organizations looking to form a coalition to continue this work. The Framework will continue to evolve thanks to the input received during the Forum and work led by researchers Dr. Ellen Field and Dr. Christine Kwauk.

ECCC will no longer be leading as a convening body for implementation of the Framework; however, we are encouraged by the overwhelming support from partners and stakeholders who have stepped in to maintain momentum on our collective successes.

We invite those committed to advancing environmental learning to participate in opportunities for horizontal collaboration. One such opportunity is by connecting with the NFEL Advisory Community by signing up here: [Next steps: National Forum for Environmental Learning / Prochaines étapes : le Forum national sur l'apprentissage environnemental.](#)

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We extend our sincere gratitude to the NFEL Advisory Committee for their strategic guidance in shaping the Forum.

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Kathy Nguyen (WWF Canada)
Chetna Kaith (WWF Canada)

In addition, we are grateful to the sub-committee members and other core teams who were instrumental in developing the Forum panels and activities.

Education Outcomes: Pat Maher (Nipissing University), Sarah Flynn (CGE), Colin Harris (Take Me Outside), CGE Youth, Will Burton (University of Winnipeg), Terry Godwaldt (College Board), James Bartram (IUCN).

Green Careers: Aaron Wilson (Eco Canada), Dr. Bonnie Schmidt (Let's Talk Science), Jamie Thomsen (ReNature Foundation), Kathy Nguyen (WWF Canada), James Bartram (IUCN).

Health: Helen Doyle (CPHA), Dr. Louise de Lannoy (Outdoor Play Canada), Dr. Erica Phipps (CPCHE), Jennie McCaffrey (BC Parks Foundation).

Learning Outcomes and Indicators: Dr. Ellen Field (Lakehead University), Dr. Christina Kwauk.

Path Forward: Elysa Vaillancourt (Lab 22), Dr. Ellen Field (Lakehead University), Haley Guest (EECOM), Sarah Flynn (CGE), Rebecca Moon (CGE), James Bartram, Dolf DeJong (Toronto Zoo), Sean Southey (CWF), Ryan Dymont (EcoSchools Canada).

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THANK YOU



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