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ROUND SQUARE CONFERENCE 2008

Creating Sustainable Communities | Local to Global

This year's conference had an environmental theme. Because Round Square has expanded to include 74 schools, for the first time the conference was held on two sites. Cobham was assigned to Collingwood School in Vancouver. Half of the schools went to Glen Lyon Norfolk School on Vancouver Island.

Our delegates were Annabel Ashworth, the Round Square Deputy Guardian, Ishita Jalan, Pauline Liu, Sophia Kost, Francesca Piercy and Chantelle Roles.

We began our trip with a four day pre-conference tour to Vancouver Island with ten other schools. On the first day we crossed to the island. It was a two hour ferry ride and then we had a five hour bus journey through alpine forests to the sleepy hamlet of Port McNeill. This was our base for our whale watching expedition. The next morning, we wrapped up warmly and headed out to sea. It was not long before we came across our first pod of Killer Whales, gliding in and out of the glassy sea. We followed them for a few hours. At one point our attention was focused on the far distance when all of a sudden an enormous humpback whale shot out of the sea and was airborne- it was breath-taking. We were all so stunned, none of us managed to get a photo.

The following day we crossed to Alert Bay home of the First Nation Namgis band. They are busy reintroducing their children to the old ways and we spent a fascinating day with them. Their unique culture revolves around the Potlatch, a system where the wealthy among them hold a party and give away their possessions to the poor, always knowing that this wealth will return to them some day. The system was outlawed in 1921 and their intricate masks and artefacts were confiscated and put in museums. These have recently been returned and the first potlatch has been held. We enjoyed a walk in their rain forest and learnt about how First nation people use medicinal plants. The grave yards are fascinating, a combination of Christian crosses and totem poles. Some of the epitaphs are certainly honest, our favourite read, 'Short and

Fat'. The afternoon finished with an exhibition of traditional dancing by local school children in the long house. We all felt the Namgis people have much to teach us about living lightly on the planet and taking only what we need.

Friday was a long day of travelling but we arrived at Collingwood in time for the Opening Ceremony. The Opening address was by a Canadian Astronaut currently on the Russian Space Station. As he held his camera up to the window, we caught sight of our fragile and beautiful planet spinning below him. King Constantine of Greece gave his opening address and then the flags of all the different schools were brought in.

We had three keynote speakers. The first, Brian Keating is a TV presenter and zoologist. He used film clips to illustrate environmental success stories and showed us it is possible for man to correct the wrongs in our wildlife populations. The most touching clip was of a gorilla giving birth. Brian also spoke about leadership, using the example of the unsuccessful polar explorer Shackleton.

Our second lecture was by a university professor, Tom Homer-Dixon. His talk was very challenging and he used many graphs and charts to illustrate the serious predicament the environment is in at the moment. We were shocked to hear that polar bears have been found 400km out to sea, unable to locate the nearest ice cap because it has melted.

I think we would all agree the final lecture by Craig Kielburger was the most inspiring. He is only 25 and began his charity 'Free the Children' when he was only 12. He had read about a boy who was given as payment for a debt in Pakistan. This boy ended up as a slave in a carpet factory until he managed to escape at the age of ten. Craig was so shocked when he read this story, he decided to start a charity. At first no one took him too seriously but he persuaded his parents to let him take three months off school when he was thirteen and go backpacking around Asia investigating child labour and slavery. So far his charity has built 400 schools and educated thousands of children. Craig makes you believe that even if you are young, you can make a profound difference. We were delighted to hear he has been made a patron of Round Square.

After each lecture we divided into our Baraza discussion groups and some difficult questions were debated. We had all calculated our carbon footprints before we left and were rather alarmed to see just how much of the world's resources we are using up. Our Rikka groups challenged us to look at ways of reducing our footprints. If you would like to know your footprint, take a look at www.myfootprint.org

Conferences are not all about work and we had many wonderful opportunities to make new friends from all corners of the world. One night we had dinner in the Vancouver Aquarium. We did feel a little guilty eating fish in full view of their cousins in the tanks. Another day was spent at the very impressive UBC, University of British Columbia. In the afternoon we watched a hockey game and even had a quick go but it is harder than it looks.

On our adventure day, we caught a ferry to the Sunshine Coast and stayed at the YMCA camp for a night in cabins. It was a spectacular setting for our leadership and outdoor activities. That night we held a Cultural show and the diversity of talent was extraordinary; from Peruvian boys beating out Salsa rhythms on wooden boxes, German students in lederhosen doing a traditional thigh-slapping dance, Kenyan warriors and deep poetry, Hindi love songs to our own Cobham girls giving a great rendition of Mamma Mia. This was truly the heart of Round Square.

All too quickly the conference drew to a close. Our final banquet was held on top of Grouse Mountain. We travelled up in sky cars and then looked down on the glittering lights of Vancouver. There was a lot of frantic swapping of facebook details and a few tears when we had to say goodbye to our new found friends. We are sure we will meet them again- hopefully at the next conference or project.

The next international conference will be held at Mayo College in India in October 2009- keep your ears open for details- going to a conference is an opportunity of a life time!

Some weird things we learned in Canada are:

- Canadians put maple syrup on EVERYTHING even bacon and eggs.
- Black bears are sometimes brown or even white.

- Ice hockey is just called hockey
- Vancouver is the cleanest shiniest city any of us have ever seen!