

Nature-deficiency disorder

Description

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As a child I spent time in the apple tree in our backyard. The branches on the side closest to the house formed a level seat eventually worn smooth by repeated clambering, fidgeting and presumably sitting. e also served in target practice as Iâ??d aim at or over it with e house.



I made the bow from string and a length of thin wooden edge moulding procured with my pocket money from the hardware shop down the street. The arrows were fashioned from sharpened dowel, with plastic from an ice cream container shaped into feathers inserted into grooves at the blunt end.

I also served as target practice for my sister when she felt inclined through adolescent seniority to hurl apples at me â?? apples that had fallen from my tree.

Memories: you have to begin with them if you are going to talk about nature. Iâ??ve been reading ***Last Child in the Woods*** by Richard Louv, which is a lament over our loss of contact with nature, and a rallying cry to get back in touch.

He uses the phrase â??nature-deficiency disorderâ?• to describe â??the human costs of alienation from nature, among them: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses. The disorder can be detected in individuals, families, and communities.â?•

Itâ??s difficult to deny the value of nature, and being in it, especially when aligned so strongly with childhood, and its innocence. Itâ??s also easy in the same breath to denigrate the effects of modern technology: â??Experience, including physical risk, is narrowing to about the size of a cathode ray tube, or flat panel if you prefer.â?• Thanks to networked computers we are growing â??more separate from nature,â?• and each other it seems.

Whatâ??s so special about nature?

Such sentiments find ready resonance amongst electronically connected contemporary adults who recall a time when things were different. But I still find it difficult to identify precisely what is being alluded to when experts catalogue the benefits of the nature experience. Here are some candidates.

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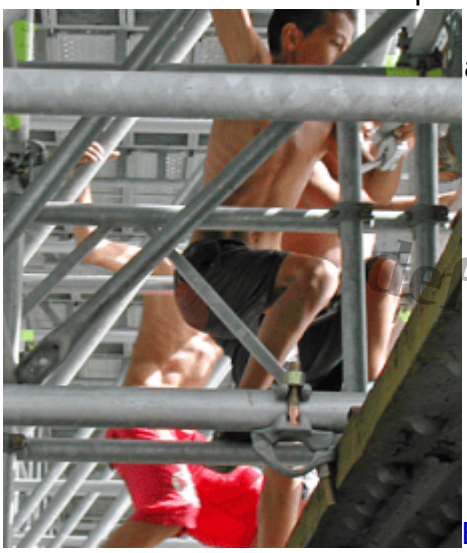
1. **Solitude**: â??I wandered lonely as a cloud.â?• Most accounts of a nature experience amongst the Romantics were of the lone wanderer savouring the wonders of the natural world. Perhaps solitude brings benefits. Itâ??s easier to achieve in the vast expanse of the outdoors.
2. **Company**: camping, hillwalking picnics, bushcraft, and white water rafting are group activities. Projects in the outdoors typically require some level of cooperation. Perhaps itâ??s increased, project-based sociability that yields benefits.
3. **Stewardship**: Whatever the benefits to individuals and the human species, the world outside of human artifice needs to be sustained and respected. To experience nature is to engage with this bigger project. What some call â??altruismâ?• loops back to tangible and emotional benefit.
4. **Exertion**: Nature experiences afford opportunities to traverse distances, work against physical resistance, run about, breathe deeper and become fitter.
5. **Knowledge**: Thereâ??s a lot to know in nature, and people benefit from being able to recall, identify, classify, and explain it. Itâ??s a rich arena for the exercise of shared practical wisdom.
6. **Risk**: Nature experiences afford some degree of challenge. You can fall from the tree, get stung by a bee, or bruised by a flying apple. Even the most risk averse are stimulated by the occasional danger nature throws at us.
7. **Contrast**: Perhaps thatâ??s what we crave. Moving into and out of safety and danger, light and shade, the simple and the complicated, the familiar and *the other* â?? leaving the safety of home for the wild unknown, and returning with some new insight or point of view, only to venture out again in the constant transformation that is life. Perhaps thereâ??s something about the â??frontier spiritâ?• here.
8. **Other**: The list goes on. Iâ??ve already reviewed *soft fascination.* Perhaps the benefits come from doing things with our hands (climbing, picking up sticks, tossing apples), play, embodied interaction, giving scope to the full range of the senses, meditation, letting be, exercising our hardwired biological affinities, participating in the web of life, filling our lungs with fresh air, absorbing UV light, or connecting with as yet unmeasurable natural fields and forces. Perhaps it just feels good to do what you like doing. Stamp collectors, guitar players, sociable drinkers, and bloggers move into a beneficial frame of being when doing what they like doing. If you like the forest then you anticipate and experience some benefit from being in a forest, unlike those who

are forest averse.

9. **All of the above**: Perhaps itâ??s all of these things (1-8) bundled together, in variable intensity, mostly delivered at low cost, without special equipment or the need of a checklist.

What intrigues me though is that scholars and enthusiasts for computers, digital media and devices have made similar claims to all of the above. Artefacts, buildings, and experiences induced by artificial means, including music, watching movies, hanging about indoors, indoor exercise, looking at abstract pictures and patterns, and commentary on urban living in general draw on similar tropes.

Thatâ??s not to valorise computers, networks, mobile devices, or the built environment (or to indic that the world of aps t one in any case.





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Bibliography

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Notes

- Other childhood memories (in no particular order) include assembling gears with my Meccano set, making an intercom with a Philipâ??s *Electronic Engineer* kit, constructing puppet stages out of cardboard boxes, and loitering with friends along a creek turned into an open concrete drain that smelled of insecticide.
- Perhaps itâ??s sufficient to find correlations. If the evidence points to benefits of what people choose to call â??the naturalâ?• then never mind the causes â?? though observation and

evidence gathering are prone to confirmation bias.

- Perhaps it comes down to values. â??Natureâ?• is a substitute for â??value neutrality.â?• We canâ??t use the language of good and bad for the occurrence of an earthquake or tidal wave (nature), but we can for the construction of a power station (technology).
- In gathering evidence for the benefits of nature the researcher may set up experiments to discount each of the factors above, in which case the natural turns out to be whatever is left over, which is basically a null set.
- The pictures are of kids clambering over and jumping off the Dom LuÃs I Bridge, Porto, Portugal when it was undergoing refurbishment around 2004.
- Iâ??m grateful to Professor Sara Warber of the University of Michigan (UM) Ann Arbor for alerting me to Louvâ??s book.
- For some of the narratives that romanticise and â??naturaliseâ?• digital media see Coyne, Richard. 1999. *Technoromanticism: Digital Narrative, Holism, and the Romance of the Real*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.



Category

1. Nature

Tags

1. nature
2. outdoors
3. play

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