

Children of the natural world

Nature is a fascinating playground; give children the chance and they'll embrace it

For anyone with a love of the natural world – like so many people reading this column – a deep concern for the future occupies our thoughts. There are, of course, the frightening threats of everything from climate change to the population explosion. But, for many people, there is also a growing unease about how to nurture a passion in children for the natural world – especially in light of our fast-paced, mostly indoor lifestyle, where so much time is spent in front of a screen, and nature education is largely absent from the school curriculum.



Drew Monkman
OUR CHANGING SEASONS

With fewer and fewer opportunities to simply be outside, there is a real fear that children will become adults with little knowledge, awareness, or concern for the natural world around them. This week, I would like to share some thoughts on nature and children, and maybe even try my hand at how spirituality fits into this mix.

If the somewhat bruised and battered conservation movement is to continue to have any degree of success, we will always need a critical mass of people who know the natural world and who care. To paraphrase Baba Dioum, a Senegalese conservationist, we will only conserve and care for what we love and only love what we understand, appreciate and feel an emotional connection with. If we have no real knowledge of or appreciation for the natural world around us – right in our own backyard to begin with – how will we ever develop a sense of what is being lost? How can we expect people to be outraged when yet another wetland is slated for destruction if they don't know or care about what lives there? In other words, destruction of the natural world has to be felt personally for people to want to do anything about it. Only then do we become inspired to make an environmental ethic part of our world view, politics, and lifestyle.

LOVE OF NATURE

So, how do children relate to nature? Here are some of the things that I noticed during my many years as a classroom teacher.

- To use a term coined by Harvard University biologist E.O. Wilson, children are naturally “biophylic” – loving the natural world. We all begin life as budding biologists. There are only a few creatures we inherently avoid – maybe spiders and large snakes – but little else. I think most of us can recall collecting fascinating creatures in jam jars and being so proud to show our parents. Some of us – like myself – were fortunate enough to have parents who responded positively and encouraged these activities. Given this innate biophilia, my experience as a teacher was that hands-on nature activities were always an easy sell. Children love to touch and hold animals, to get their fingers dirty.
- I also found that many of my students loved to collect and name objects from nature, be they beetles, leaves, rocks, shells, or whatever. I would even



DREW MONKMAN photos

From collecting fascinating creatures in discarded jars to catching frogs, tadpoles or insects in a nearby stream, children have an innate love for the natural world and will respond to it if given the chance.



see this fascination with collecting and naming when it came to collections of toy dinosaurs.

- Children love to share what they've found, seen, or experienced in the outdoors – hence the importance of listening and showing enthusiasm at their stories, or at whatever creature they bring home to show you. There is something very affirming for a child to be able to share a discovery with a truly interested and enthusiastic adult.

PLANTS COUNT, TOO

- Children also adore having a personal relationship with an individual animal, hence the importance of pets or just keeping a frog or insect in a jar for a day or two. This one-on-one personal relationship can even extend to plants. I always started the school year with an activity called “Adopt-a-tree” in which students chose a tree in our school's natural habitat area, identified it, watched how it changed through the seasons, and gave it a nickname.
- As any parent knows, most children also have a passion for exploring and for catching things. They therefore need to be given lots of time to spend simply “mucking about” in fields, woods, wet-

lands or a nearby green space. They also need to be able to do this alone or with friends sometimes and without coaching.

Given this natural disposition that children have for learning about the natural world, I think that parents, grandparents, teachers and youth leaders should focus on five main goals.

- First, that the children become familiar with the most common local plants and animals and be able to put a name to many of them.
- That they develop a sense of some of the key events in nature happening in each of the four seasons.
- That children gain a basic literacy about how the natural world operates such as why do birds, frogs and insects sing or why are there flowers?
- That little by little, they attain a basic understanding of evolution. Only by knowing evolution does everything in nature make sense.
- Finally, that they begin to see and experience the spiritual dimension of the natural world in all its stories and mysteries

I believe that a fascination for and an understanding of the natural world – not only the plants and animals but also the weather, the sun, the night sky, and the universe beyond – almost always leads to feelings of reverence – in other words, to nature's spiritual dimensions. We truly are surrounded by wonder. I used to like to share the example of the spring peeper with my students. When

you listen to spring peepers calling from a swamp in April, remind yourself that these 3 cm-long frogs have just awoken from a winter spent frozen solid in the leaf litter with no heart beat or breathing. Then, without even taking time to eat, they sing their hearts out for days on end in an effort to attract a mate. How can one not find this example of the amazing resilience of life a spiritual experience? The exciting news is that the spirituality only grows with the more you learn.

I'm now going to be so presumptuous as to suggest how we might foster a sense of nature's spirituality in children.

BE A ROLE MODEL

- First, try be a role model: Show curiosity at all the life that surrounds us and how every living thing has so many stories that come with it – stories such as the wonder of photosynthesis or how birds navigate during migration. Learn some of these stories and share them with children.
- Teach children the story of evolution – in ways, of course, that are appropriate for their age. Evolution provides the only truly satisfying and complete explanation of existence and adds so much more to one's appreciation of nature. Maybe start with the story of bees and flowers and how each has essentially shaped the characteristics of the other. Try to personalize the evolution story. Remind your child that he or she is the result of an incredibly long line of ancestors who all survived at least long enough to reproduce. All of these ancestors, despite the odds, had the physical adaptations and intelligence that allowed them to escape predators, starvation, disease, etc. We

are here because our ancestors were biological and evolutionary winners. It is the same story for every other creature alive today.

- Remind children of our relatedness to all other creatures: If we go back far enough through time, we share a common ancestor with every other organism alive today, including plants, insects, and bacteria ... We still have in our cells many of the same genes as these other forms of life.
- Point out to children, too, that every

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living thing looks and acts the way it does for a reason. We therefore need to encourage children to ask “why questions” such as “why are so many berries red?” Asking questions like these helps us to think in terms of how everything about an organism (its physical characteristics, its behaviour) is an adaptation to the way it lives. We soon realize that the so-called “ordinary” plant or animal in the backyard is far more sensational than we ever imagined it to be or almost can imagine it to be.

- Explain to children that we still live in a universe imbued with the unknown: The natural world is full of tantalizing mysteries to be contemplated and eventually to be solved – not to be explained away by dogma, as humans did in the days pre-dating modern science and many still do today. Science has only started to explain phenomena such as dark matter or how monarch butterflies manage to successfully migrate to the mountain tops of Mexico each year, entirely on their own, without ever having done the trip before.

TRACK THE SEASONS

- Make a habit of drawing children's attention to seasonal change: There are a never-ending, almost limitless series of events in nature that occur more or less at the same time every year and that can be anticipated beforehand, enjoyed while they are happening, and remembered fondly. As George Santayana said, “To be interested in the changing seasons is a happier state of mind than to be hopelessly in love with spring.”
- Finally, kids should have access to field guides, a small compound microscope, maybe an old or inexpensive digital camera and, at age 10 or 11, a pair of good binoculars. Having a backyard bird feeder is also a great resource for enjoying nature. You may also want to pick up a copy of books such as Dawkins “The Magic of Reality” or one of the many new books for children on evolution. (e.g., *Evolution: How We and All Living Things Came to Be*, by Daniel Loxton)

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