



Wonder

NEWSLETTER OF THE NATURE ACTION COLLABORATIVE FOR CHILDREN

Where is the Beauty?

Coordinated by Tina Reeble on behalf of NACC

As I was curating the reflections for this edition of Wonder, I found myself contemplating the many ways that a connection to the natural world helps us tap into our own powers. Our power to heal, to express joy, to create and collaborate, can all be drawn from within as we become more and more attuned to the beauty in our world. How does that happen? I recalled a blog post I wrote seven years ago:

I have been traveling the last few months, leading educator workshops across the country. During one of my favorite activities, the whole group takes some time to connect to the natural world, wherever we are in that moment, and consider the beauty that we perceive. A common theme to the discussions that follow is the reminder that natural beauty surrounds us we just need to remember to look. So many of us get caught in the "autopilot" versions of our daily life and it isn't until we are intentional in our thoughts and actions through this shared workshop experience that

we break free and begin to see anew. I often wonder how long it will last.

In her book "The Sense of Wonder," Rachel Carson shared, "A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eye vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood..." A few paragraphs later she adds, "For most of us, knowledge of our world comes largely through sight, yet we look about with such unseeing eyes that we are partially blind. One way to open our eyes to unnoticed beauty is to ask yourself, 'What if I had never seen this before? What if I knew I would never see it again?'" (Carson, 1956)

My personal reaction has been to seek out frequent moments to experience beauty through the eyes of children. When I do, I am gifted with the energy waves that come from their sense of wonder. The past few days I have had charming moments with my seven-year-old son who has been enchanted by the beauty of fireflies. Most evenings this week as dusk settles into darkness, Rory can be found roaming the backyard, which has become his own solitary world of magical insects and make believe. I have seen his discovery, his amazement, his sense of wonder, and with that, a need to engage with curiosity more deeply, a desire to cherish and preserve, the need to stay longer and come again.

There in those moments, because my child has reminded me to, I too am seeing beauty in the world around me. On occasion, Rory has invited me to join him, and I realize now my child is experiencing the world through my eyes as well. How long will it last? Perhaps together we can grow in a way of life that finds long lasting, life-long connections with each other and with our beautiful world.

Today, I invite you to intentionally experience nature's beauty. Ask yourself "what if" questions as Rachel Carson advised. After you read the stories below, think about what's next for you. How about for the children in your care? Until next time, be bold – choose to be extraordinary.



The mission of the Nature Action Collaborative for Children is to re-connect children with the natural world by making developmentally appropriate nature education a sustaining and enriching part of the daily lives of the world's children.

WorldForumFoundation.org/nature

The Healing Power of Nature: How Walking in the Rain Saved My Life

The following excerpt is from, “The Healing Power of Nature: How Walking in the Rain Saved My Life,” by Suzanne Falter (<https://tinybuddha.com/author/suzanne-falter/>)

A recent study by the National Academy of Sciences found that a ninety-minute walk in nature slows our worried, troublesome thoughts about ourselves and our lives. Even better, it reduces the neural activity in parts of the brain linked to mental illness...

I road tested this concept at the very worst moment in my life, in the year following the sudden death of my daughter. At the time, my life had fallen apart completely. Not only had my daughter just dropped dead from a medically unexplainable cardiac arrest, but a few months earlier, I lost my relationship and the home that came with it...

Unable to fathom how to even begin, I found my way north to the country. Once there, I moved in with a friend.

A nearby park with rambling blackberry lined paths beckoned to me—even in the rain soaked northern California winter. Unable to even keep two thoughts in my head at the time, the only thing I could do was to walk.

Every day, I would pull on my rain gear and my big rubber rain boots and walk along the park’s muddy trails for hours. It was a rough and tumble place, but it was beautiful, as well. More importantly, I was alone out there, as I slowly memorized every dormant blackberry bush, every rain puddle rut, and every sweeping field of grizzled grape vines.

Sometimes I sobbed as I walked. Sometimes I smiled at the pileup of bittersweet memories that poured through my body. Sometimes unexpected ideas would pop up for things I wanted to write, or places I wanted to go. Sometimes I’d remember lost wisps of memory from my childhood, things once said to stories or me I’d been told.

These walks became nothing less than a time of reckoning.

Most of the time, I just needed the active motion of my legs pumping and my feet moving through the mud. I needed to feel my feet on the ground in order to somehow get a grip—and to be reminded, perhaps, that everything would eventually be okay.

By the time summer came, I knew every path, every rock, and every tree. Gradually, my grief began to lift as my walks in nature gradually worked their magic.

I felt held out there by something bigger than myself. More importantly, I reveled in the sheer predictability of my surroundings. It was important that I walked in this park, at this time, down these paths every day. In the absence of a job, walking

these trails and letting my thoughts and feelings, pour through me became my work....

The NAS study suggests that having access to nature may become increasingly critical to our mental health as the years go on. All I know is that I now rely on a regular walk to carry me through my day. And not just any walk. I walk where there is natural beauty, even if it’s the small lake in the middle of my city. I’ve found it to be nothing short of a healing miracle.

This truly is one that anyone can enjoy.

As Nature Recovers, So Shall We

Pam Musburger, United States

Our Thousand Oaks community in California, known as a slice of heaven, has forever changed.

At the beginning of November, 2018 we suffered unmeasurable loss as we struggled with the shock of a mass shooting that took place at a local bar. The very next day two wildfires began close to our school, Ascension Lutheran Early Childhood Center. In a matter of 48 hours, some of our families lost their homes and all sense of safety.

All of our schoolchildren were displaced while our site closed for two weeks to clean up ash and purify the air in the classrooms. The first week back at school following the catastrophic events, our outdoor classroom once again served as a place for our school community to gather and experience peace, joy and freedom. The children embraced the familiarity of their outdoor space as well as the sense of community it offers. The changing colors of the trees in our yard offered our children the opportunity to go on a leaf hunt and create leaf people. Teachers used the leaves to create ice sculptures and the children used hammers to excavate the leaves.

Soon after, we were blessed with rain, which is rare as we have been in a drought in California for several years now. Many of



our children had never seen rain. They played and danced with their faces turned up to the sky. It brought such joy to all of us! The rain washed away some of the ash and stench and Mother Nature is assisting us in the healing process.

Our outdoor dramatic play area will continue to be a place to process and heal from these events. Most of our families and staff were evacuated from their homes and our streets were filled with fire trucks and equipment. We will have firefighter equipment (vacuum hoses) and uniforms for the children to reenact their experiences. We plan to have some of our parents who are first responders come spend time with us at school.

Our families and staff have experienced a deep sense of powerlessness. As we continue to look to the resiliency and beauty found in our outdoor classroom, it is our hope that our children too will regain a sense of control, safety and peace.

Multi-cultural and Multi-disciplinary: Diverse perspectives support effective nature-based education in China's first outdoor classroom

Huan Cao, China
Kirsten Haugen, United States and Huajun Li, Beijing

One might expect differences in culture, language, time zone and profession to be barriers to successful collaboration, but a shared passion for connecting children with nature can bridge and even leverage those differences in surprising ways. In the case of designing an outdoor classroom for a conservation park in urban China, both the collaboration and the result have been inspiring.

Huan Cao, educator for Shenzhen Mangrove Wetlands Conservation Foundation explains how it all got started.

"MCF was established in July 2012. It was China's first publicly founded organization that focused on environmental protection, and the first NGO to operate a government-mandated ecological park – Futian Mangrove Ecological Park. Several years ago, MCF's secretary-general Dr. Baohua Yan joined a Nature Explore workshop in the United States. Since then, she always wondered what it would be like for Chinese children to have some place like this. In 2017, after two years of managing the ecological park in Shenzhen, we were ready to act on our desire to build an Outdoor Classroom for children in the community, giving them a joyful and beneficial experience in nature, which is the core value of operating an ecological park in the middle of the city."

MCF gathered a large team at Futian Mangrove Ecological Park in January 2018. A landscape designer and educator from Nature Explore shared their research-based principles for designing and working in an outdoor classroom, while the Gaiascope Design team from Beijing offered experience designing for and with children and a highly creative take on local ecology and culture.

Gaiascope Designer Huajun Li explains, "As a landscape design institution which always focuses on sustainable landscape, we believe that a good landscape should create a better environment for the future, especially for the children. The MCF Outdoor Classroom project brought us an opportunity to design a place for children to build intimate interactions with nature in an urban area."

Other collaborators included the park officials who shared a rich understanding of the park resources, infrastructure and public usage; the park's educators who provided continuity with existing programming; the funders from Danone China who challenged the whole team to dream big about possibilities for the currently overgrown and unused space; and local educators, design interns and parents who gave input and gained a deeper understanding of the design and intended use of the new outdoor classroom.

We focused on the key elements of indigenous nature education, such as mangroves, wetland organisms, native plants and local materials, fully incorporated through the details of our design. For instance, signs to identify each area are represented by a different plant or animal unique to the mangrove ecosystem and the dramatic and welcoming entry was created in the shape of a cluster of mangrove trees.

The international perspectives that we embraced in our collaboration continued and even resulted in an intergenerational collaboration idea rarely seen in China. To design and run the playground infused with Chinese culture and local elements and support community connections, teen-agers were invited to participate. The youngest volunteer is only ten, and they are all doing great.

The extensive involvement and collective efforts from different parties has been the key to the establishment of the outdoor classroom and its better use in the future.

Consider this:

- Whom can you collaborate with to consider and enhance your outdoor space from diverse perspectives?
- What are some ways that you can include families' active engagement with your outdoor space even more? How would greater engagement benefit your program?

References

Carson, R. (1956). *The Sense of Wonder*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.

Future issues of Wonder

Do you have an idea or story to share? We invite you to email your ideas, stories and photos that relate to Connecting Children with Nature to Tina Reeble: tinar@natureexplore.org