



For Immediate Release

May 22, 2026

This month, CBEEN's Awards of Excellence recognized six outstanding local educators from across the Columbia Basin region for their efforts in educating students and the public on environmental stewardship and sustainability.

"The 2025 award winners include primary teachers, community and Indigenous educators. All are committed to creating opportunities for people to connect with, learn about, and learn from our amazing local environment" said Laura Jackman, Network Manager for the Columbia Basin Environmental Education Network (CBEEN). "We are grateful for their dedication to bringing outdoor learning opportunities for students, professionals, and community members throughout the Columbia Basin."

CBEEN's 2025 Awards of Excellence in Environmental Education were awarded to:

- Indigenous Educator – Mara Nelson (Ktunaxa Nation)
- Primary Teacher – Charlotte Soles (Castlegar)
- Community Educator– Graeme Lee Rowlands (Golden)
- Community Educator – Amy Cross (Cranbrook)
- Primary Teacher – Myia Malakoff (Castlegar)
- Primary Teacher - Bridget O'Malley (Rossland)

Primary teacher Myia Malakoff said, "Winning the CBEEN's 2025 Award of Environmental Education Excellence means so much to me because it recognizes the passion, dedication, and creativity I pour into connecting little people with the natural world. This honor affirms the impact of my efforts and inspires me to continue fostering a deeper love and respect for the environment in my community."

Indigenous educator Mara Nelson said, "This award touches something deep inside me - it honors the strength of my ancestors, my teachers and fellow learners. It carries the hope that I have for our language Isolate to live, breathe and rise in the voices of all those who will proudly speak Ktunaxa in the future. My immense gratitude to all who are walking alongside this incredible journey."

Five of the six educators were recognized during an awards ceremony at the 2026 Outdoor Learning Conference held in Banff May 7-9, 2026. <https://takemeoutside.ca/conference/>



Photos of award winners:

https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/iobdfbez0reaywy97hg7r/AF_-Uhh8dKx5sOMDQhaH4yk?rlkey=y n4a70297at0xvmgtdjocnee9&st=svqp1lk4&dl=0

2025 AWARD RECIPIENT NOMINATION SUMMARIES

Graeme Lee Rowlands serves as Wildsight's Director of Water and Climate, where he leads water and climate programming across the organization, including the Columbia River Field School, Teach the Columbia, Columbia River Conversations, and Youth Climate Corps. A prolific writer and advocate, his work on the Columbia River Treaty, salmon restoration, reconciliation, and climate change has appeared in over 50 publications and has engaged dozens of organizations throughout the international Columbia River Basin. As co-lead of the Columbia River Field School — an accredited summer program for students aged 15 to 18 — Graeme has guided 90 young people through immersive paddling expeditions that foster deep environmental stewardship and civic engagement, with many alumni going on to participate actively in Columbia Basin advocacy. He was also instrumental in founding Youth Climate Corps BC, coordinating its inaugural pilot in fall 2020 and overseeing its growth into a province-wide initiative that has employed 150 youth and generated over 10,000 days of collective climate action work. Throughout his career, Graeme has distinguished himself as a passionate educator and visionary leader, consistently empowering young people to pursue meaningful lives of purpose, optimism, and active participation in addressing the defining environmental challenges of our time.

Charlotte Soles is a Castlegar-based educator whose innovative approach to outdoor learning has made a lasting impact on students, colleagues, and the broader Columbia Basin community. Through her signature Forest Fridays program, Charlotte leads her students into the forest each week to build connections with the land, explore local ecosystems, and develop curiosity and a deep sense of place — experiences she thoughtfully integrates back into classroom inquiry to enrich academic learning. As a mentor, Charlotte generously shares her knowledge and resources with fellow educators, having led numerous professional development sessions showcasing her outdoor learning practices, including an engaging puppet workshop complete with games, songs, and creative strategies that teachers can readily apply in their own classrooms. Her reach extends well beyond her school, having presented at district-level professional development days across the Columbia Basin, traveled to Banff to share her workshop, and contributed to gatherings such as Nipika. Through these efforts, Charlotte has equipped countless educators with practical tools to bring environmental learning into their classrooms and has helped cultivate a stronger regional culture of outdoor education. Her



passionate, generous, and visionary leadership continues to inspire stewardship, curiosity, and a lasting respect for the natural world in students and teachers alike.

Mara Nelson brings a rich background in education — having worked as a Sign Language Transliterater and Education Assistant — to her deeply committed work in Ktunaxa language and culture revitalization. A dedicated student of the Ktunaxa language under the mentorship of Elder Alfred Joseph, she has gone on to mentor dozens of language leaders herself, supporting hundreds of individuals across Ktunaxa homelands in reconnecting with their language and cultural heritage. Mara's work recognizes that Indigenous languages are not only vessels of linguistic identity, but carriers of ecological knowledge, ancestral wisdom, and foundational understandings of the land — making her contributions as much a part of environmental education as they are of cultural preservation. Over the past five years, she has collaborated with CBEEN on a range of impactful initiatives, including the Ktunaxa Language Course, language learning resource development, and a second-level language learning program. Working across a diverse spectrum of Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals and organizations, Mara continues to uplift the Ktunaxa language, people, and community with skill, dedication, and profound respect — advancing both linguistic diversity and the fundamental rights of Indigenous Peoples to their languages and cultures.

Bridget O'Malley has been a driving force in outdoor and environmental education within School District 20 for many years, leaving a meaningful and enduring mark on students, colleagues, and the broader Columbia Basin educator community. She was instrumental in establishing the outdoor learning space and school garden at Rossland Summit School, where she has co-led an outdoor education prep program alongside teaching partner Laura Jackman and actively supported fellow teachers across the district in bringing learning outdoors. As a longstanding and integral member of the Kootenay Columbia Environmental Educators (KCEE) network, Bridget has helped shape a regional culture of outdoor learning through her leadership, hosting, and ongoing collaboration. A generous and inspiring mentor, she has guided countless emerging educators through workshops, webinars, and hands-on experiences at the outdoor learning space she helped create. Her workshop "Puppets Sing" has been shared locally within SD20, at the Classroom to Communities conference in Revelstoke, and most recently at the National Outdoor Learning Conference in Banff in 2024 — a testament to the reach and resonance of her work. Above all, Bridget's warmth, enthusiasm, and deep love of the natural world have enriched the lives of countless students and motivated educators across the region to foster that same connection in their own classrooms and communities.

Myia Malakoff has been a passionate and dedicated leader in outdoor learning, guiding her primary students outside on a weekly basis in all seasons and weather conditions. She is deeply committed to helping her students build meaningful connections to the land, sharing her knowledge of local plants and animals in the Millennium Park area while thoughtfully weaving in



Indigenous ways of knowing, learning, and being. Beyond her own classroom, Myia is a strong advocate for environmental and social responsibility, consistently encouraging and supporting her colleagues to take their learning outdoors.

As an active member of the Kootenay Columbia Environmental Educators network, Myia brings enthusiasm, experience, and a collaborative spirit to her work. She has led and contributed to professional learning opportunities across School District 20, helping to build confidence and capacity among educators. She has also worked alongside local Indigenous knowledge keepers to create authentic and meaningful learning experiences for her students. Through her leadership, mentorship, and willingness to share, Myia has helped foster a growing culture of outdoor learning within her school and across the district. Her energy, joy, and genuine passion for environmental education have had a lasting impact on countless students. By connecting children to the natural world and creating space for curiosity, respect, and exploration, Myia has contributed significantly to the health, well-being, and sense of belonging of students in the Castlegar community.

Amy Cross is a remarkable educator and cultural ambassador whose workshops and language teachings celebrate the richness of her Métis heritage with warmth, openness, and deep intentionality. By encouraging Elders to step forward in their Indigenous pride, she amplifies voices of knowledge and experience, sharing their wisdom and joy with educators, students, and community members throughout the Columbia Basin. Amy models vulnerability and inclusive participation, mentoring learners of all ages and backgrounds — Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike — to engage meaningfully in the vital work of truth and reconciliation. Her community-building extends beyond in-person gatherings, as she has developed online platforms that remove barriers to Métis learning and foster ongoing connection and sharing across the region. Amy creates uniquely safe and nurturing spaces where Indigenous people are empowered to grow and deepen their knowledge, while non-Indigenous participants are warmly invited into meaningful allyship. Driven and passionate yet calm and caring, she embodies the rare qualities of an educator who can hold space for both celebration and healing — leaving a lasting legacy of connection, cultural pride, and reconciliation across the Columbia Basin.

These CBEEN Environmental Education award of Excellence winners include primary teachers, community educators, along with Indigenous educators. All are committed to creating opportunities for people to connect with, learn about, and learn from our amazing local environment in the Columbia Basin. We are grateful for their dedication to providing outdoor learning opportunities for students, professionals, and community members throughout the Columbia Basin!