

GUIDING CLIMATE CHANGE

By Sarah Locke

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Nicole Lamb shoots her hand into the air as soon as she hears the first question of the day. “Does everyone know what climate change is?” asks Katharine Sandiford with the Northern Climate ExChange.

“When Greenland turns green!” chirps the eight-year-old girl guide.

Nicole is one of 67 girl guides who gathered in the multipurpose room at the Canada Games Centre last Saturday for a major event in Yukon guiding circles, the kick-off for a new badge program called the Climate Change Challenge.

The City of Whitehorse, in partnership with the Northern Climate ExChange (NCE) and the Girl Guides of Canada—Yukon Council, developed the program, which is funded by the One-Tonne Challenge, a federal initiative aimed at encouraging Canadians to cut their emissions of greenhouse gasses by one tonne.

This project is a trail blazer in girl-guiding circles—the first one on climate change in the country and the Yukon’s first effort at developing a badge program. Over the next few months, the guides will work on a whole range of activities. Today the emphasis is on arts and crafts fun, with some learning on climate change worked into the mix.

The room fairly hums with energy, but it’s controlled chaos, and soon the guides are dispersed to one of five stations set up around the room. One group makes a wind chime from recycled materials. Another gathers around two tables covered with long sheets of drawing paper, where they work on a mural showing how they can help with climate change.

Nicole Gauvin, 9, draws a detailed picture of polar bears floating on icebergs. She learned about these animals on an earlier field trip, and is worried that they might go extinct. It’s an appropriate subject for this particular challenge as its mascot is Paula the Polar Bear, who is portrayed on the climate change badges.

Some of the guides already know quite a bit about both climate change and what individuals can do to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. “We try to turn off our lights and we have those really expensive light bulbs,” explains Claire Abbott, 11, who is illustrating a number of self-propelled ways of getting to school—including skateboarding and roller-blading. “In summer we also take our laundry down the street to grandma’s to hang it up.”

Today’s activities are just the start of this challenge. To earn all four badges, the guides will need to complete a wide range of activities. They can investigate ways that their own families use energy, conduct science experiments showing how melting glaciers can raise sea levels, and make meals from more locally available foods.

Shyloh van Delft, 11, will have no problem with this last activity. On the mural she has written “buy locally, buy from little farms, buy elk and bison from little farms that have not been stuffed with hormones.”

“My mom knows a lot about this sort of stuff,” she says. “We do this all the time. We buy bison instead of beef, and we get eggs from our babysitter.”

Other girls seem less familiar with these topics, but that is exactly why Jen Turner, the climate change coordinator for the City of Whitehorse, wants to focus on raising environmental awareness among youth.

“A lot of energy waste and greenhouse gas emissions are from everyday habits. If we can get kids to change some of these energy-wasting habits early on, we hope they’ll carry this environmental awareness with them throughout their lives. For now, we hope they take these ideas home to their families,” she says.

At first Turner approached the local girl guides about a single climate change project—something simple like making cloth bags. But once they began talking, all of the partners began to see the possibilities. Jennifer Moorlag, the territorial commissioner for the Yukon girl guides, is justifiably proud of having contributed to the Yukon’s first challenge for girl guides.

“Ontario has 60,000 members and comes up with challenges all the time, but we only have about 200 members in the Yukon, so for us this is really special,” she says. Indeed the boy scouts kicked off a climate change project in 2004, and it was developed in Ontario.

This year’s pilot project will be evaluated over the next few months., and the first round of badges will be handed out to the girls in the spring. The aim is it to make it a national project in 2007, using the girl guides national web site as a clearing house for information.

“But it will be our baby,” says Moorlag.

At the end of a very busy afternoon, each guide walks out with a decorated cloth bag, a personalized light switch plate (a reminder to turn off the lights) and many tidbits of new information on climate change and energy use. And then, it’s off to the swimming pool.

For more information on the Climate Change Challenge, contact environment@city.whitehorse.yk.ca.