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### **Change begins with optimism a key message at Valley's first Youth Climate Conference**

**COMOX, VALLEY B.C.** – The Humpback come-back, could be words to describe the level of optimism reached after 300 students spent a full day learning, collaborating and finding their voice on climate action initiatives to make a positive impact in schools and their community.

On February 13, Comox Valley became the hub for youth and environmental think tanks passionate about solutions-based planning on the climate issues facing society today.

The conference, dubbed *Empowerment for Impact*, was born in response to the growing desire among youth and educators in the District to offer more education opportunities on the subject of climate and environmental protection.

A first of its kind, the Regional Youth Climate Action Conference, hosted by Comox Valley Schools at the Florence Filberg Centre, was the brainchild of three educators who have been instrumental in supporting youth express their concerns while spearheading learning opportunities to enhance and improve students' interaction with the environment.

Serina Allison, District Environmental and Outdoor Learning (EOL) teacher, teamed up Jill Peacock, recently retired educator and Heather Beckett, Mark R. Isfeld, to develop a robust agenda that included presentations from key community leaders, team-building activities, expert panel discussions, brainstorming, and, for the grand finale, an intense collaboration exercise on drafting a feasible action plan to tackle local issues.

The day was fast-paced and deeply focused on changing the narrative around climate issues to adopt an optimistic approach with the understanding that no one is truly alone on the journey. Change is best accomplished when working together.

“The conference was all about providing youth with an opportunity to connect with one another, in small groups and large to share their passion for environmental advocacy and to generate positive discussion and ideas,” explained Allison. “All the activities were geared toward empowering and fostering collaboration to create positive environmental change and to educate youth around the issues we face here on our island.”

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Soon after the conference agenda was set, word spread quickly to neighbouring school districts attracting registrants from other regions including Nanaimo/Ladysmith, Parksville/Qualicum, Powell River, and Campbell River.

The conference began first with a storytelling journey to demonstrate there is a common thread that weaves amongst all participants and it is rooted in a shared value system around climate action. Guest presenters took that message further to highlight current and critical environmental issues in the local and surrounding communities on Vancouver Island with the goal of identifying where some action planning could be implemented to address real problems.

In her presentation *Think Globally, Act Locally* which focused on drinking water supplies, Meaghan Cursons was candid about the intense feelings of doom and gloom in response to recent climate crises unfolding across the globe such as the fires in Australia.

“Allow yourself to have the big feeling and then turn that into compassion and then turn that into action,” stated Cursons, Cumberland Community Forest Society Executive Director who combines art, culture, science, and politics to initiate community action. “Maybe there’s something you can’t do because it’s some other place in the world but know that there are tons of things right here in your schools, your homes and on Vancouver Island that you can do to make a difference.”

Tina Willard-Stepan a community environmental educator with the Comox Valley Regional District (CVRD) and Comox Strathcona Waste Management, elaborated further on local change initiatives sharing ideas around smarter management of food and textiles reiterating the key tenets of waste control – reduce, reuse, recycle, repurpose.

On the heels of Willard-Stepan’s presentation, Courtenay local city councillor Will Cole-Hamilton, himself a climate activist, pointed out that there is no one more responsible to give the green light to advocate for change than ourselves and that by working together, small communities can make the greatest impact. He cited two leading examples of youth advocacy efforts within the school district already including Arden Elementary students proposing to Courtenay Mayor and Council the need for a safer commute along a busy corridor that would encourage more cyclists and walkers. The second, which earned them a finalist position for the 2020 Chamber of Commerce Award, was the efforts of the Youth Environmental Action (YEA) to collaborate with municipal leaders in addressing community climate concerns together.

Keynote presenter Elin Kelsey re-emphasized the importance of compassion as a critical enabler to change. During the afternoon workshop, Kelsey brought together the day’s discussions and outpouring of positive energy to generate hope optimism. According to Kelsey who holds a PhD in science education and communication and international environmental policy, hope optimism is a state of mind necessary if any individual or society wants to make an impactful difference. Hopelessness, which she explained is the message more commonly expressed in the media around climate issues, is a self-fulfilling prophecy. To truly address climate change, Kelsey implores youth and educators to start first with our values rather than positioning.

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Kelsey, also an internationally renowned children's storybook author, pressed upon conference participants the need to share success stories to ignite more optimism. Some of those success stories include the immense recovery of the white shark off the coast of California and the Humpback whale in numbers far exceeding the most optimistic scientific predictions, and the record number of trees on the planet today greater than any other recorded period in history.

“Don't teach climate change, teach what the world is doing on various issues around climate.”

Leaders of change such as these powerful guest presenters and conference organizers, have a remarkable way of inspiring others to act, particularly when they come from one's own community, which was the motivation behind inviting Sina Berndt to share her story as the final guest presenter. Berndt, currently a University of Victoria, happens to be G.P. Vanier *Explore Program* alumni and a graduate of Highland Secondary. She continues to actively advocate for more sustainable practices including eliminating single use plastics within the food services at UVic among other environmental initiatives. At the heart of the work she and fellow students commit to are knowing your values and a strong sense of community, without which advocacy and climate action can be daunting and near impossible.

As the day drew to a close, Allison lead participants through an activity to simulate the collaborative approach toward climate action. Participants were asked to form two rows, facing each other, interlocking arms as a life-size ball representing planet Earth passed down the line to demonstrate how to work together in keeping the momentum.

“We need to show the youth of today that the future is not resting on their shoulders alone, but rather we are here working as one, as a community; That we are not starting at the beginning but are in an exciting time of change and transformation,” explained Allison. “There will be hurdles and some resistance but by picking up where we fumble, we can continue moving forward.”

The exercise was a bit of a risk as was pulling together the first of what hopes to be many more youth collaboration endeavours. Indicators of the conference success have yet to be fully realized and it may not be determined in the number of climate action ideas created nor in any measurable terms to signal change.

“The climate story is still unfolding and demands a longer time frame to tell the full story,” explained Kelsey. “Stories change emotions.”

A broadened lens and changed perspective, a new narrative, and an optimistic approach to climate issues, are perhaps the best indicators of success to measure the value that the first Regional Youth Climate Action Conference had on the lives of these 300 registrants.

Comox Valley Schools thanks the following sponsors whose participation and contribution was also immeasurable: Blue Spruce Ice Cream; Thrifty Foods Courtenay; Habitat for Humanity; Art'n'Knapp; Home Depot; Mark R. Isfeld Secondary; World Community; and CVRD.

**NOTE TO EDITORS:** Kindly credit words and images to Mary Lee, Comox Valley Schools.

To view a video summary of youth action plans, visit our YouTube channel at  
<https://youtu.be/pDmuKEWTGwQ>

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