



What is “Deep Nature Connection”?

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The methodologies, theories, and engaged routines that lead one to develop Deep Nature Connection are among the most important and relevant practices for generating healthy outcomes in our youth and our communities. Many people today are disconnected from nature and suffer a quiet emotional and psychological discontent as a result. There is considerable evidence for a generalized, cultural malaise caused by widespread alienation from the living breathing earth that birthed us and that raised our ancestors. Establishing a connection to nature, and fostering what is known as “Deep Nature Connection,” can be achieved through a set of practices known as Core Routines. The healing proposed through Deep Nature Connection has implications for individuals, communities, and culture in its entirety.

The topic of our disconnect from nature has been approached from many fields. Ecopsychologists examine human thinking and behavior to explain our consistent disregard for environmental collapse. Evolutionary Psychologists are considering what in our long tenure as hunter-gatherers might shed light on our relationship to earth. David Abram, in his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, describes how the human mind is intimately linked to terrain and weather, and how the earth itself is a ‘great mind’ of which we are all an active part. The biologist E.O. Wilson was the first to speak of humankind’s innate love of living things and life-like systems in his groundbreaking book *Biophilia*. Wilson’s theories spawned entire academic disciplines. The late Paul Shepard, a renowned human ecologist, wrote a landmark book *Nature and Madness*, which described how the advent of agriculture 12,000 years ago led to a form of ‘madness’ in culture that expresses itself as institutionalized hostility towards nature. Bill Plotkin, a pioneer in nature immersion therapy, uses the *vision quest* to help people discover their inborn gifts, what he calls their true purpose in this life. In 2008, Richard Louv wrote the bestselling book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. His work galvanized public awareness about the importance of the natural world in a child’s healthy development. Thanks in part to these contributions, a large body of scientific research -quietly conducted over the past 25 years and showing nature’s link to mental health- has begun to enter mainstream public discourse.

With this growing evidence for the importance of nature in human development, it is important to consider what kind of nature exposure, or nature engagement can begin the process of healing ourselves and our planet. Many people believe that simply getting into nature is enough, but there is more to the process than simple exposure. Jon Young, long-time wilderness expert and co-author of the book *Coyote’s Guide to Connecting with Nature*, outlines specific practices that will awaken our innate, empathetic connection to nature.

Nearly everyone has had the experience of staring into a fire. This is a relevant example that touches on our human genetic disposition. The dance of flames is captivating and mesmerizing. Fire gazing is an ancient human practice, something we have done for close to



a million years. Fire was central to the lives of the early nomadic ancestors who traveled in their small bands into the ice-age north, through Europe and into Asia over 800,000 years ago. Evenings were spent gathered around the flames, as stories of the day filled the air. Illuminating the faces of storytellers, cooking food from the hunt, the fire also brought safety and warmth to the tribe. This enduring legacy from antiquity makes fire something we feel in our bones. Though most humans left this nomadic lifestyle 12,000 years ago (when our ancestors discovered agriculture), we are still, all of us, captivated by the compelling presence of a wood fire. This is because we spent 99% of our ancestry around this fire. Our biological organism has an intimate knowledge of fire; this is something coded in our DNA. The magnetic pull of fire on our ancestral fibre is something every living person can sense, and it reminds us of our long social evolution as people who lived with fire in a deeply dependent way.

What naturalist Jon Young and his team call the “Core Routines” of deep nature connection, are effective precisely because they tap into ancestral ways of knowing, touching those nerves of intuitive sense-making that are buried deep in our bones. They have a remarkable healing capacity because they are ‘remembered,’ and have an organic resonance. Developing nature connection is not done accidentally during the weekend hike, nor through some mysterious osmosis beside the State Park stream, but actively through the practice of behaviors and routines that for thousands of generations were a mainstay of daily human life. Activities such as tracking, fire-making, flint knapping, hide tanning, plant gathering, herb preparing, basket making, and the like, touch deep nerves of our sense-making capacity. As we learn these skills, something in us already knows how to knap the stone and scrape the hide. We are sympathetic to these skills innately and intuitively, much like our capacity for language. The study and practice of primitive technologies, what are called “Stone Age Skills,” constitute one of the dozen or so *Core Routines*: Sit Spots, Story Telling, Bird Language, Sensory Expansion, Awe and Gratitude, Mental Mapping, Animal Mimicry, Intuitive Wandering, Questioning –these core routines tap into something we already know, into our tribal fiber as descendants of traditional nature-based ancestors, awakening a tremendous sense within us that we are imbedded in, and that we belong to, the natural world, to a living and breathing Mother Earth.

The great linguist Noam Chomsky taught us that humans possess a ‘universal grammar,’ evidenced by that fact that children are able to learn the complex nuances of language at an impossibly early age. The only explanation, he argued, was an evolved predisposition to communicate this way, to navigate the spoken world before the age of two. This inherent genetic encoding is especially also when we consider our relationship to wild nature.

Among the core routines of deep nature connection, the study of Bird Language provides an exciting window into the adaptive purpose of certain human abilities. It invites us to become more fully human by exploring this inherited proclivities. In Jon Young’s most recent book, *What the Robin Knows. How Birds Reveal the Secrets of the Natural World*, he describes a technique long known by our ancestors to map the movement and behavior of animals in the environment through the ever-changing vocalizations of birds.



Young claims that all humans possess an evolved capacity to differentiate the vocalizations of birds, to distinguish the local species that are making them, and to map the terrain from these sounds. According to his work, birds variously make five sounds: (1) juvenile begging, when the young ask for food; (2) territorial aggression, to ward off unwanted 'others'; (3) songs; (4) companion or 'contact' calls' during feeding; and (5) alarm calls. This last category, alarm calls, are especially important. These are used by birds to warn other animals (not just fellow birds), of the location and behavior of predator such as foxes, ravens, hawks, coyotes, and bobcats. For a person who has learned bird language well, it is common practice to quickly know the location of the nearest *accipiter*. This hawk hunts other birds by snatching them out of flight. One who knows bird-language can literally hear the 'pockets of silence' these aerial hunters cause. When a predator is spotted, an alarm is given, and an entire area becomes devoid of sound and movement. The area remains this way until the predator has moved on. Listening to bird language is not just about noting the tapestry of sounds, but also the location of silences. Not surprisingly, bird language skills are well-developed among living tribal peoples, helping them stay safe from predators, and also locate possible food sources. This skill was also well-known to our ancestors and lies dormant in each of us. As we re-awaken our innate capacity to comprehend the utterings of our feathered friends, we retrieve our rightful inheritance as people of a living planet, returning once again to our role as stewards of a bountiful and providing earth.

The Core Routines will lead to Deep Nature Connection. This in turn builds a number of very desirable personal attributes such as empathy, reverence, commitment to service, vitality, earth stewardship, joyfulness, and a quiet awareness. Not surprisingly, we commonly find these attributes among living nature-based peoples. Developing Deep Nature Connection in our youth is, through practicing the Core Routines, is a commitment of Manzanita School and Institute.