

Cultivating a Sense of Place in Children

by Ken Finch, President, Green Hearts INC

“Can you help me? I have a frog stuck in my mirror.”

It was perhaps the oddest query I’ve ever had, and it came from a complete stranger. My two young boys and I were taking refuge on the sunny, comfortable porch of a resale store on Sanibel Island, Florida while my wife was busily going through the store’s every nook and cranny.

As we sat there, a car pulled into a parking space directly in front of us, and the elderly lady driver got out and marched right up to me. Dispensing with all formalities, she immediately posed that peculiar question to me. I was puzzled, but naturally I looked – and found that her car’s electric outside mirrors, when adjusted at a particular angle, left a gap between the mirror housing and the car body. And sure enough, there was a tree frog in that gap on her right side mirror. Son of a gun, thought I. “Cool!” said the boys. A gentle prod revealed that the frog was alive and apparently content, so I brilliantly advised the lady to leave it alone, be sure not to adjust the mirror, and rest assured that it will climb out when it is good and ready to.

Today – years later, and with the extra wisdom that age often grants – I recall that frog incident as just one of scores of times when I have encountered peculiar bits of nature in odd places, strange ways, and unlikely circumstances. I’m no longer surprised, though. Nature is our constant companion, whether sitting on a sub-tropical porch, walking inner city streets, mowing the Pleasant Valley lawn, or cheering on a tee ball game. (To wit: the time my youngest found a large, dusty toad just a few feet behind the bench where his fellow ballplayers were awaiting their turns at bat – a discovery that instantly emptied the bench and threatened the sanctity of the game....)

The underlying lesson is simple, really: nature is always there. No, make that “nature is always here.” It is easy to slip into thinking that “nature” is only a far destination, usually featuring gorgeous beaches, raging waterfalls, enticing forests, and towering mountains. These are the images of nature that travel brochures and tourism websites lure and delight us with.

But have you ever seen a travel ad touting a wasp that builds mud nests that look exactly like tiny clay pots? Or a chrysalis that’s a perfect ringer for a dead leaf? Or an odd (some might say ugly) Elegant stinkhorn fungus that pops up overnight, only to quickly fade in the sun? Or an Eastern red cedar tree



The Elegant stinkhorn fungus

that looks like it is giving off clouds of smoke as it releases its pollen? I have seen all of these (and much more!) on my one-fifth-acre suburban lot amidst the “wilds” of Omaha, Nebraska – a destination that is distinctly close rather than far. These represent “nearby nature” – not spectacular like Yellowstone or Yosemite, but every bit as fascinating to the attentive eye.

I have discovered these home-turf wonders for one simple reason: I go outside and look. As Yogi Berra once said, “You can observe a lot just by watching.” Over time, nearby ecological observations – whether grand or minute – can create intimate familiarity with the place where we live, and thus begin to distinguish our home from everywhere else. This is the gestation process for a personal sense of place.

Once this was a routine part of growing up: we would all explore, learn, and enjoy our “turf,” whether it was a center city neighborhood or the “back forty” of our farm. Kids like us soon discovered where and when to snack on ripe wild blackberries, where the creek was deep enough (but not too deep) for an August dip, where ramshackle forts could be built without fear of adult removal, and where fox pups might be spied in the springtime. Even our travel to and from school added to the local familiarization process, as we walked or biked through our neighborhoods twice a day, five days a week, regular as clockwork.

Before their minds have been marinated in the culture of television, consumerism, shopping malls, computers, and freeways, children can find magic in trees, water, animals, landscapes, and their own places.

– David Orr, Oberlin College

With these frequent childhood explorations, “home” became much more than just an apartment or a house – it became a geographical identity embossed in our minds. Ask any American adult about their “free range” childhood years, and there’s a great chance that they can still sketch out a map of their play domain – a map that will likely include features like the “big woods,” the “swamp,” the giant boulder, or other distinctive natural icons of their long-ago “home range.”

Today? Not so much. Kids are indoors far more than outside, and that inside time is largely ubiquitous across the map. Kids in Omaha play the same video games as kids on Oahu. Children in Portland, Maine see the same TV shows as children in Portland, Oregon. And if they watch any nature shows or videos at all, those are more likely to be about the Serengeti or the Amazon than about the amazing but less-bodacious nature right outside their own doors. This detachment from their own outdoor environment is a huge change in the nature of childhood – a change that has lessened or eliminated children’s foundational sense of place.

Does it matter? Consider that throughout human history, children have played and explored outdoors – routinely, freely, and frequently. They knew their surroundings, and those settings became

a piece of their self-identity and sometimes a source of pride. That created a sense of community – a natural and human community that they were an active part of. For free-range kids, the environment wasn’t just an academic concept, it was their home and their playground. It was where they discovered fascinating bits of nature, and where they gained at least a rudimentary understanding of natural science, in the way that learning always works best: through first-hand experiences.

Those experiences were rarely if ever intended to be educational, yet they almost inevitably were. Early explorations and discoveries in nature form the very foundation of what we now refer to as “STEM” learning: science, technology, engineering, and math. Children playing in nature learn engineering skills as they cobble together a tree house. They learn about volume and states of matter when they bring a snowball into the house. They learn ecology when they watch a Praying mantis seize a butterfly. They learn biology when they nurture a tiny seed into a seven-foot stalk of corn. And they practice scientific observation, research, and recording skills when they gather, identify, and meticulously label a leaf collection.



Young scientists at work? You bet!

Years later, these first-hand experiences will resonate in science classes, as their minds consciously or subconsciously connect real, observed phenomena with textbook lessons. Just as importantly, these same experiences will forever be embedded in their personal sense of place. Their self-identity will be at least partially defined by the land they explored and the nature they found during

their youth. A logical extension of this is that they will gain a greater concern for the natural world, since we all tend to care about – and care *for* – those things we know and love.

The power of place during childhood is not a new revelation; it has been celebrated for ages. Among countless testimonies: Christopher Robin and Pooh had their “100 acre wood,” and the children of Roxaboxen formed a human community while building their own outdoor play village. Gary Paul Nabhan and Steven Trimble focused an entire book on the matter with The Geography of Childhood, while E. O. Wilson’s auto-biography, Naturalist, fondly recalls the childhood roots of his career as an internationally renowned biologist. And famed lepidopterist Robert Michael Pyle traces his personal conservation values to his young explorations on the wild outskirts of Denver in his eloquent book, The Thunder Tree. In all of these cases, fictional and real, the powerful places were nearby, close to home.

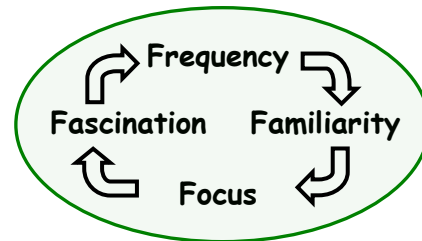
Whether found through the wonder of a young child, the adventurous spirit of adolescence, or the practiced scientific eye of an adult, there are unique natural phenomena to be discovered and treasured right in our backyards, our neighborhoods, and our towns. Happily, the idea of “locality” seems to be taking hold in our culture. Many people are now “locovores,” eating mostly or exclusively foods produced nearby. Others are steering their consumer dollars to “buy local” campaigns. Similarly, “stay-cations” encourage Americans to enjoy sites and activities close to home rather than traveling far afield, and “place-based education” is using students’ own communities as the focal point for excellent multi-disciplinary learning.

So amidst our very-mobile society, perhaps we are re-establishing our local roots by seeking tangible ways to counter-balance the life changes that seem so rapid and pervasive. As is so often the case, nature can offer us a tonic and an approach for this quest, via the intentional nurturing of a heightened sense of place for ourselves and our children.

Is there a formula for fostering a child’s sense of place? Well, certainly not an exact one. Bonding to a place is at least as much about the heart as the head, and is there ever a reliable formula for matters

of the heart? But a vital starting point is frequency: it is crucial to provide kids with outdoor free play as often as possible! Daily is ideal; weekly is just minimal. Realistically, that degree of frequency requires proximity, so children’s sense of place will usually arise close to home, whether in their own backyard or in a neighborhood patch of leftover “wilderness” (as the kids see it!).

Frequent visits will create familiarity, which will allow a heightened focus on any new or exceptional phenomena that kids may find. That focus will foster fascination with these new discoveries, and the psychic reward of fascination will then motivate more frequent exploring. But how do we get kids started in this loop?



First, nurture discovery and repetition.

- Be sure your kids have good clothes for all weather; then encourage them to go outside every day!
- Set an example by going for family walks in rain, snow, fog, and cold. (No whining allowed!)
- Set and enforce a daily limit on electronics time.
- Give your kids tools to help enjoy the outdoors: binoculars, insect nets, bug boxes, magnifiers, small shovels, a kid-size wheelbarrow, etc.
- Help them start and care for a vegetable garden.
- Encourage artistic fun with a simple digital camera and/or a sketching kit with colored pencils.
- “Walk the acres” with your kids every so often, helping them to spot new things and letting them show you what they find by themselves!
- Write out a lease “officially” giving your children control over a portion of your yard – so they know it is theirs to do with as they wish!
- Eat “al fresco” with occasional outdoor meals.

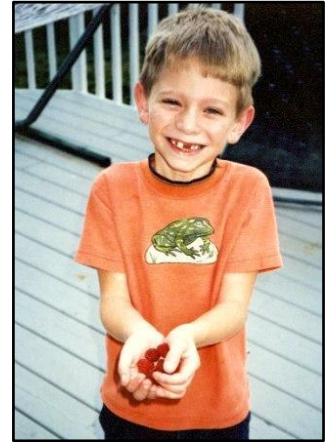
- Buy a basic tent and sleeping bags for periodic campouts in the backyard or a nearby park.
- Have family campfires in your yard or a local park.
- Give your kids simple tools and materials to build a clubhouse or a treehouse, and encourage them to find natural materials for it, too.

Next, enhance the territory.

If you are fortunate enough to have your own yard, there are many ways you can augment it in order to nurture your children's nature connections.

- Reduce turf grass, in favor of more trees, shrubs, and planting beds. This will help create diversity on a "micro-habitat" scale – thus attracting more birds, insects, and other animals; increasing blooms, seeds, and fungi; and adding playful "niches" and "dens" for kids to explore.
- Imitate nature's own design by using shrubs or tall perennials to create a bushy, wildlife-friendly edge along any stand of trees, rather than having an abrupt change from trees to lawn.
- When you add trees, shrubs, or perennials to your yard, use native plants. These are best adapted to your area and thus need less care, plus they will support greater populations of butterflies, beetles, birds, bugs, and many other animals that will add interest for kids!
- Avoid using commercial pesticides and herbicides, which are poison. If you use them in your yard, you may also poison any child or pet that plays there! You can usually find homemade non-toxic options through an internet search.
- Mulch your plantings to hold in moisture and moderate soil temperatures. However, do not use rock or shredded rubber mulches, which limit natural diversity in and on the soil. Wood mulch is better; natural leaf litter is best.
- When planning habitat enhancements, look for plants that will provide food for your family or for wildlife – e.g., berry bushes and fruit trees. Ask a good nursery for advice, or do your own research with the web or reference books.

- A few micro-habitat options: a small garden pond, a patch of prairie grasses, a shrub thicket, a rock or brush pile, a butterfly garden, a perennial flower garden, an herb garden, a berry patch, or a moon garden (for nighttime blooms and scents!).



Home-grown raspberries: Yum!

- Add homes and shelter for wildlife: bird nest boxes or ledges, insect "hotels," butterfly houses, loose rock piles, or bat houses.
- Feed birds with sunflower, nyger, and safflower seeds, plus suet; ask a bird store for what feeders to use. Place them where your kids can watch the action from inside. Before long, a few species of birds will seem like old friends!
- Add other features to entice your kids into more outdoor time: a tall swing, a bench swing, a low hammock, comfortable kid-size chairs, a large and deep sand play area (not just a tiny sand box!), a digging pit or large dirt pile, and hiding spots amidst shrubs or tall grasses. Plus, campfire rings and outdoor kitchens are great for family use!
- Whatever you plant, build, or install outside, get your children involved! They will learn life skills, and their participation will help make the yard feel like their own special place to play and explore!

Finally, boost the connection.

Your goal is to guide your children into knowing their "nearby nature" and coming to feel a personal bond with it – the genesis of a sense of place. Consider still more ways to nurture this nature connection.

- Keep binoculars near one or more windows that provide a good view of your yard.
- Create a cozy indoor "perch" where you and your children can sit, read, eat, and chat while still having a view of the outdoors.
- Create comfortable sitting spots outside, as well, with shade and shelter from the wind.

- Keep a camera (with a telephoto lens) handy. Also consider using a motion-activated scout camera to reveal your yard's nocturnal wildlife visitors.
- Buy a few simple field guides to help identify wildlife and plants, or download field guide apps for your smart phone or tablet.
- Keep a home journal of bird sightings and natural events. Over time, you'll find how consistent some events are on the calendar, such as the return of bluebirds or the emergence of fireflies.
- Study aerial photos of your neighborhood and community (easy to find on the web) to see where nearby streams, woods, lakes and other natural features lie in relation to your home. Then plan family walks to these destinations!

Sadly, modern cultural trends are inadvertently limiting children's spontaneous opportunities to develop their early sense of place. This loss produces a void in personal identity and a rift in a

child's emerging linkage to his or her immediate community. Ultimately, this is a spiritual wound that erodes the wonder and adventure that had characterized childhood for eons.

With intent and sustained determination, these wounds can be healed -- but it won't be easy. Amidst American society's current obsessions with electronic entertainment, relentless school testing, and 100% safety at all times, mindful parents and caregivers will need to take a strong, pro-active stand in order to re-store their children's connections to nearby nature -- and the sense of place that those experiences engender. Virtually without doubt, though, in 50 years' time those parents' lucky children will recall their childhood realms with knowledge and affection, and with no remorse for the video gaming they missed out on!



"HEY! That's MY bug! I recognize him from last year!"

Green Hearts Institute for Nature in Childhood

Bringing Children and Nature Back Together

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