

Reflections on Nature Camps: Where are grown NC Children Now?



Nature Study & Its Positive Influence on the Lives of Children

At Ladew Topiary Gardens in Monkton, MD, there is a gazebo with a framed picture entitled Ever Changing Landscape. It is a painting of a valley with a garden in the foreground. In reality it is a window surrounded with a frame. As seasons change so does the painting, bringing forth new perspectives.

As my own children have grown and changed, as Nature Camps' children have blossomed and grown over these past thirty-three years, I have been the fortunate recipient of their ever-changing landscapes, as in the frame at Ladew Gardens.

My, how they have grown and blossomed!

Their reflections below tell how Nature Camps (formerly Don Webb Nature Camps – DWNC) has influenced their lives. Enjoy them -- and be touched by them as I have been. They **all speak about the essential-ness of outdoor experiences that every child needs -- to be whole, to have perspective, to be in touch with themselves** -- especially in today's world.

My wish is that today's children and their children's children will continue to be blessed by what their parents impart to them about nature. **I also hope that we remember that children's sense of time is different from that of adults. This seems especially true of summertime days. What a gift it is of us to slow down, to be unhurried, and give the gift of a summertime place such as Nature Camps to our children.**

From David Heroy:



In the third grade, I got a headache almost every Monday. It was so painful, I remember having to go to my room after school and shut my window shades and eyes and lie in bed. While this gave me some relief from my headache, it multiplied my anxiety – because I was merely putting off my endless piles of homework. I was depressed, overwhelmed, and no

one seemed able to do anything to help me. As an adult, I can see now that my parents were busy with their own problems, going through a divorce. But that was life.

That summer, I remember going to Nature Camps for the first time (in 1979 it was called Don Webb's Nature Camp). I had been to various camps before, but they were "sports camps", where campers were locked into a particular activity every day, regardless of what we liked or didn't like. So, my first day at Nature Camps, with shaggy hair and Zips (shoes that made you run really fast), I was confused when counselors asked me what I wanted to do that day. Did I understand right? I can choose to do anything? Really?

Completely daunted by all the new faces, I chose to do nothing. I remember swinging myself on a swing and playing in the sandbox. I quickly became bored. A counselor had been watching me and eventually came over and asked me if I wanted to make a "god's eye" out of two sticks and brightly colored yarn. Well, I didn't really, but the prospects were better than what I had been doing.

As I was making my god's eye, I noticed all the other kids were having much more fun than I was. For one thing, some actually wanted to make god's eyes. Others came back from activities with red raspberry stains ear to ear, still others with mud on their pants and shirts. I decided no matter what, from now on I was going to choose something. So, the next day, I chose to go on an all day hike in search of "The Lost Pond". That's right, bring your own lunch, there may be wild savages, we'll be lucky if we ever return, and I was excited.

It poured rain on our hike, and we got completely lost, and we crossed back and forth over a swollen stream, getting wet up to our knees. Two campers slipped and fell in the water. But no one cared; we were already completely soaked, and the rain showers were actually relief from the heat. The storm eventually passed, and the counselors found our way back to camp, and we survived. We received a hero's welcome, wore mostly dry but still-crusty shirts and shorts and soggy Zips that made squishy noises, and had triumphant smiles. **It was a new world, and I was going to stay here in this world as long as possible.**

Every summer, I cried on the last day of camp. I know my older and much wiser sister (who also loved Nature Camps) cried too. For me it meant back to a world watching *The Price Is Right* on T.V., avoiding summer reading, and ultimately, back to school. Yuck. **But, I had a taste of something different. I had been in a place where I felt at home, I felt comfortable. That place was outside, among the tall trees and ferns or in the field with uncut grasses or in the streams or even on the logs and swings hanging from the trees. I took that feeling of comfort and belonging with me into adulthood.**

Outside is where I feel most comfortable. When feel lonely or upset, I go outside (or at least I look out the office window). It's like a secret strength, to look up to the familiar stars (I remember my best friend and I naming our own constellation, stars I know now to be part of the Summer Triangle), to smell the soil or leaves (the smell of skunk cabbage reminds me of making leprechaun houses by the stream, using Skunk Cabbage leaves for roofing material), to hear the birds (the wood thrush to me sounds like an exotic French flute) or the sound of light rain on a pond (sounds like tiny little bells). I only went for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out 'til sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in. — John Muir

And this summer, my wife and I are starting our own camp called Blackwood Nature Camp here in Texas. I am both nervous and overjoyed at the thought of running my own camp. Strangely though, I know that it will work – in it's own time and in it's own way. **I simply believe that children learn and grow best as nature intended them to: outside, in natural surroundings, with mixed ages and close supervision of caring adults, doing challenging, fun, and meaningful activities. It's my hope to recreate the magic of Nature Camps here at Blackwood – to create a comforting and rejuvenating place for all to share.**

From Helen Tuten:



When I started high school, I was a dolphin. I had been trained to jump through hoops, to swim along with my fellow performers, and at the end of the show I would be rewarded. My main focus, of course, was the end of the show. I hardly concentrated on the training or the acquirement of my skills; it was all about the fish at the end.

And then I went on my first night walk. I could not see the fish at the end. I was not even sure where we were walking, or if I had ever walked that path before. All of a sudden, roots jutted under my feet, higher than I had ever noticed. The path was not just under my feet but was all around me; if the branches scratched my arms, I knew I was off the path. The moment, each individual step, became the most important thing.

For the first time in my life, the doing of something became more important than the end result. And in the summers that followed, with my performance costume of polished oxfords and blue jumper stowed in the closet, **I learned to be. I learned that a hike was not where we ended up, but the myriad of things we saw and smelled and tasted on the way. That weaving a basket was not about what would be carried in the basket upon its completion, but how it would look with flowers woven in it and worn on the head.**

My own children reminded me of these gentle lessons learned so many years ago at camp. For a child a walk is a time to gather all of the rocks of a certain color, traveling a speed measured in feet per hour. **Each moment in time lives in its entirety for a child. This pure focus, innate in all of us, is so easily clouded by the need to accomplish, to “check it off the list”, to call it done.** The focus moves from the heart to the head. Daily, I strive to regain this sense of being wholly present. In working with children with special needs, it is all about the moment. For most of my kids, time is slowed down. Each movement requires more notice, more attention and more effort. Helping to guide their small bodies through space requires us both, as a team, to fully focus on the task at hand. **The compassion, love, and honesty that pervaded camp and all its philosophies gives me the capability of answering that painful question, always uppermost in a parent's mind, “Will my child ever walk?”** I can answer that we will first work on head control and in each moment together I know that we will learn something new; we will **fill each moment to the brim focusing on the now.**

From Polly Webb:

The memories of Nature Camp are infinite. I was lucky enough to be born the year Nature Camps started. I grew up at camp as it evolved and thrived. **Nothing compares to that time for me.** There are moments I smell something that takes me back to that time . . . rope swings, sweaty horses and grass, chlorine scented hair, skunk cabbage, wet shoes, wet dog, and sweet musty woods and pine.



I felt princess-like in the woods, feeling like they were my woods for I knew them inside and out, in light or dark. Choosing every day what activity to do as it spoke to me was wonderfully liberating. I remember meeting a former staff member years later that recalled me as a young girl, always climbing a tree or playing in mud and streams. It makes me remember such times fondly, as I think how wonderful it was to be so lost in what I was doing and creating. I had my independence early on and that has always stayed with me. I cherish that immensely.

At camp I was fascinated by critters and creatures as they were all around, big or small. Turning rocks over had the same feeling as opening a Christmas present . . . the anticipation of what could be or what was there was exciting and intriguing. To my delight I was never disappointed, learning or seeing something new with each rock, with each day.

My love affair with horses began early on. My initial fear and sense of wonder, turned to respect and love, as I was challenged how to communicate and even relate to these amazing creatures. I took riding lessons, then eventually became part of staff and helped teach. In addition to riding at camp, I became part of a separate riding school, where I flourished in proper riding and genuine care of horses. It lead me to Colorado, to work on a ranch leading trail rides into Rocky Mountain National Park. I became involved with the Equestrian Team at college. Years later I pursued a degree in Equine Sports Massage Therapy as well as my Veterinary Technician degree. I now own my own business, Hands for Horses, providing massage therapy to horses. I love the work I do as I get to be outside with my favorite smells. I am fueled by the Colorado sunshine and my equine companions.

As I recall the words to the Circle Song, I think to myself things do have a way of circling back on themselves. And I am forever touched.

From Seth Webb:



Thinking about the gifts of Nature Camps is a bit like attempting to discern the sublime; growing up and living with camp was so magically integral to the rest of my life. Part of that was that my father, Don, organizes and lives his life in a way that extends the Camp experience to more than just the three summer months - **it is a way of living in the world.**

One of the many beauties of Nature Camps is the unhurried time children enjoy to explore their natural surroundings. Through slowing down and taking their time, looking at the familiar from different perspectives, children at Nature Camps deeply explore the wild spaces around them. They develop a way of knowing that comes from being genuinely part of what they are attempting to understand; that is, an authentic knowledge rooted in sensorial experiences that tickle and surprise. **The children form an intimate connection with the world, and that relationship resonates within them. This relationship is 'love'.**

Today I live with my family in New Zealand and teach in an elementary Montessori classroom. **Working with children, my job is one of setting the kindling for the wonderful sparks of curiosity and interest to spring forth.** It is up to the students, alone or collectively, to do the work of the synapses – to make those links, to leap the gaps between experiences and ideas towards a holistic understanding of everything around and within them.

Nature Camps is about just that: making connections, becoming so familiar with the natural world that the children receive it as a source of deep insight and practical wisdom.

Watch children as they play in nature. There is an intensity and exuberance that appears so wonderfully organic. They appear to distill joy from their experience of the world: the taste of a ripe berry, the feel of cool mud between one's toes, the warm whip of the wind before a rainstorm.

Nature Camps facilitates a life-long conversation between children and the environment around them. These moments provide children with an intrinsic, spiritual connection to what is wild around them – and within.

The above remarkable validation of the effects on children's experiences in nature has been noted over the past fifty years, especially in books such as Anna Comstock's *Nature Study*, Rachael Carson's *Silent Spring* and *Sense of Wonder*, in *Opal – The Journal of an Understanding Heart*, and in the 2006 popularized book *Last Child in the Woods – Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*, by Richard Louv.



These powerful, touching thoughts and feelings from NC grown adults and these books, all cite the continual body of research that indicates engagement with the natural world is essential for healthy childhood development, and for the physical and emotional health of both children and adults.

Mandy Koch :



Nature Camp has been my home ever since I was just a little bump in my mama's dress at camp – she was the nurse there, in the 'Happy Hollow' woods when she was pregnant with me. My sisters, just little girls then, were flitting through the forests like tree sprites, learning what I would later know too – of magical trees, dear friends, of the secret stillness and beauty of animals and plants native to those woods, the notes that make up our symphony of nature and ultimately a gentler way of living.

The family I found at camp stays with me still, and I love the thrilled way that counselors now (who used to be my campers when I was a counselor) say, "I've been coming here for 11 years!" They have found the same family there that I did when I was in their muddy shoes. Camp nurtured me as a child, an adolescent and young adult the way that all parents hope that children will be cared for by the larger community: with tenderness, guidance, plenty of space for growth and wild play. I was free to wander through the woods and examine the natural world with wide curiosity and joy, holding the hands of more genuinely loving friends (both child and adult) than one young girl could ever hope for. These friends helped me grow into a confident, secure adult with values rooted in the traditional Quaker way: humility, passivism, consensus-building, equality, gentleness, responsibility, and acceptance. It was a place that I learned how to recognize and celebrate the innate goodness in myself and in others. This was and continues to be a real family to me – in the same way that Don's is for so many other young people. Camp is a place I'll always return to for safety, belonging, nourishment.

I only went for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out 'til sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in.
— John Muir