

House Education 2/16 testimony

Anna Saco, Teacher - Outdoor Recreation and Environmental Conservation, Lyndon Institute (5 minutes), Anna (5 minutes) questions

Good morning and thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today. My name is Anna Saco and I am the instructor for the Outdoor Recreation and Environmental Conservation program at Lyndon Institute. I developed this program three years ago and it is the first outdoor recreation program to be registered as a career and technical education program in Vermont.

Lyndon Institute is an independent high school in the NorthEast Kingdom with a total enrolled population of 430 students. Our school serves 24 towns and villages, and has a growing international boarding program. One of the crown jewels of our school is our Career and Technical Education (CTE) program that allows students to choose from 7 different programs at our school alone. Three years ago Lyndon Institute trusted me to develop an outdoor program. My hope was to not only prepare students for meaningful careers in the outdoor industry but it was to provide them with the education and guidance that I wish I had at their age in a program that centers around the idea that the outdoors is a place for everyone to feel at home, not just those with material wealth, and that the outdoors is one of the core places where students learn resilience, self-worth, and understand their place in the world.

When a student graduates from the OREC program I like to visualize them carrying a large, well fitting backpack full of all of the skills and principles that they learned and the certifications that they earned along the way. The main supports of this backpack are the foundational outdoor skills that allow our students to take care of themselves and others in wilderness settings so they not only survive but thrive as competent outdoors people, individually, and within a group. The foundation of our students' competency is understanding and diligent analysis of outdoor leadership and group dynamics (which is also the name of the dual enrollment college course embedded in our program). The brain of our backpack is the relationship that we have built with the ecosystems around us through our study of environmental conservation ethics, guided by indigenous knowledge of the lands that we recreate on and care for. Filling our backpack are the industry recognized credentials (such as wilderness first aid, cpr, game of logging chainsaw safety and more) that will give our students a head start in their chosen career path. Our students have the option to fill their backpack with two years of experience working in our Project Bike Tech program where they are equipped with the knowledge and authentic hands-on experiences necessary to go right into the industry as a bike mechanic. The back pack will be tailored to fit their interests and natural talents with authentic experiences like work based learning internships with local businesses and organizations.

Everything that we do in our program is designed to spark interest in the diverse ecosystem that is the outdoor industry, knowing that when my students choose their pathway they will feel well outfitted to embark on that particular journey. "Authentic" is the keyword as we partner with local organizations such as Kingdom Trails, NorthWoods Stewardship Center, Adaptive Sports Partners at Burke Mountain, Sterling College and The Vermont State Colleges at Lyndon Outdoor Leadership program. Experiences like trail work in the fall and spring to maintain our campus trails and volunteering with Kingdom Trails

may take a student down a path to the environmental conservation side of the industry while volunteering with Adaptive Sports Partners and helping their peers with disabilities access adaptive biking may lead us down the recreation therapy or guiding route. Building partnerships doesn't need to stay within the confines of our class time. When students wish to explore a particular career we will organize a Work Based Learning internship of their choice to authentically experience that pathway, directly connected to the industry.

While there are many free or affordable outdoor opportunities available for elementary through middle school students such as hands-on environmental education in after school programming and summer camps; **accessible outdoor opportunities are not readily available when students enter high school.** Outfitting a group of teenagers for our wide variety of activities is no small task. My goal is always to make the outdoors accessible to students without resource, inclusive and equitable for all. In the Northeast Kingdom, the inability to afford even seemingly basic footwear and outerwear is a barrier to seeing outdoor recreation as a viable career. Funding for programs like mine is essential in ensuring that a student is able to participate equally without needing any personal financial support. Bill S.304 supports the mission to ensure that Career and Technical Education is not only accessible to all students but it focuses on developing relationships with The Vermont State College system. By federal law, our outdoor program is required to offer two college dual-enrollment credits. We have taken the first step toward this by solidifying a partnership with VTSU, and this bill would reinforce our efforts. Supporting the idea that all students deserve to explore career based learning and have authentic experiences in their industries of choice is an investment in the future of Vermont and in the future of Vermont's economy. Experiential outdoor education should be the norm in high schools across the state if we want to solidify the many health benefits that research tells us it brings to our young adult population. Steering students away from trouble is easier to do when they are supported with the confidence and skills to master outdoor activities. I am very proud to say that I have students that would rather spend the day riding across Island Pond on a snowmobile, hunting with their dogs, fishing with their families, hiking, building snow shelters, mountain biking, skiing and painting the landscapes around them rather than doing pretty much anything else, including spending hours on their phones.

Thank you (wli wini) for taking the time to listen to my testimony today.

I now have the pleasure to introduce one of my students, Miss Anna Thomas who will speak on behalf of her experience in the OREC program.

Anna Thomas- Junior Lyndon Institute- Student Testimony:

Good morning everyone. My name is Anna Thomas, I am a Junior attending Lyndon Institute. I grew up watching the show North Woods Law with my father. This was what sparked my interests in becoming a Game Warden. I think that Game Wardens play a very important role in our state, but a lot of people forget who they are and what they do. They keep our wildlife populations safe, as well as everyone else by responding to

accidents or other calls that may not even be involved with wildlife. This is why I want to go into this field, to help maintain the wildlife in our beautiful state and protect the citizens who inhabit it. I have recently started an internship with a local game warden. I have only done it for a couple of days and I have already learned so much about what the job is really like and what you don't see on TV.

I think that outdoor recreation is a great way to get a head start on any type of career that is involved with the outdoors, whether that be a game warden, trail guide, ski instructor or any other outdoor job. Its also a great way to get outside during the school year, and learn skills that you may not have otherwise learned from other classes.

AT's Closing Statement:

I would like to end by reading quotes from my classmates when they were asked why the OREC program is important to them.

“I’m a very hands-on person who can’t focus when I am at a desk, and I need to be active to learn.”

“Outdoor REC is a class that gives kids things they can physically do, like trail work, and even free medical certificates where they learn through doing. The more you do something the more of a habit you form for it, so when we do physical activities the more likely you are to remember and be able to do it”

“What OREC means to me is taking time out of my normal day to go outside and explore new areas and experience new activities outside of a normal classroom setting. Whether it be learning map and compass skills or learning different animal tracks, this class provides me with the skills I need to succeed in the outdoor industry.”

Thank you for taking the time to hear our stories and learn why outdoor education is important for us.

