

## **The Importance of Deep Experiences in Nature**

By Joseph Cornell

I have seen, through my own experience and that of many others, how profound moments with nature foster a true and vital understanding of our place in the world. I remember an experience I had as a five-year-old boy that awakened in me a life-long fascination for marshes, birds, and for a life lived wild and free:

I was out playing alone on a cold foggy morning when I suddenly heard a startling chorus of “whoouks” coming toward me through the air. I peered intently at the thick fog, hoping for at least a glimpse of the geese. Seconds passed; the tempo of their cries increased. They were going to fly directly overhead! I could hear their wings slapping just yards above me. All of a sudden, bursting through a gap in the fog, came a large flock of pearl-white snow geese. It seemed as if the sky had given birth to them. For five or six wonderful seconds their sleek and graceful forms were visible, then they merged once again into the fog. Seeing the snow geese thrilled me deeply, and ever since then I have wanted to immerse myself in nature.

### **Being Fully Present**

When outdoors, many people are so engrossed in their own private concerns that they notice little of their surroundings. I once demonstrated this to a group of twenty-five teachers in Canberra, Australia. I asked them to look at a beautiful tree as long as they were able to, and to raise their hands when their attention wandered from the tree and drifted to other thoughts. In only six seconds, every hand was raised. They were amazed to discover how restless their minds were.

Mere exposure to nature isn't always enough. A friend of mine discovered this when he took his eight-year-old son hiking in the Canadian Rockies. They hiked for several hours until they came to a spectacular overlook, where they could see two glaciated valleys and several alpine lakes.

He said, “That view alone made our long trip from Iowa worthwhile.” He suggested to his son that they sit and enjoy the mountain scenery. But the boy, who'd been running exuberantly back and forth along the trail, sat for

five seconds, then scrambled to his feet and started running up the trail again. My friend said, he felt like screaming: “Stop! Look at this incredible view!”

How can we help others experience nature deeply when their minds and bodies are so restless? The secret I’ve discovered is to focus their attention with nature activities that engage their senses—in a captivating way.

For example, in the *Camera Game*, which is played with two people, the “photographer” taps the shoulder of the “camera” twice, and the camera-person opens his eyes on the scene before him. Because the camera-person looks for only a few seconds, his mind doesn’t have time to daydream, so the impact of his “picture” is quite powerful. Players of the Camera Game have told me that they’ve retained a vivid memory of their pictures for five, even eight years afterwards. This activity helps people of all ages experience what it is like to truly *see*.

Other examples of simple, absorbing activities are mapping natural sounds; writing an acrostic poem about something captivating; drawing one’s “best nature view;” and *Interviewing Nature*, where you look for a special rock, plant, or animal that has an interesting story to tell. Then you ask it questions like, “What events have you seen in your life? What is it like to live here? Is there something you would like to tell me?”

Abraham Maslow described peak experiences as especially joyous with “feelings of intense happiness and well-being” and which often involve “an awareness of transcendental unity.” Many mountaineers commonly report having these kinds of experiences. John Muir, in the following passage, explains why:

“In climbing where the danger is great, all attention has to be given the ground step by step, leaving nothing for beauty by the way. But this care, so keenly and narrowly concentrated, is not without advantages. One is thoroughly aroused. Compared with the alertness of the senses... one may be said to sleep all the rest of the year.”

- John of the Mountains

The intense focus required by wilderness pursuits such as climbing heightens our awareness. This is why so many people avidly enjoy them.

Leaders can encourage peak-like experiences on less wild walks by using experiential activities that direct people's complete attention on nature. Concentration is concentration: people benefit from increased perception wherever there are. One educator, who hikes the Appalachian or Pacific Crest Trail every summer, practiced Sharing Nature's reflective *I Am the Mountain* exercise for just four minutes. Afterwards, he said enthusiastically, "I was able to experience a state of heightened awareness that usually takes me a month in the wilderness to feel."

### **Meeting Nature Face to Face**

Science can only *describe* a flowering cherry tree; it cannot help us *experience* the cherry tree in its totality. To develop love and concern for the earth, we need deep, absorbing nature experiences; otherwise, our relationship with nature will remain distant and abstract and never touch us deeply.

Rita Mendonca, Sharing Nature Brazil's national coordinator, recently gave a training program in the Amazon for professional ecotourism guides, some of whom had worked in the area for 40 years. Their attitude at first was that she had little to teach them. But after participating in several experiential Sharing Nature activities, a woman approached Rita and said with deep emotion, "You are helping me find the forest inside of me! We don't know the forest in this way!"

Absorbing experiences bring us face-to-face with nature. The observer and the observed become united—and only then is true knowing and love awakened in the observer's heart. John Muir said that the content of the human soul contains the whole world. The deeper purpose of experiential learning is to broaden our experience of life and include other realities as our own. When one is immersed in nature, Muir said, the "body vanishes and the freed soul goes abroad." Only by expanding our sense of identity beyond our physical body and egoic self can we commune with distant horizons, brightly colored songbirds, and countless other delights.

When people are quiet and receptive, fully immersed in nature, insights on the real purpose of life reveal themselves. is a teacher at the Punahou School on Oahu Island, Hawaii, where every year he leads his thirteen-year-old students on an inspirational nature walk along a remote and wild coastline. Below are some of his students' thoughts about life and nature after playing reflective, experiential Sharing Nature activities like *Expanding Circles*, *Trail of Beauty*, and the *John Muir Game*:

- It made me feel like I was actually a part of the sand and ocean.
- I was a calm ocean wave gently rolling towards the shore. I was the reef, feeling the cool water roll over me.
- I felt euphoria. I felt like I was one with everything around me.
- It felt powerful, yet peaceful. Every part of me is moving and flowing in harmony.
- Watching the turtle swim carefree reminded me that I have nothing to worry about.
- You really live when you take time to notice your surroundings.
- I feel like I can connect and be a part of nature. Being here makes everything go away. I can connect with myself.
- If you find beauty within the world you can find it within yourself.

Jessica, one of David's students, wanted to express her appreciation for the ocean, so she gratefully wrote "thank you" in the sand—and let the ocean waves embrace her sentiment and take it into itself.

Fostering in others beautiful human qualities of humility, respect, love and joyful harmony with one's environment inside and outside of oneself—as expressed by the Hawaiian students—is what nature education is really about.

## Becoming Good Stewards

A teacher in the Southwest once asked the children in his class to draw a picture of themselves. He recalled, “The American children completely covered the paper with a drawing of their body, but my Navajo students drew themselves differently. They made their bodies much smaller and included the nearby mountains, canyon walls, and dry desert washes. To the Navajo, the environment is as much a part of who they are as are their own arms and legs.” The understanding that we are a part of something larger than ourselves is Nature’s greatest gift. With it, our sense of identity expands and, by extension, so does our compassion for all things.

In order to create a society that truly reveres the natural world, we must offer its citizens life-changing experiences in nature. Saint Teresa of Avila said, “The soul in its ecstatic state grasps in an instant more truth than can be arrived at by months, or even years, of painstaking thought and study.” One moment of deeply entering into Nature can inspire in us new attitudes and priorities in life that would take years to develop.

When people *feel* immersed and absorbed in the natural world, they are learning the highest that nature has to offer—because Nature Herself is their Teacher.

*Joseph Cornell is the author of the highly acclaimed Sharing Nature Book Series and is the Founder and President of Sharing Nature Worldwide. You are welcome to reprint this article with prior permission from Sharing Nature Worldwide. Find out more about Sharing Nature activities and resources at [www.sharingnature.com](http://www.sharingnature.com) or (530) 478-7650. Contact Joseph Cornell at: [info@sharingnature.com](mailto:info@sharingnature.com).*