

Connecting with Nature:

A Guided Exploration of
Self-Discovery

For

The Neighborhood Environmental Stewardship Program
2006

By

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Welcome to Connecting with Nature!

You're about to embark on a guided exploration of self-discovery, in conjunction with all of the great activities that you've selected to do as part of NEST. In contrast to all of the other NEST activities, the goal of Connecting with Nature is to provide you with some private time outdoors, in a location of your choice, to let you experience Nature in a quiet, thoughtful way, and also perhaps, to let Nature experience you.

We know that having quiet time anywhere in our busy, responsible lives is a rare commodity. We hope that you'll experience these activities as a gift that you give yourself. Actually, the activities described in the next few pages are suitable for children to seniors, so that once you've tried them yourself, we encourage you to share them with those you care about, too. Here's the plan:

We're asking you to find a favorite spot outdoors that you'll return to for the first five activities and follow the directions for the activity. Our last activity will be different - combining everything we've done, but somewhere else! Your favorite spot can be at a park close to you, at the National Arboretum or the gardens of the National Cathedral, or even in your own backyard. It's up to you. The only requirement is that it is a place you commit to returning to, once a week or so, for five consecutive weeks.

The only other "gentle" requirement is that we'd like you to write down your thoughts and discoveries after you complete the activity. No one else ever has to read this, unless you want to share it. But, we've found over the years that folks who take the time to reflect on their experience by writing it down, get so much more out of it.....another gift!

Again, welcome, and let's get started.....



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Activity One: Finding Your Favorite Spot

So you thought this would be the easy part, right? Well, you're right! The hard part will be coming back to this spot once a week or so for the next five weeks. As you'll be learning in your other NEST activities, there are many things going on in this favorite spot of yours, whether you notice them or not. We know you'd hate to miss something – so we hope you can get out there regularly.

How to choose? Well, of course there's the convenience factor. Pick a place that's easy to get to or that you're dying to spend some time in. Maybe it's on your way home from school or work, maybe it's out your home or workplace window.

Then there's the immersion factor. Pick a place where there's just a bit more of the natural world than the urban world. See if you can find a place that's just pulling you in...and once you're there, you feel surrounded by friends.

Then there's the diversity factor. It would be great if this spot had lots of different aspects of the natural world – some trees, some wild flowers, a few critters, maybe a little bit of wetland and insects, and of course, a space to watch the clouds go by – or at least a few of your favorites!

When all else fails, ignore the advice above, and just follow your feet to the perfect spot. They won't fail you and you'll be surprised what you find! Once you find your spot, just spend 15 minutes being there.

Journaling Ideas:

What favorite spots did you consider? What did those spots have in common? What was different about each of them? What aspects of your favorite spot ultimately attracted you there?



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Activity Two: Take a Look Around

So, how was your week since we last got together? We hope it was a good one, and that you've been looking forward to getting back out to your favorite spot. The last time you were here, you had no particular activity other than to enjoy the spot you selected. Today we're asking you to really take a look around.

Try to go to the middle of your area. Look ahead and mentally divide your view into thirds. The first third is from eye-level on up to the sky. The second third is from eye-level down to just above ground-level. The third view, ideally, is on your hands and knees looking carefully at what's on the ground, or even a bit below. If it's physically comfortable, or if you don't want to attract a crowd – all doing the same thing you are just to find out what you're looking at, then use your judgment! The important things are to be quiet, look carefully, and just soak it in.

Stay in the direction you are facing, and begin to look in the first third. Let your sight be drawn naturally to whatever catches your eye, gaze there for as long as you want, then continue looking around. Then move to the 2nd level, and do the same thing. Continue down to ground level and spend time there. Do this facing each of the four directions. If you really like this activity, come back on a day with different weather conditions, or at a different time of day and see what you find.

Journaling Ideas:

Describe what you saw in each view. What did you notice about each third? What were your eyes drawn to first? Why? What did you NOT want to look at carefully? Why not? Did you find any surprises? Did you feel like anything was looking at you in return? Do you think this activity has any applications in your daily life? If so, what sort?



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Activity Three: Shh - Did you hear that?

Today, we're asking you to listen to your favorite spot. After all, you never know what it might be trying to tell you! Living in this region, our sense of hearing can be constantly bombarded by sounds we choose to listen to, or by all-out noise. It's tough to selectively listen, but we are going to practice this skill today.

Go to your spot and pick a location that you just feel like being in - there's no rhyme or reason to this - except to try to get away from any distracting, unnatural noises. Be in this space for a few minutes, just looking around, slowing down your breathing, forgetting about the cares of the day for a few moments. Just like last week, where you divided your gaze into thirds, we'd like you to try something similar with your hearing.

Close your eyes, if you'd like, and start listening. What do you hear? Can you try to isolate sounds that are far-off in the distance and just focus on those? Stay with this for a few minutes. Now, concentrate on sounds that are really close to your face and ears. If you don't hear anything at first, stay with this a few minutes. Finally, listen to what's in between. Try to experiment and play with listening to one distance at a time, then everything at once, then back again. Change locations or directions, and try again! Hopefully, your ears will thank you!

Journaling Ideas:

Was this easy or difficult to do, and why? Record all of the different sounds that you heard in each distance. Did one distance have more or different types of sounds than any other? Did you prefer one distance over another? What discoveries did you make about yourself or your place?



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Activity Four:

What's that smell? or Hmm – what smells so nice?

During the past few activities, we've basically asked you to pick a location in your favorite spot and stay there. For all of you active types, here's your big chance to start moving around! No worries – nothing strenuous and athletic today, but if you're in a public place, you might find that you're attracting attention again!

Our sense of smell can be the most taken-for-granted of our senses, until we smell smoke in the house, or noxious chemicals that have spilled, a fragrant flower or a favorite dinner. Since it's spring, we should have no problem keeping our nose busy for this activity.

Choose a day when it has recently rained, or try to go to your spot in the morning, when some of the evening moisture still remains. When you get there, just take some deep breaths -- nothing fancy here, just good 'ole being alive. Then just start strolling around and literally follow your nose. See if you can follow one distinct scent to its source. Or, see how many and what type of scents you can detect in a few breaths, standing in the same place.

Sure, we've all smelled flowers – today, try smelling some tree bark, a bug (careful here!), or a rock. Get down on the ground and find a few different scents near the ground. The dirt should have a pleasant odor this time of year. If you're by water, does the scent change as you walk along the stream?

Journaling Ideas:

How did you feel doing this activity- self-conscious, awkward, happy? Describe the different scents and odors that you discovered along the way. Identify some of your most and least favorite scents in Nature and why.



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Activity Five: Touch this!!

This is the fifth time at your favorite location. What changes have you noticed here since you started "Connecting with Nature"? You might notice signs of different plants, animals or insects emerging. Today is the final day sticking close to your favorite location, and, we do mean "sticking"! You can bring a buddy along today.

If you have a buddy along:

Spend a few minutes having them get to know the area. If you're comfortable, bring something to shield your eyes, like a scarf. Your buddy will be your eyes and ensure your footing and safety. Be sure they keep you away from poison ivy, etc. Hold on to your buddy while they lead you to various spots. No talking! When there, your buddy should direct your hand to various items for you to carefully touch. You can try to guess what it is, but that's not necessary for the activity. Just try to feel a variety of natural items (including the ground with your feet) without the benefit of eyesight.

If you're alone:

Do the same activity, only stay in one spot (no tripping, please!) and just close your eyes instead. Do this at different heights and notice the various textures that you discover- even on different sides of the same item. Again, be aware and avoid any poisonous plants.

Journaling Ideas:

How did it feel to be deprived of eyesight, only relying on your sense of touch? Were you able to identify any of the items, and why? If you were with a buddy, what did you discover about your feet and the ground? If alone, were there any surprises?



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Activity Six: Let Nature Be Your Guide

Congratulations! You've made it to the final activity, and we've saved the best for last. If time permits, you should allow at least an hour for this activity – only because you're going on a hike. If you can only spare a half hour, ok, but it's better the longer you can go.

Today we're asking you to go to a location of your choice. Ideally, this is a place with established trails, but not too many people. Also, try to select a place that's not too familiar, so that you can greet your hike with fresh expectations.

Before you start your hike, establish an intention. For example, an issue may have been on your mind for the past few days; hold this question as you hike, but don't directly think about it. Another idea is simply to ask "what does this hike have to teach me today?" As you set off, deliberately cross a threshold, signifying the start of this "mindful" hike. It can be as simple as walking between two trees, or stepping over a log. Then, enjoy! Go with wide open senses (you're good at this now!) and let yourself be attracted to whatever aspects of Nature is calling you at the moment. Slow down, and linger wherever you want. Do one of our activities from the past weeks. You may find that you're attracted to certain types of objects, or a certain sense today. Or, you may find that something dramatic happens on the trail. Just try to block out thoughts of the rest of your day, and just be where you are. When you reach the end of your hike, cross over another threshold signifying the conclusion.

Journaling Ideas:

What attracted you during your hike today? Did you find yourself linking anything that you experienced on the hike with things going on in your life? What message/s did the hike offer you today?



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Thank You!

We want to thank you for taking the time to go on a guided exploration of self-discovery by "Connecting with Nature". It is our wish that these activities have enriched your NEST experience, as well as your life, in general, and that you'll participate in these activities again with friends and family. If you have any questions or would like to discuss any aspect of this program, please contact Beverly Winterscheid at the email address below.

The Institute for Nature and Leadership is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to promoting the sustaining effects of nature. We serve individuals through workshops and other activities like "Connecting with Nature". We serve other environmental and non-profit organizations by providing expertise on stakeholder management and community-based citizens' education efforts. Above all, we try to serve the Earth in all of our activities.



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