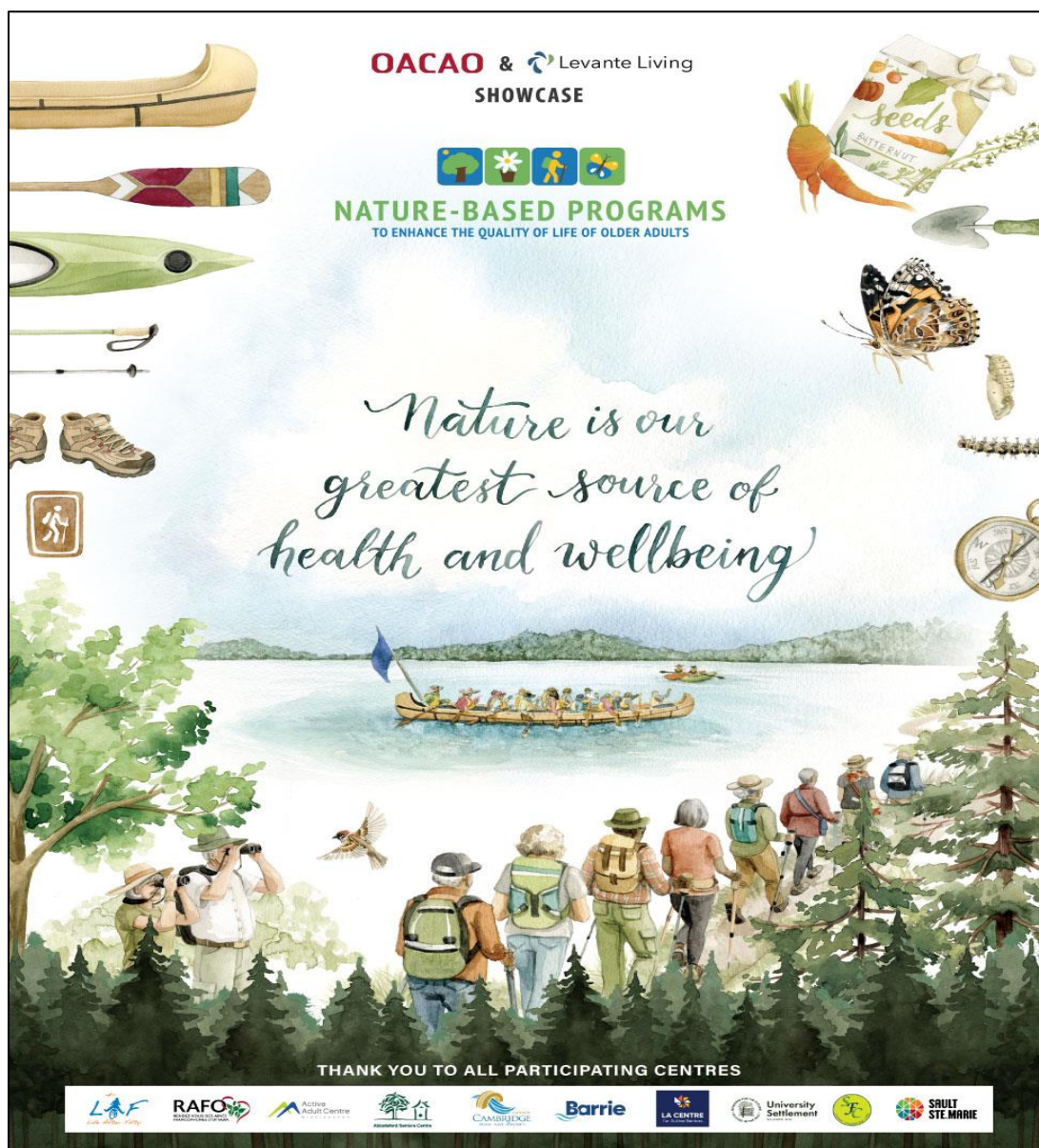


## Nature-Based Programs to Enhance the Quality of Life of Older Adults



**Final report – October 2024**

Illustration by Alicia Bint, Alicia's Infinity.

## Table of Contents

Introduction	2-3
Project descriptions	3-12
Results	12-23
Challenges and overcoming them	24-25
Conclusion	25
Appendix A: Green Social Prescribing Infographic	26
Appendix B: New Project Announcement	27
Appendix C: Data collection form	28-30

## Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) describes nature as “*our greatest source of health and wellbeing*”

There is an increasing body of scientific evidence about the benefits of immersing oneself in nature. Some of these include:

- Reduced risk of chronic disease
- Reduced blood pressure
- Increased feelings of wellbeing and social inclusion
- Reduction in stress, anxiety, depression
- A boost in one’s immune system

In addition to documented benefits, there are guidelines about how much time we should spend in nature to reap the rewards. The suggested amount of time is:

- 2 hours/week, 20 minutes at a time
- Evidence suggests that the most efficient drop in cortisol (stress hormone) levels take place between 20-30 minutes

Tune inwards the next time you go for a walk, and at about the 20-minute mark, you may begin to feel that transition to calm kick in!

While the Older Adult Centres’ Association of Ontario (OACAO) has a specific interest in nature prescribing<sup>1</sup>, one pathway of social prescribing, this project didn’t specifically focus on nature prescribing. Rather, the intent was to look more broadly at the ways in which OACAO member centres and member Seniors Active Living Centres (SALCs) could implement new and or revitalized nature-based programs at their centres and to learn more about the impact of engaging in nature on older adults.

With this in mind and with the support of Levante Living, the OACAO members launched 10 demonstration projects over a one-year period that ended September 30th, 2024. There was a strong response to the OACAO’s call for proposals in the summer of 2023, and the following projects from across the province were selected.

1. 55+ Centres, City of Barrie (55+ Parks Tours)
2. Active 55+, Sault Ste Marie (Silver Paddle Society)
3. Active Adult Centre, Mississauga (Seasons in the Garden)
4. City of Cambridge (Guided Forest Walks of Discovery)
5. LA CENTRE for Active Seniors, Toronto (Doug Saunders Gardening Club (DSGC))
6. Life After Fifty, Windsor (Never Stop Exploring – An Outdoor Nature Program)

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<sup>1</sup> To learn a bit about Green Social Prescribing, please refer to the infographic (Appendix A) that is the result of a UK study.

7. Rendez-vous des aînés francophone d'Ottawa (RAFO) (A la découverte de la nature et ses bienfaits pour les personnes aînées) (Discovering Nature and the Benefits for Seniors)
8. The Glebe Centre, Ottawa (Abbotsford Seniors' Centre Butterfly Release and Nature Walk)
9. University Settlement, Toronto (Nature Within Reach)
10. Upper Ottawa Valley Seniors Friendship Club (Deep River) (Woodsy Wednesday Walks)

We are most appreciative of the support from Levante Living. We would also like to thank and congratulate the 10 demonstration sites for the inspiring nature-based projects you implemented at your sites.

In this report, we are pleased to showcase the 10 demonstration projects and their impact on staff, volunteers, and older adult participants. Your success paves the way for expanding nature-based programs in Ontario and across Canada.

## **Project descriptions**

Interested OACAO member centres were invited to submit applications to participate as one of 10 demonstration projects (Appendix B: new project announcement).

Applications were to include a brief description of the proposed project, potential partners (if any), expected benefits and anticipated outcomes.

This section of the report presents the project descriptions as they were originally submitted for the August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023, deadline. The only change is that the descriptions have been edited here to reflect the past tense and also to include some minor wordsmithing. Please note that, for a variety of reasons (e.g. inclement weather conditions), what actually transpired during the implementation phase of the projects may have been modified.

As these demonstration projects were intended to illustrate the potential of nature-based programs in OACAO member centres and member SALCs, we wanted to share the original project descriptions, regardless of modifications that may have been introduced along the way. By doing so, readers will have a clear picture of the aspirations of each of the projects.

The 10 projects represented a mix of new and revitalized nature-based programs. In addition, they reflected various regions of Ontario (north-south, urban-rural) and included one Francophone site (Rendez-vous des aînés francophone d'Ottawa - RAFO).

## **The Glebe Centre - Abbotsford House**

[www.glebecentre.ca](http://www.glebecentre.ca)

**Project Title: Abbotsford Seniors' Centre Butterfly Release and Nature Walks**



### *Project Description*

Older adults gathered in parks and gardens in and around Ottawa to enjoy nature, socialize with others and to be in the presence of the flora and fauna of the area. Butterflies that were ready (out of their chrysalis) were released into the park or garden. Art supplies and small journals were to be available for participants to create a drawing or jot down thoughts while in the park. Transportation was offered to some participants, and others made their own way to the park or garden. Refreshments were served, and water was made available.

### *Expected benefits and anticipated outcomes*

The expected benefits for time spent in nature included increased attention, deeper connections with earth, deeper and slower breathing, increased vitamin D production, reduced risk of disease, increase sense of well-being, better mindset, reduced stress response and increased sense of personal satisfaction of the day. Anticipated outcomes included: 1. 40 participants were expected to enjoy the experience in nature 2. 80% of participants were expected to rate the overall experience as satisfied or highly satisfied 3. low income and LGBTQ2S+ participants would be invited to participate 4. 5 volunteers would be recruited 5. 5 events would take place, and 6. 1-2 partners would be approached to support the events for in-kind support of refreshments.

## **The City of Barrie 55+ Centres**

<https://www.barrie.ca/>



**Project Title: 55+ Parks Tours**

### *Project Description*

Venture with us to explore some of Barrie's finest parks. Participants explored 4 different parks in Barrie. Each park was selected for its special features. Participants engaged in nature-based programming at each site including: 1. Mindfulness Meditation in the Park – Travel to Sunnidale Park where Parkview 55+ instructors led the group through a one-hour mindfulness meditation program. Sunnidale Park is one of Barrie's largest and most diverse parks. Participants explored the meditation Zen garden. Program length approximately 2 hours 2. Learn to axe throw and learn to play archery at the Barrie Community Sports Complex. Travel to the Barrie Community Sport Complex where staff instructed participants in learning to axe throw and learning to play archery. Participants were to have their choice of activities. Program length

approximately 2 to 2 1/2 hours 3. Hike through Bear Creek Eco Park. Bear Creek Eco Park is a natural wetland. Participants were to hike along the trails and boardwalk and discover the natural wildlife in this unusual urban setting, marshland right in the heart of the City! Participants used binoculars to see the birds. Geese, ducks and a few turtles are common sightings. 1.3 km hike along a natural trail and boardwalk. Program length approximately 1 to 1.5 hours 4. Party in the Park. Participants were to choose an activity from three choices of fitness activities: use of outdoor fitness equipment along Barrie's waterfront park. 5. Art in the Park using art kits donated by the Simcoe Muskoka Geriatric Services and in partnership with the MacLaren Art Centre. Participants used soft pastels to create a beautiful sunflower each. This takeaway project was completed in Nelson Park outside the Parkview 55+ centre.

### *Expected benefits and anticipated outcomes*

The health benefits for increased participation were to be gauged using self disclosure and reported benefits by participants during the program final evaluation. Anticipated outcomes for this program included increased visits by participants to parks and increased enjoyment in nature as well as potentially new hobbies (nature walks, archery, meditation).

### **La Centre for Active Seniors**

<https://lacentreforseniors.ca/>

Project title: **Doug Saunders Gardening Club (DSGC)**



### *Project Description*

This project was to plan and plant a community garden at the 300-unit Toronto Senior Housing (TSHC) apartment building supported by our agency to revitalize the rooftop community gardens. During the pandemic, the building's garden spaces were closed to tenants and had been left untended for 3 years. In 2023, the DSGC began work to restore the community spaces; however, it did not have the resources to revitalize the building's rooftop garden. During the closure of this space, it had fallen into great disarray, overgrown, full of weeds, and was also very dirty due to falling debris from the overhead balconies and the large group of pigeons who started to nest in the space. This is a space where seniors should be able to access gardening boxes to grow their own fruits and vegetables, socialize together at the picnic tables and connect to nature in the city. OACAO's nature-based grant would provide the Garden Club with the resources to revitalize this space to be enjoyed once again by the nearly 400 seniors that live in this senior building. Seniors were to be involved in all aspects of the project - including planning, planting, and maintaining - and would be supported in sustaining the garden in future years. The vast majority of seniors we serve live on fixed incomes, in subsidized Toronto Senior Housing, are financially marginalized and belong to equity-deserving communities. The program's objectives were to encourage teamwork, build a



stronger sense of community, and improve the access and intake of fresh fruits and vegetables.

#### *Expected benefits and anticipated outcomes*

The program's benefits were expected to include: community building and increased engagement with seniors; additional access to opportunities for physical activity for seniors; a social gathering place for the community; increased education for participants including basic gardening skills, healthy eating, and an increased understanding of the local food system and sustainable food systems. An opportunity for individuals to build confidence and new skills; and improvement of the local environment through the preservation and productive use of green space.

### **City of Cambridge**

<https://www.cambridge.ca/en/index.aspx>

Project title: **Guided Forest Walks of Discovery**

#### *Project Description*

Embodying the concept of Forest Therapy, the nature-based program proposal 'Guided Forest Walks of Discovery' provided a new opportunity that would launch in June 2024 for Senior's Month. Forest therapy evolved from the Japanese practice of Shinrin-Yoku, which literally translates as "bathing in the atmosphere of the forest" and means taking in, with all of your senses, the forest environment. Connecting with nature boosts our body's immunity, energy levels, and healing ability. It can improve our mood, sleep, memory as well as focus. Nature activities also have a healthy influence on our emotional well-being, stress reduction and boosts the immune system. This pilot guided program was to be led by an instructor (lead guide) and would utilize the local tree canopy and nature trails.

#### *Expected benefits and anticipated outcomes*

This weekly program would invite older adults to meet new people, participate in easy to medium duration walks with the option of using poles to increase the physical benefits of walking which involves applying force to the poles with each stride to speed up and intensify their gait. As a result, walkers use more of their entire body (with greater intensity) receiving further fitness benefits. Offering the addition of poles expanded the program offering to varying levels of physical ability. Within the guided walk experience would be embedded sensory components; sight, smell, touch, listen as example to fully immerse participants in their surroundings. 'Guided Forest Walks of Discovery' acted as a connector of people and of our natural world. This program would welcome volunteers to act as support guides to engage in conversation and assist in monitoring for participant capacity where the lead guide would adjust pace. An evaluation would be completed at the end of the pilot and would assist in determining interest to offer subsequent future sessions



## Active Adult Centre of Mississauga

<https://aacmiss.ca/>



Project title: **Seasons in the Garden**

### *Project Description*

Through this program, forty-two participants would experience Gardens through the Seasons. Each month, March through August 2024, we would visit a garden, including the Royal Botanical Gardens, Riverwood Conservancy, Iceland Community Garden, and the Humber Arboretum. Topics could include seed starting in March, the Humber Tranquility Bird Garden and/or Food Learning Garden and the Enabling Garden at Riverwood.

### *Expected benefits and anticipated outcomes*

The educational component would provide participants with increased knowledge of plants, a greater appreciation of nature and their role in it, and encourage them to grow their own plants and vegetables. A qualified instructor would incorporate urban pole walking, stretches and/or yoga into the visits, and we would provide a simple, nutritious lunch to enjoy in the fresh air, and socialization after a long winter of isolation, improving their mental health.

## University Settlement

<https://universitysettlement.ca/>



Project title: **Nature Within Reach**

### *Project Description*

Nature Within Reach program aimed to introduce and connect older adults residing in the City of Toronto to natural parks and trails in their neighbourhoods. Living in Toronto, many older adults may not realize the presence of serene natural spaces within the city. Our goal was to bring the serenity and joy of the natural world closer to older adults, bridging the gap between older adults and nature. Through activities such as guided nature walks, hands-on outdoor educational workshops and invigorating pole walking, and sessions in natural parks and trails, participants were to have opportunities to immerse themselves in natural green spaces that are only steps away from their homes.

The program was be delivered to participants free of charge. The programming was to take place monthly during the fall and spring when older adults would join guided nature walks or partake in outdoor activities such as pole walking along one of the city's nature trails. The incorporation of seasonal programming also ensured making the most of Toronto's natural beauty during those times of the year.



The program organizers planned to collaborate with High Park Nature Centre and Toronto Tommy Thompson Park in preparing and delivering some of the outdoor activities, such as guided nature walks and outdoor hands-on educational workshops on biodiversity. Program participant information and surveys were to be collected at the time of registration and after each session. Participant information such as age category, identified gender, language and ethnicity was to be collected. Survey questions were to include level of connectedness to nature/friends/the community, decrease in levels of loneliness, anxiety and stress, overall feelings of well-being et cetera.

### *Expected benefits and anticipated outcomes*

The program was expected to not only help nurture meaningful connections older adults have with nature, their friends and the community but would also significantly improve their overall sense of well-being and strength.

The anticipated outcomes of participating in the Nature Within Reach program included:

- Discovering the wealth of natural spaces in the City of Toronto, including nature walks and trails in their neighbourhoods.
- Learning about the diverse ecosystem and wildlife that thrive in some of Toronto's most beloved natural parks (i.e., High Park).
- Exploring and embracing new activities that are suitable for older adults to engage in the outdoors (i.e. Pole Walking, Bird-Watching).

The expected benefits for older adults included:

- A deeper connection with nature, and formation as well as maintenance of meaningful social bonds with their peers.
- Experiencing enhanced mental well-being from the calming and rejuvenating effect of connecting with nature, which helps to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression among older adults.
- Improved physical health from participating in activities such as guided walks and pole walking in nature. This could be expected to help older adults maintain mobility, balance, and cardiovascular health.

## **Life After Fifty**

<https://www.lifeafterfifty.ca/>



**Project title: Never Stop Exploring - An Outdoor Nature Program**

### *Project Description*

Life After Fifty was thrilled to present a grant proposal for an exciting new outdoor nature program. The idea of this new program was inspired by members' feedback on a past program that was offered in June 2023 – of the many programs requested, many of our members expressed that they would like to see a gardening program. This proposed program, which would involve gardening, bird watching workshops and drumming circles, was designed to offer senior members unique and enriching experiences while fostering a strong sense of community, connectedness and well-being. Gardening offers many therapeutic and health benefits and is proven to lighten one's mood and lower stress and anxiety levels. Gardening would accommodate all members and their abilities, while incorporating moments of light physical activity and

allowing individuals to become grounded in mother nature. Bird watching was another huge, requested program. This workshop would reconnect members to nature, while providing educational and social opportunities. Bird watching would encourage members to engage in mindfulness and attentiveness towards the environment around them – while being able to immerse themselves and enjoy the local wildlife. This would be led by professionals who would be able to provide guidebooks, binoculars and would be able to help identify birds, fostering a safe environment for learning and curiosity. Drumming circles have been very successful at the centre and amongst our members. This would be led by a professional who would provide the drums. Through the universal language of music, this drumming workshop would aim to promote connectiveness, movement and creativity. Drumming has also been proven to improve cognitive functioning and reduce the feeling of loneliness – something that many of our members struggle with. The rhythmic nature of drumming also allows a form of emotional expression and stress relief – benefiting the overall well-being of all participants.

### *Expected benefits and anticipate outcomes*

By implementing this outdoor nature program, we anticipated several positive outcomes for our members – including improved physical health, enhanced mental well-being and strengthened community bonds. Through educational and therapeutic opportunities, Life After Fifty firmly believes that this outdoor nature program would significantly benefit our members. The hands-on experiences that this program offers, would empower members with a sense of self-accomplishment – and a rewarding experience of watching their efforts bloom. Life After Fifty is committed to creating and fostering inclusivity, physical activity, and connectedness for adults aged 50 and above.

### **Active 55+ - Sault Ste. Marie**

<https://saultstemarie.ca/>



**Project Title: Silver Paddle Society**

### **Project Description**

The Silver Paddle Society, Nature-Based Demonstration Program was planned to be a collaborative effort between local community organizations, environmental conservation groups and recreational watercraft providers. The program offered a series of guided and recreational paddling excursions for senior citizens, 55+ in scenic St. Mary's river. These excursions were led by experienced instructors and nature enthusiasts who were well-versed in water safety and environmental conservation. The program spanned several weeks, with participants engaging in regular paddling sessions. Each session typically lasted an hour, allowing ample time for exploration, leisurely paddling, and wildlife observation. Participants were divided into small groups, ensuring personalized attention and a comfortable experience for everyone. Partners Supporting the Project: Municipality: the Bay Street Active Living Centre served as the primary facilitator of the program, handling participant registrations, logistics, and coordination with partners. Environmental Conservation Group: This Lake Superior Watershed Conservancy provided guidance on the significance of preserving natural habitats, wildlife

conservation and how paddlers can minimize their impact on the environment. Recreational Watercraft Providers: The Waterfront Adventure Centre was to provide kayaks, canoes, and safety equipment partner with the program, offering discounted rental rates for participants.

### *Expected benefits and anticipated outcomes*

Anticipated outcomes included *Increased Physical Activity*: The program aimed to encourage seniors to lead active lifestyles and engage in regular exercise, contributing to improved cardiovascular health, flexibility and overall well-being. *Enhanced Environmental Awareness*: Through guided paddling experiences, participants were expected to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of local ecosystems, wildlife, and the importance of environmental conservation. *Social Connection and Companionship*: The program fostered a sense of belonging and camaraderie among participants, reducing feelings of isolation and promoting mental well-being. Expected Benefits: *Health and Wellness*: Regular physical activity through paddling contributes to improved physical fitness and mental health for seniors, reducing the risk of age-related health issues. *Environmental Stewardship*: Increased awareness of local ecosystems and conservation efforts empowers seniors to become advocates for environmental stewardship and sustainable practices. *Community Engagement*: The program strengthens community ties by bringing seniors together in a shared pursuit of outdoor activities and nature appreciation. *Quality of Life*: By providing enriching and enjoyable experiences, the program enhances the overall quality of life for senior participants, fostering a positive outlook on aging.

In conclusion, the Senior's Paddling Group, Nature-Based Demonstration Program offered a unique opportunity for older adults to engage in nature-based activities, fostering physical, mental, and environmental well-being. Through the collaborative efforts of various partners, the initiative sought to empower seniors to lead active and fulfilling lives while building a deeper connection with the natural world around them.

### **Upper Ottawa Valley (UOV) Seniors' Friendship Club**

<https://seniorsfriendshipclub.ca/>

Project Title: **Woodsy Wednesday Walks**



### *Project Description*

The UOV Seniors Friendship Club already had a weekly nature-based walking program: The Woodsy Wednesday Walks. These walks took place on local trails close to the community. The walks were held most Wednesdays from September to May, weather permitting and not usually during holiday times when people are busy with families. Last year 21 walks were taken. Most walks had an attendance of 15-20 people, made up of a core of about 30 regulars. Most walks were informal with a leader setting the course and friends walking together and conversing along the way. This year was the 10th anniversary of the Seniors' Friendship Club and we wanted to celebrate with an excellent program for members both new and old. With that in mind we wanted to

rejuvenate the walking program with some special topic walks, and to broadly advertise this exciting program to all seniors in their service area. Our hope was that these special events would attract more seniors to join us for our nature visits. This year's program was to include 6 special topic walks in addition to the regular weekly informal walks. The special topic walks were to be led by nature specialists (biologists, naturalists, ecologists, foresters) who are local to the area and each would present a topic of interest. Funding would be used to pay for travel costs (mileage) and honorariums for some of the speakers (some do not accept a speaking fee).

Some of the special topics included *Wolves in Our Area*: A presentation on research about the status of wolves in the local area (partnering with DND, CNL and CFS) - *Evening Owl Call*: Led by a local naturalist participants would meet at dusk on a local forest road to listen for owls (partnering with PAFN). *Forest Ecology*: Led by a local forest scientist, this walk would focus on the ecological links between the plants and trees that make up a forest. *Spring Waterfowl Walk*: Led by a local naturalist this walk to a local wetland would feature a talk about the ducks, geese and swans in the area (partnering with PAFN). *Spring Migratory Songbird Walk*: this walk through the forest with a local naturalist would provide tips on identifying songbirds by their appearance and their calls (partnering with PAFN).

Three walks were to be held in the fall, and three in the spring. Each walk was to be organized with a primary date and a rain date. Participants were required to arrange their own transportation to the trailhead. Organizers would have to limit the numbers of participants on these walks for safety and logistics reasons

#### *Expected benefits and anticipated outcomes*

The walks would introduce seniors to local trails and provide them with a chance to meet others with similar interests. Walkers would get a chance to find out about equipment and practices to make for a safe outing. One of the proposed special topics was Safety in the Woods, an outdoor workshop that would teach seniors about how to travel safely in the woods and what to do in an emergency (partnering with the Shaw Woods Ecology Centre).

#### **Rendez-vous des aînés francophones d'Ottawa (RAFO)**

<https://www.rafo.ca/>



**Project Title: Discovering nature and its benefits for seniors**

#### *Project Description*

##### **Objectives:**

1. Discover new places or revisit them from a different perspective (municipal and provincial parks, the Greenbelt, ecological and public gardens, the Experimental Farm, neighbourhood parks, et cetera)
2. Allow seniors to observe flora and fauna with the support of an expert in a field and discover or rediscover the benefits of nature;

3. Expose elders to new hobbies from nature through various media (birding, photography, nature exercises to relax, hobbies such as gardening, painting, drawing, crafting from nature, making an herbarium, taking an interest in native fungi and plants, et cetera)
4. To give opportunities and new habits to seniors to exercise, distract themselves, socialize in an outdoor environment while remaining vigilant to their health and safety.

#### Implementation:

RAFO was to organize 8 nature outings (2 per season) to discover nature and the benefits it provides for our seniors. Examples of outputs:

- An outdoor outing to the Experimental Farm to take photo;
- An outing to a park in the Green Belt to discover native plants
- An outing to an ecological garden, arboretum or ornamental gardens to discover new species
- A nature outing to do relaxation exercises (yoga or tai chi movements)
- An outing at the water's edge to be inspired by nature to draw or paint, visual projects or make an herbarium, et cetera.
- Use nearby park facilities to perform stretching exercises without injury.
- Observe the birds that are around your home and try to identify them.

#### *Expected benefits and anticipated outcomes*

Health benefits such as learning to safely engage in stretching exercises, experiencing the benefits of relaxation exercises.

## **Results**

Demonstration projects are similar to pilot projects in that the intent is to try different ideas and innovative approaches related to a topic, in this case nature-based programs, and to identify challenges and/or opportunities before you implement a program on an ongoing basis or on a larger scale. Demonstration projects are not meant to be rigorous research studies – that comes later!

As it was micro grants that supported these projects, the OACAO team was acutely aware of the need to balance collecting some impact and participation data but not overwhelming centres by asking them to dedicate too much time to data collection. The data collection form (Appendix C) was co-created by a small group of representatives of participating centres and a representative of the OACAO team. The group was mindful of recommending what they thought was feasible for centres to report on – information that would provide insights into introducing new or revitalized nature-based programs at the centres but without creating excessive work for the centres.

#### *By the numbers*

Participating centres were asked to report on the overall number of older participants. For our purposes, whether individuals participated in more than one activity was not necessary to capture.

Over the course of the project, **1,054** older adults participated in activities, just shy of the original projected numbers (1,182).

In addition, **128** volunteers supported the activities and **25** partnerships contributed to the projects.

### *Partnerships*

While developing external partnerships was not a grant requirement and may not have been relevant for every project, a number of centres did include partnerships/collaborations to support their nature-based programs.

Partnerships can contribute immeasurably to initiatives from providing practical and operational support to helping to raise awareness about the topic (e.g. in this case, implementing nature-based programs) to creating opportunities for sustainability in the future.

The following chart highlights the partners/collaborators engaged in the projects and a brief description of their roles. We hope that including this information in the report may serve to generate ideas for additional partnerships that might benefit and enhance nature-based programs in the future.

<b>Name of the centre</b>	<b>Partner(s)</b>	<b>Role</b>
<b>University Settlement Toronto</b>	COSTI	Partnership with the Senior Department at COSTI on walk to Scarborough Bluff Trail  A COSTI dedicated staff volunteer with knowledge of the trail, its natural surroundings and local experience led the walk.
<b>Active Adult Centre Mississauga</b>	Humber Arboretum & Credit Valley Conservation Authority (CVCA)	A Humber representative gave a guided tour and provided a background about the arboretum and the relationship with CVCA.
	Ecosource	Gave a tour of the vegetable teaching garden.
	Riverwood Conservancy	A walking tour of the gardens provided participants with an opportunity to learn about



		the plants and the interaction of plants and trees with animals, birds and insects.
<b>Ottawa Rendez-vous des aînés francophones d'Ottawa</b>	Montfort Renaissance/Centre Guigues and Jardin Royal Residence	Provided transportation services (shuttle bus and driver)
	IPG Wellness	Led exercise and stretching sessions using the RAFO's outdoors fitness equipment
	Paule Ouellet, biologist	Led three nature walks
	Friends of Petrie Island	Led a tour of Petrie Island and presentation on its turtle habitat
	Tucker House Renewal Center	Facilitated a gardening workshop and led a tour of their pollinator garden
<b>Upper Ottawa Valley Seniors' Friendship Club</b>  <b>Deep River</b>	Pembroke Field Naturalists	Led two expeditions. They suggested location, led the group and provided a briefing on the topics.
	Shaw Woods Ecology Centre	Presentation on traveling safely in the woods.
	Department of National Defense Canada Canadian Nuclear Laboratories Centre of Forensic Sciences	Presentation on research about the status of wolves in the area
<b>City of Barrie</b> Internal (city) and external partnerships	City of Barrie Fitness (Active Living)	Sourced an instructor to demonstrate fitness equipment on the Barrie waterfront.
	City of Barrie Camp (Community) programs	Camp leaders instructed participants in the use of archery and axe throwing equipment.
	City of Barrie Parks Department	Parks staff provided their expertise during guided walks.

	North Simcoe Geriatric Services & the MacLaren Art Centre	Use of art kits. Note that, based on participant feedback, after one session, the art project was replaced with the Waterfront Fitness Equipment. This cohort of participants preferred more active programming.
<b>City of Cambridge</b>	Individual from the Certified Association of Nature and Forest Therapy Guides & Trainers Owner of Deep Roots Walk	Individual had extensive knowledge, experience and understanding of local parks and trail systems.  She was an excellent collaborator for ideation, safety and risk and program delivery.
<b>City of Sault Ste Marie</b>	Waterfront Adventure Centre (WAC)	WAC provided space to launch watercrafts and to socialize. They also provided their watercrafts at a discounted rate.
	Lake Superior Watershed Conservancy	Facilitated the Metis Tour in they 36' canoe and provided paddling instruction and a fully guided tour of the St. Mary's River, teaching the history of Sault Ste Marie and its Metis heritage, the locks and the Lake Superior watershed.
<b>Life After Fifty Windsor</b> (partner led workshops; some were hands-on experiences and some were educational opportunities designed to	Drumming Circle	Among other benefits, the drumming workshop was designed to promote connectiveness, movement and creativity, offering a form of emotional expression and stress relief.

pique the interest of future naturalists.	Arbor Memorial	A horticulturalist offered a gardening workshop that accommodated all participants and their abilities while incorporating some light physical activity and helping individuals to become grounded in nature.
	Pelee Island Bird Conservatory	Getting started with birding on one's neighbourhood and contributing to bird conservation.
	Windsor Horticultural Society	Workshop on building your own herb container. Learning about which herbs pair well with which foods.
	Monarch Butterflies	Individual taught participants how to attract monarch butterflies to one's garden and how to raise them on your own.
	Yoga/Qigong Hybrid	Yoga meets qigong and participants were taught physical exercises and flowing movements to improve balance and breathing control.
	National Urban Park Hub University of Windsor	Learning how to access the proposed National Urban Par and build relationships with green spaces in one's own neighbourhood.

### *Impact on Participants*

Participating centres were invited to share, from ***their*** perspective, the impact of the nature-based programs on older adult participants. In addition, where this information was available, centres also shared experiences as expressed by older adults and/or project volunteers.

While a few centres surveyed their participants for feedback, the results are primarily qualitative and anecdotal in nature. These impact stories will be instrumental for building on and transitioning from demonstration projects to larger, funded research initiatives.

For purposes of this report, staff, volunteer and older adult perspectives about impact have been combined.

Four themes that emerged across the 10 projects included:

- A greater appreciation for and connection to nature
- The importance of socializing and building relationships with peers
- The health and well-being benefits of engaging in nature
- A reduction in social isolation and loneliness

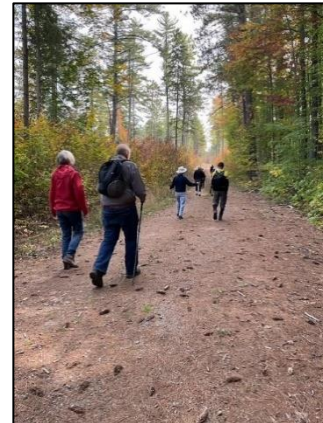
Reports from all 10 centres were very positive in describing the impact of the various activities on participants. In **Sault Ste Marie**, for example, the experience deepened the older adults' understanding of local and Indigenous history, fostering a stronger sense of belonging and a desire for more knowledge. Some participants, new to river experiences, formed a profound connection with the water's power. Staff reported observing increased confidence as participants explored and discovered new birds, species and locations.

One participant mentioned that, after the Metis tour, he bought four new books on local history and is researching his family's role in the fur trade. Many participants said that being on the water provided a profound sense of peace and calm, while others noticed they were engaging muscles they hadn't used in years!



In **Deep River**, the Upper Ottawa Valley Seniors' Friendship Club (UOVSFC) reports that most of their members are still active in the community but that the Woodsy Wednesday Walks amplified their enjoyment of nature. The walks helped to keep people active and to maintain their mobility. Participants were amazed to see wildlife so close to where they live!

Similar to the experience in Sault Ste Marie, for some members, these outings increased confidence as they learned about safety in the woods, how to use a compass and became knowledgeable about local trails and spots of natural interest.



In **Windsor**, Ontario, Life After Fifty surveyed their members about the impact of the nature-based program that was comprised of 8 workshops. The responses reinforce the benefits of participant experiences. Please note that each of the participants had the opportunity to choose their own workshops which accounts for different experiences.

- ✓ **54** reported 'increased physical movement'
- ✓ **69** reported 'increased appreciation of nature and wildlife'
- ✓ **65** reported 'improved mood and sense of well-being'
- ✓ **70** reported 'reduction in stress and anxiety'
- ✓ **62** reported 'sense of accomplishment/pride'
- ✓ **69** reported 'sense of bonding/connection'
- ✓ **79** reported 'increased knowledge or skill'

In addition to the workshop feedback, in an overall survey of 280 participants, **85%** noted that they felt more connected to nature, **80%** noted that their movement had increased, **100%** said they met people and had time to connect with them and **98%** said they would be interested in nature-based programs in the future.

These findings are consistent with the research literature about the health and well-being benefits of nature and its potential to reduce stress and anxiety.





Consistent with the other projects, participants in the **City of Barrie's 55+** parks tour were positive about their experiences and enjoyed exploring parks and nature in their own backyard. For example, they did not know about the Zen Garden at Sunnidale park prior to their visit and, at the Bear Creek Eco park, the group learned about the marshland.

Participants especially enjoyed forest bathing which was new for all and also hiking. Forest bathing gave participants an opportunity to slow down and to appreciate being in nature. They reported feeling refreshed and relaxed and didn't want the forest bathing program to end! These evaluations included self reflections including reports that participants felt more relaxed, part of a group, and the benefits of increased sense of acceptance with laughing and interacting with others. The small group benefit included, among other benefits, an increased appreciation of nature and of self awareness plus a clearer mind, relaxation and awareness of nature.

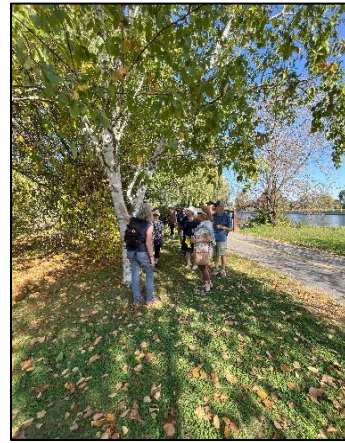
In terms of impact at a centre level, the project lead in Barrie noted that she would not have been able to organize a group without the micro grant. She added that, now that a group exists, she will be able to build on the experience to add more nature-based programs to the 55+ Centre.



Two of the nature-based projects took place in **Ottawa**. RAFO reported that their participants were very engaged and expressed a desire for more nature-based activities in the future. Although participants may have visited some of the places, they enjoyed discovering them through a new 'lens' and a heightened sense of appreciation. What they learned about pollinators, habitats and different species of plants and trees contributed to a greater appreciation of nature and its benefits.

Most participants said they felt encouraged to be more active and to get out in nature more often. That's a win-win!





The other **Ottawa** based project took place at the Glebe Centre – Abbotsford House. The leaders observed smiles and friendly conversations amongst the participants. Many enjoyed getting their hands dirty in the soil as they prepared the garden area for plants for the butterflies once they were ready to be released into nature. The project leads also observed calmness among the participants who walked in the parks with the river nearby and gardens filled with tulips. The time spent in nature brought out a serenity and happiness in their spirits. Being located in an urban seniors' centre means limited outdoor space so being in the parks and local gardens was innovative for everyone. There was much joy in the participants who released the painted lady butterflies into nature. At times the butterflies lingered on the finger of an older adult and that resulted in much happiness for everyone who witnessed it. There was so much beauty in the act of releasing the butterflies. Awe and wonder!

In addition to the positive observations of staff, all participants either 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that they enjoyed the nature-based activities. One anonymous participant wrote *"Thank you for the marvellous picnic and walk! You coordinated it all, brought a really good spread and picked a great site to go trekking. The company worked well together and I'm still feeling the good vibes a week later".*



The **City of Cambridge** guided forest walks were well received by participants. It gave them an opportunity to explore local nature while engaging in an activity that involved physical and sensory components along with providing social connections. Examples of feedback from participants included:

- ✓ 'slow down and immerse ourselves in the environment'
- ✓ 'I get it, usually I go for a hike without really seeing what's around me'
- ✓ 'I felt a connection to nature when I slowed down'

The walks were led by a certified Forest Therapy Guide, a budgetary consideration for any centre wanting to avail themselves of this expertise in the future. The guide was able to assess the outdoor spaces and planned and led the sessions.

Getting outside and immersing oneself in nature can affect mood and physical health. An added benefit of the Deep Roots Walk program and the guide is the emotional impact and the impact on mental health; that contributes to long lasting impact. Many participants described the impact using words like calming, feeling relaxed, peaceful, noticing each sound, taking time to listen and to feel nature.



We were excited to see what engaging with nature might look like in a dense urban core. That opportunity presented itself in **Toronto** through University Settlement as they sought to connect older adults with the city's natural parks and trails. Many older adults shared how much they loved the outings and mentioned how refreshing it was to be out in nature. In addition to the enjoyment of being in nature, participants expressed feeling a deeper sense of community connection and valued the opportunity to socialize with their peers.

The project leaders described the nature-based program as *transformative* for older adults, giving them a chance to step outside their homes and to reconnect with nature while building meaningful relationships with their peers. The project leader noted that the nature-based program reignited a sense of adventure and curiosity in older adults, something that does not always occur in programs.

Through surveys, participants consistently reported feeling uplifted and less isolated after their walks. More than 90% of the responses indicated improved mood following walks, all of them were satisfied with the walks and reported feeling more



connected to the green spaces in their community. One respondent wrote *'I feel lighter and happier after these walks.'*

It wasn't only older adult participants who benefitted from the walks. The volunteers also found their involvement deeply rewarding and shared how meaningful it was to witness the joy and positive energy in the group each time.



A second **Toronto** based project was led by LA CENTRE for Active Seniors through their gardening club. The project was to plan and plant a community garden at their 300-unit Toronto Senior Housing (TSHC) apartment building supported by their agency to revitalize the rooftop community garden. Nearly 400 older adults live in this building. Over 60 planters were used and harvests were shared by family, friends and neighbours. Volunteers with green thumbs helps, seeds were shared and there was a steady stream of older adults enjoying the outdoors in the gardening spaces. As one older adult said, *'The garden gave me a reason to get up in the morning to water my plants'*. The gardening club helped to decrease isolation and provided a green space to support mental health.



Rounding out project impact stories as reported by the 10 centres is the Active Adult Centre in **Mississauga**. During their Seasons in the Garden program, participants visited various gardens over a six-month period. As many of the centre's older adults do not have transportation to get to parks and gardens. This project enabled them to get out into nature, to learn about trees, plants and to exercise in fresh air. They also enjoyed socializing while eating outdoors.

As reported through surveys, 100% of the participants strongly agreed or agreed that, having discovered new places in nature to visit, they felt more engaged with the community. They enjoyed being immersed in nature and experienced the positive mental benefits. They strongly agreed they were more energized after the outdoor physical activity. Some of the feedback from participants is recorded below.

*Please describe your favourite activity today:*

"Pole walking around the area and discovering herbs mixed with other herbs (experimenting), watching birds and fish"

"Walking in nature and photographing it"

"Being outside somewhere different"

"Walking in the woods and visiting nice wild gardens"

"Learning to grow plants of my own, as I am a newcomer to gardening"

"Orchids in green house, cactus, mangoes and lunch, feeding blue jays and seeing the agave plant flowering 10 meters height through the greenhouse"

"Admiring the beautiful horticulture, finding varieties of aloe vera, cactus etc."

"Everything! I live in an apartment close to highway 10, construction plus new building construction – so great to be somewhere peaceful. Seeing the different types of succulent plants that can be grown in house. "

"Picnic, lunch outside with blue jays:

"Viewing the different plants and walking the trail – especially the Rhododendron dell"

"Loved walking through all the gardens especially the blooming rhododendrons and meeting new friends"

"Very peaceful for mind, soul and body, walking around the trails"

"Exercising in nature, lunch, visiting the gardens plus being surrounded by nature"

"Everything green, saw different flowers never seen before"



## Challenges and overcoming them

While there were remarkably few obstacles reported by the centres, there were a few. Three main challenges that were noted by some of the centres included:

- ✓ Weather
- ✓ Mobility and accessibility
- ✓ Scheduling and transportation

### *Weather*

Not unexpectedly, one challenge that presented itself for some activities and many of the centres was the weather. Most Canadians are familiar with making accommodations for winter weather. However, we may not have been as prepared for the heat experienced during the summer of 2024. The last day of an event planned by Life After Fifty in Windsor (Yoga/Qigong), for example, brought with it an extreme heat warning (35 Celsius). For safety reasons, the event was moved indoors.

Nature-based activities will always be subject to potentially inclement weather which means we will continue to need Plan B! One work around that the Upper Ottawa Valley Seniors' Friendship Club (UOVSFC) implemented was to plan their Woodsy Wednesday Walks for the spring and fall when the weather 'should' be optimal for planning outdoor activities. Even then, they had to postpone one of their events twice due to inclement weather. However, weather doesn't respond to 'shoulds' and we will always need to pivot as necessary to respond to changing weather conditions. Some groups were fortunate to have good weather on all program days!

### *Mobility and accessibility*

When planning walks and hikes on trails, the terrain presented some obstacles for participants with mobility concerns. UOVSFC reported that some of their walks were on old logging roads that were fairly level but others were on trails that had some uneven ground, rocks or roots.

In addition, University Settlement noted that while many parks and trails are beautiful, not all were accessible for older adults, particularly those individuals with varying levels of physical mobility. Some important factors that they had to consider in their planning were how well maintained the trails/parks were, availability of

public washrooms, benches or other places to rest along the way, shade for walks taking place in summer months. In terms of mobility, balancing the needs of more active older adults while supporting those who may require additional assistance become an ongoing effort that required extra volunteers and teamwork between staff and volunteers.

### *Scheduling and transportation*

Other challenges reported included scheduling and transportation. RAFO was fortunate to have two project partners, Montfort Renaissance/Centre Guigues and Jardin Royal Residence, that provided shuttle buses and a driver for their activities. Many of their older adult participants said they would not have participated if transportation had not been provided.

Rescheduling because of inclement weather was more challenging when relying on partners for transportation as it necessitated working with the partners' schedules.

## **Conclusion**

The success of the 10 demonstration projects is promising. They clearly demonstrated the positive impact of nature-based activities on older adults and provided the centres with important feedback about implementing nature-based programs. The results also provided the centres with an opportunity to receive feedback about the interests of older adults when it comes to their preferences related to nature-based activities.

As we read the impact reports about enhanced knowledge and appreciation for nature, in addition to other benefits, we couldn't help but reflect on the reality that we are all stewards of our planet.

When the OACAO originally envisioned this initiative, our focus was on encouraging centres to introduce new or to revitalize previous nature-based programs and learning more about the personal benefits of engaging with nature for older adults. It turns out that caring for the land – plants, trees, birds, wildlife – may be an important unintentional result of this initiative.

Perhaps a new research initiative that emphasizes older persons as stewards of the land will emerge as a next step!



## 26

Green Social Prescribing is a way of supporting people to take part in activities in nature that may help to improve their mental health and wellbeing



## Appendix B New project announcement



# NATURE BASED PROGRAMS

TO ENHANCE THE QUALITY OF LIFE OF OLDER ADULTS

Older Adults' Centers Association of Quebec  
Association des centres pour seniors

**OACAO** 50  
1973 - 2023

Levante Foundation

## NATURE-BASED PROGRAMS FOR HEALTH AND WELLBEING

### NEW PROJECT ANNOUNCEMENT!!

Nature-based Programs to Enhance the Quality of Life of Older Adults Project

*"Backed by hundreds of studies over several decades, research suggests that connecting to nature is one of the best things you can do to improve your health"*

(PaRx website)

We are pleased to announce that, with financial support from the Levante Foundation, the OACAO is launching a year-long demonstration project that offers OACAO Members an opportunity to introduce new or revitalized outdoor programs for their members.

- ✓ Up to 10 centres will receive a \$1,000 micro-grant for demonstration projects
- ✓ Call for proposals for demonstration projects highlighting how you will introduce new and/or revitalized outdoor programs for older adults – open now
- ✓ Deadline for submission – Tues., August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023
- ✓ Application portal now open: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/OACAONatureBasedPrograms2023>
- ✓ Successful applicants will be notified on August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023.
- ✓ Demonstration Projects to run between September 1, 2023 – August 31, 2024
- ✓ Questions and Application submissions – [info@oacao.org](mailto:info@oacao.org)





## Appendix C Data Collection form



Levante Foundation



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### Reporting period.

**Please note that, depending on your program's start and end dates, you may not have information to report in each time period. Please check the box that indicates the time frame for which you are reporting.**

September 1 – December 31, 2023  
(due January 12, 2024)

☐

January 10 – March 31, 2024  
(due April 12, 2024)

☐

April 1- June 30, 2024  
(due July 12, 2024)

☐

July 1 – August 30, 2024  
(due September 13, 2024)

☐

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Name of project:

Contact person:

Phone.....Email.....

Brief description of project, including examples of activities:

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1. **Total** number of older adult participants (not for each individual activity) who participated in your nature-based project for the time period for which you are currently reporting.

Please note that it doesn't matter if individuals participate in more than one activity. For our purposes, capturing the overall number is sufficient to demonstrate interest in nature-based projects.

2. **Total** number of volunteers facilitating and/or supporting activities (not for each individual activity)

3. **Number** of partnerships involved with your nature-based program (**\*if any**).

If you are collaborating with external partners on your nature-based demonstration project, please list them below and briefly describe the partners' role(s) in your project.

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4a. From **your** perspective, please briefly describe the impact of participating in the nature-based program on older adults.

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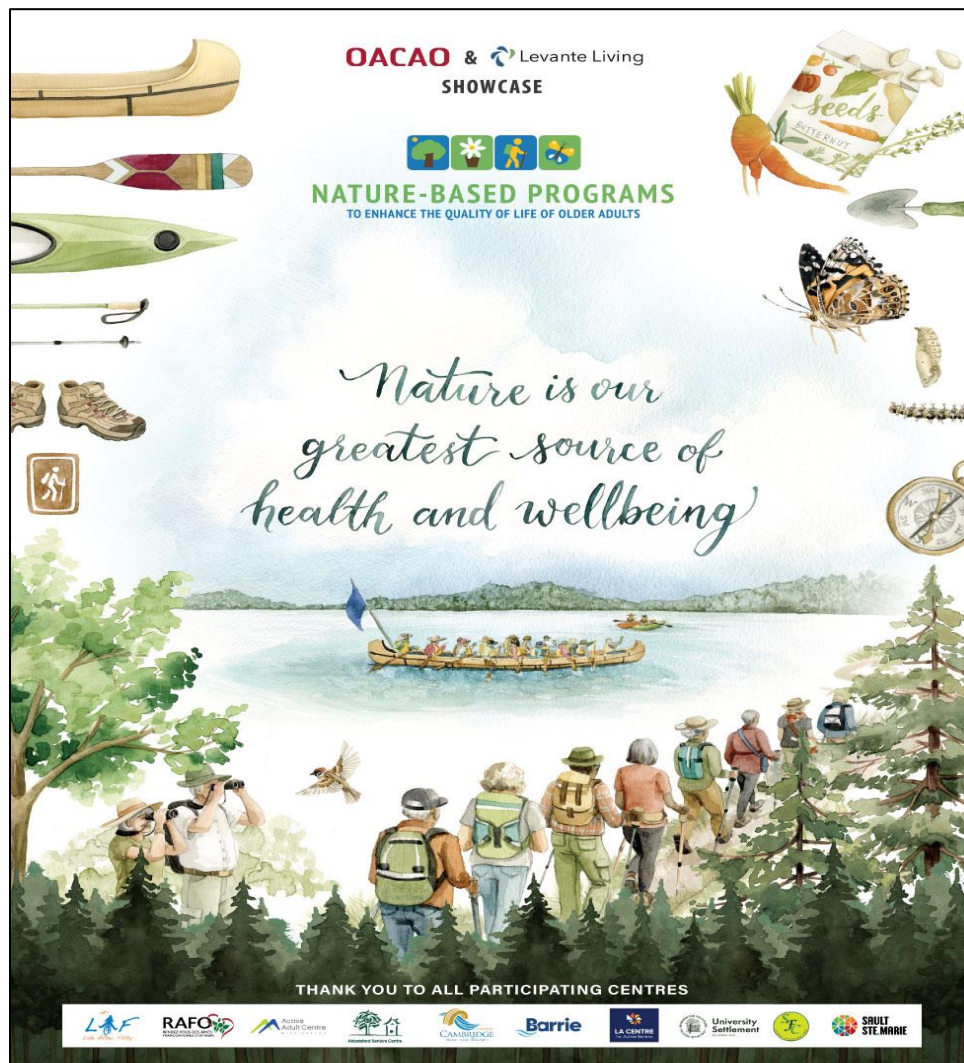
4b. If you have this information available, please tell us about the experience of participating in the nature-based program as shared by the older adults and/or volunteers (e.g. feeling more connected to their community, the experience of being immersed in nature – affect on their mental and physical wellbeing, anything feedback about the specific nature activity). This anecdotal evidence will be helpful to scale and build on these demonstration projects.

5. Have you experienced any obstacles to implementing your nature-based program? If yes, please describe below.

6. Have your program/project participants (older adults and/or volunteers) reported any barriers to participating in the activities (e.g. mobility challenges on hiking trails, not enough options, such as benches, for sitting)? If yes, please describe below.

**Thank you! Please continue to collect photos and stories about participant impact that we may be able to integrate into the toolkit for SALCs that is one deliverable of this project.**





This beautiful illustration was created by Alicia Bint of Alicia's Infinity. Each image represents one of the nature-based activities that was implemented in our 10 demonstration projects and speaks to the beauty of the natural world around us.

To learn more about this project and the OACAO's continuing interest in and commitment to promoting the health and well-being benefits of engaging in nature, please contact Sue Hesjedahl, Executive Director, at [sue@oacao.org](mailto:sue@oacao.org).