



What kind of biodiversity can exist in a wetland near the centre of urban Ottawa? Students at Educarium, our neighbourhood independent school, are exploring this situation.

A unique and important inner-city wetland, located on the grounds of one of Canada's most prominent cemeteries, has gained a new status thanks to a group of Grade 6 & 7 students and an extraordinary Cemetery.

Educarium students and Beechwood Cemetery officials unveiled a plaque for the newly named Macoun Marsh. The name honours the great Canadian naturalist, John Macoun, who is buried at Beechwood. The cemetery was open to a naming contest in which the community voted on the young people's reasons for a name. "We are very proud of the students at Educarium for what they have achieved. They are a credit to our community and indeed our country," they said.

Under the direction of science master teacher Michael Leveille, 27 students have spent the last year documenting the biodiversity through observations, photography, water tests and diaries. Over 625 species have been listed, over 550 have been photographed and it is estimated that a minimum of 5,000 may be present.

"I want to empower my students with a sense of responsibility," said Mr. Leveille, their science teacher, "Young people need to know that the environmental condition of our planet is not hopeless. We can celebrate one little ecosystem at a time."

For their work, the students were awarded the 2004 National Capital Regional Wildlife Festival Youth Award in Environmental Excellence earlier this year at a ceremony held at the Canadian Museum of Nature. This summer, Pinegrove Productions, an independent film company, heard about the school's project. They produced a bilingual educational film for television called "Our Incredible World" at the Macoun Marsh. It tells the tale of two students that save a wetland from a developer. This film project will be made available for Grade 6 wetland and biodiversity studies across the country next year.

The student's diaries and photographs will also be featured as an exhibit at the Eastern Ontario Biodiversity Museum in Kemptville, ON. "What these students and their teacher have accomplished is phenomenal," said Museum Director, Heather Hamilton. "We are delighted to showcase this project for others to emulate. Biodiversity needs to be celebrated in small pockets and young people need to know they have the wherewithal to make it happen. It is very uplifting."

Grade 6 student Harry Willis presented his Macoun Marsh project and research at the UN International Children's Conference on the environment this summer in the USA.

These events have inspired the formation of a Macoun Marsh Committee. This committee will oversee any landscaping or construction at this wetland. Among the members of this committee are Cynthia Iburg (Canadian Museum of Nature), Ann Coffey (Canadian Biodiversity Institute), Mark Sunderland (Neighbour), Heather Hamilton (Eastern Ontario Biodiversity Museum), Vera Yuzyk (Beechwood Cemetery Foundation) and Michael Leveille (Educarium science teacher). Among the items of interest, the committee is looking at the creation of a physical outdoor classroom.

Life in Macoun Marsh continues its seasonal rotation watched over diligently by the caring students and their teacher, safe in the knowledge that this special place will be protected for all time.