

Astronaut inspires students on environment during Sweetgrass trip



Roberta Bondar discusses nature photography with the students, who were all given digital cameras at Sweetgrass as part of a project that aims to get people connected with the environment through taking pictures. (Photo: Parks Canada)

By DON JAQUE • Tue, Sep 18, 2012

For the last three years, students from Grade 7 and 8 classes in PW Kaeser High School in Fort Smith have boated and hiked into the south of Wood Buffalo National Park for an educational wilderness experience, but this year a special visitor made their adventure all the more memorable.

When the students had just settled into their new digs - a restored warehouse (boys on one side, girls on the other and parents and teachers in the middle) - and had begun exploring the meadows where usually only buffalo roam (and wolves pursue them), a helicopter arrived with Canada's first female astronaut, Roberta Bondar.

Beyond being one of Canada's astronauts who have spent time orbiting the earth, Bondar is very accomplished. She is a medical doctor and is also a dedicated (professional) photographer. Her foundation, The Roberta Bondar Foundation, strives to promote environmental awareness using photography as a tool. Bondar spent three hours with the students starting with a captivating presentation.

"She is an amazing speaker. The kids and adults alike were completely engaged. She talked about space and about the importance of being connected to nature. It was fascinating," stated Richard Zaidan, the head of visitor experience for Wood Buffalo National Park.

Bondar instructed the students in nature photography, telling them about the type of images to look for in nature and how to capture them. Following their return to school on Monday, the students are now to select what they think is their very best photo from all the images they captured and write an "artistic statement" about it. The best photos will be selected for presentation on Bondar's website to be exhibited along with her own photographs. Called the "Bondar Challenge," the program promotes the use of photography "as a gateway to learning about our environment," and strives to help "cultivate in all ages a sense of awe, respect and appreciation for other life forms that share our planet."

Getting to class at Sweetgrass means driving over 100 km, boating 70 km on the Peace River and then hiking 13 km, with backpacks, into the historical Sweetgrass Meadows, accompanied by parent, teacher and park escorts. When the boats filled with the Grade 8 students came ashore, they were met by a similar sized group of Grade 7s on their way out after their own three-day experience.

A team of 10 Parks Canada staff (was) on hand for the event, including a media specialist from the Calgary office and a staff person from Ottawa, investigating the possibility of instituting similar programs to the Sweetgrass Student Trek into other national parks.