

# Wild Play



## Pond Dipping Our Way to the Promised Land

**Unless we act to stem the alienation of people from the environment (and illustrate the connections between ecology and our everyday lives) each generation will multiply the problems we face. If we are not to engage in ever more widespread and futile battles against destruction we need to start at the beginning—with the children.**

The legacy of domination is that our ecology is under assault. Industry is destroying the diversity of life on Earth at an unprecedented scale. As James Lovelock (author of the Gaia hypothesis) puts it: "It's as if the brain were to decide that it is the most important organ in the body and started mining the liver." That we find ourselves here is due, in part, to dominant culture's general alienation from the ecological communities which support our lives. Alongside the damage that we are causing to other species, this alienation is having a profound psychological effect on ourselves—as a species—enabling us to blindly stumble on, creating further problems. Our psyches have evolved in symbiosis with the environment, as the cultures we have formed further divorce us from it, it is no wonder that we act irrationally. It is a psychological, as well as physical, loss of connection.

Three steps towards a basis for a radical ecological sensibility can be defined as: nurturing a relationship with the natural world; developing

understanding of our planet's basic ecological processes; and encouraging and supporting participation in caring for, and developing in partnership with, our environment.

### Cling-Film Wrapped Kids

For the majority of children, having a relationship with the natural world is becoming a lot more difficult. Not only does the cling-film wrapped sanitised world of the modern consumer disguise any connections to the natural world and its processes, but parental fear and capital-driven urbanisation are denying children access to 'natural' areas. In a 1995 survey by Barnardos, half of parents interviewed said that they would never let their children play outside without adult supervision. A 1999 study by the NSPCC claimed 8 out of 10 parents were too frightened to allow kids to play unsupervised in parks.<sup>1</sup>

How much time do modern parents have to supervise children, never mind make the effort to take them to play in natural areas, supposing they



can gain access to them? Even when children are allowed out it has been observed that their independent mobility range (or how far children are allowed to play) has shrunk for a nine year old to a ninth of what it was in the 1970s.<sup>2</sup>

Increasingly intensified use of our countryside is denying even rural children access to wild areas. Yet in the city the situation is much worse, where the environment is of adult design with priority given to economically profitable activity. The stark design of the modern 'play area' is less about children playing and exploring their world, and more about a 'safe environment' where children can 'pass the time'. 57% of children born in developing countries in this decade will be born into urban slums.<sup>3</sup> This is also a major problem in Britain and has been said to have contributed to the fact that the environmental movement here is predominantly white and middle class. The Black Environment Network has uncovered what it calls the cycle of participation:

"All the elements of this cycle are embedded in white middle class lifestyle. Most of them have gardens, so that children have the opportunity to mess around with soil and plants. At the weekends, it is usual to drive out to the countryside for picnics and walks. In other words, being in contact with nature is part of their lives. If one enjoys nature, one naturally grows to love it. If then, one is informed that what one loves is threatened, it is a natural human response to come out fighting for it. In such a scenario environmental participation is a natural phenomenon in white middle class life."

"For many deprived groups, it is therefore important to recognise that the process is missing because the first crucial step—contact with nature—is not in place. If we wish to release the vast missing contribution of ethnic groups and other disadvantaged groups, the environmental movement needs to put into place access to contact with nature in the immediate environment of such groups, and enable access to nature at large further afield."<sup>4</sup>

As can be recognised this is an issue of class as well as ethnicity. Ethnic groups can also have other barriers to wanting to get involved in natural areas; one of these is culture. The 'natural' environment in the UK is by and large 'wilderness' free. It is as much a social and cultural construct as it is a natural one. The tales that help define a sense of home in the natural world told by grandparents and parents may be of a different type of environment, imbuing different values. The overriding priority given by many environmentalists to 'natural areas' above a social ecology that links both the natural world and the more social and urbanised realms characterised in inner city areas, could be seen to have an underlying agenda of

privilege and racial prejudice. A lot of 'lifestyle environmentalism' prioritises retreats to the rural over quality of life issues affecting the majority of urban dwellers. Greening estates, allotments, public space and the built environment can be a more immediate priority for many ethnic and disadvantaged groups.

Another group that may need additional support in feeling comfortable in the natural world are girls and young women:

"Cultural barriers and fears keep many of our daughters away from the woods and the fields. Tomboys are acceptable only until they reach the threshold of adolescence. Then, they are told, they must climb down from the trees they love and act 'a proper lady'. At this point, young women begin to live with a paradox. They are taught to spend their time attracting men, but they are also taught to fear violence from men. As a result, women may crave solitude but may fear being alone in the landscape. Over and over, they tell me that they feel vulnerable; they fear danger—not from the land, but from men. They fear violence and never quite forget about its most disturbing expression: rape."<sup>5</sup>

## Education for Action

So, if a starting point for nurturing an ecological sensibility in children is lots of direct first hand contact with the natural world, this may have to be facilitated. This facilitation does not only include providing access to 'natural' areas, both local to them and more diverse areas further afield, but can also include breaking down psychological barriers about contact with the natural world. This may require targeted and focused activities that not only include techniques to bring people up close to nature, but also entice them to make that leap in the first place.



*In non-industrial societies kids get a connection with nature immediately through daily life—no need for 'excursions'.*



Once a positive relationship with the natural world is beginning to grow, the first step is caring about something, the second stage is developing understanding. One of the reasons that people can carry on their ecologically destructive habits is that they remain ignorant of the basic processes that underpin our world. These processes, if understood, would make many of our actions seem absurd. If effectively illustrated, through participating in practical activities, a child of eight can understand basic ecological concepts. Understanding how energy flows through our environment, and that we need green plants to process the sun's energy into food we can eat, shows the folly of covering the land in concrete and eroding the soil. Realising that we live on a finite planet and that all of our molecules are constantly recycled makes children understand the absurdity of plastic packaging landfill, and that poison put into the air and water cycles will, eventually, come back to haunt us. Illustrating the interconnections between all living things shows that you cannot act in isolation from the rest of the world, and that all of our actions have consequences. This, in conjunction with the fact that everything is constantly undergoing a process of change which is vital for evolution raises the question of why we are trying to simplify our environment and halt the flow of natural processes, and also gives us hope for the future. These are just a few concepts, which when considered together, build a basic picture that should be a prerequisite for anyone living on the planet, and can be seen as even more vital than the basic social and cultural skills that are taught in our schools.

But all of this means nothing unless people act. It is important that you then provide accessible ways that children and young people can get involved in caring for their environment, from making lifestyle changes to working together to look after and develop natural areas near where they live, play, or go to school. These may only seem like small things but it is important that young people can act on things that they can achieve, specific to their age and capabilities. Sitting in the classroom at school where

environmental education is predominantly issue based (acid rain and global warming etc.) can be very disempowering.

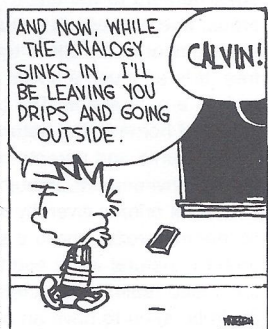
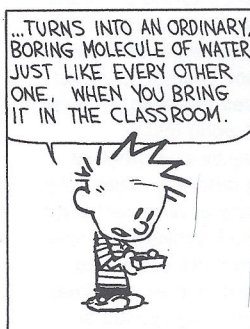
Awareness of the issues is important but they are problems caused by adult society, and it is adult society that holds the solutions. Children are one of our most powerless minorities, so to tell them that their planet is dying, and the solutions are out of their control is very unfair. But, by taking part in activities which make small tangible changes and reinforce an ecological mindset, children can develop an understanding of the world which may stop them burying their heads in the sand when they are older. However, we must be careful to place this in context. Telling children that by reducing their impact through recycling and other lifestyle changes they can save the planet, is not only misleading but also implies that the state of the planet is their fault for not doing these things in the first place, rather than the underlying cause being social and economic systems based on domination and exploitation. Once again, this participation in activities may have, to an extent, to be facilitated and supported as consumer society does not encourage participation in the real world. Children may not be used to the concept of acting on things that they learn and discover.

At what age should we begin to work with children to implement this pattern of exploration, discovery, learning, and participation? At what age of a child's development are activities with different emphases appropriate? A place to start can be at the beginning. When a child is born it is a wild animal, not yet a social or cultural creature, its experience of the world is direct and real, unmediated by words and concepts. At this stage a child's development mirrors natural evolution, it is a cumulative process of auto-poiesis (literally self-poetry), or self-making, self-organisation.

Rene Dubos, a writer on psychology and health states: "Development of the nervous system and even mental health depend upon a constant exposure to sensory stimuli and new experiences." Through play and discovery children organise their world, they build themselves. The natural world at its best is rich and chaotic, a torrent of responsive



I THINK WE MIGHT ALL LEARN A LESSON FROM HOW THIS UTTERLY UNIQUE AND EXQUISITE CRYSTAL ...





stimuli. It is malleable, irregular and teeming with other life, exposure to which can help fire the imagination.

“Although his tools are cultural, the child’s modelling impulses, perceptual and manual, appear to be spontaneous and biologically innate. These impulses are instinctive and inventive, whilst the child’s materials are in the strict sense ‘natural’. Being artefact as such is not the essential nature of any object. The natural properties of an artefact—its shape, colour, and especially texture and potential use—are the reality along with the identity. Looked at in this way a child’s world making in play is a learning process... On this basis it is possible to sustain the view that the child does not merely grow but evolves out of nature into culture.”<sup>6</sup>

### An Adventure of the Senses

This process of stimulating the imagination continues throughout the child’s development. In these early years up to the age of about five the child’s main attachment is to their mother/carer. From the age of five the child takes tentative steps away from this attachment into the wider world. It is from this age we can supplement pure free play with more focused activities. It is important when designing play and learning activities to involve children in the natural world to take into account that children have a different perception of the environment to adults. How many times have you seen adults walking their children through the countryside and trying to show them magnificent views, just to turn round to find the kids poking around in puddles or making dens in the bushes? Adults tend to find beauty, tranquillity, and solace in the mindscapes of rolling hills or sea and sky. For children the natural world is much more immediate and intimate. Acting out scenarios in secluded dens, climbing trees for lookouts. They can spend a whole day just mucking about on the edge of a stream. The best way to design activities is to observe how children play, and develop on this behaviour. From the age of about five to seven children can begin to understand concrete concepts that can be shown practically through games and discoveries. Such things as; animals need shelter, water, air, and food for survival, and that they get these things from their environment.

From about the age of eight to around the age of twelve are the most formative years of a child’s development. It is these years that are most likely to have the greatest impression on the person the child is to become. The world is becoming an incredibly interesting place, they are beginning to understand ideas, and if given the opportunity, to be exhilarated by life. It is at this age that risks are to be taken and discoveries to be made. Asbjorn Fleming, a Norwegian educationalist has noted:

### Solitude

A simple yet valuable experience that is very powerful is that of solitude. With almost constant supervision, and the audio and visual bombardment of consumer society, many children very seldom have positive experiences of solitude. As well as being a valuable place for reflection it can also be an experience where children can appreciate the flows and rhythms of the natural world. A simple activity to provide this is known in earth education as ‘magic spots’.

- Let each child choose a spot in the woods sitting with their back to a tree but so they cannot see anyone else. Then they sit still and silent until the normal activity of the woodland resumes around them, as if they were just another feature in their surroundings.
- For some children, the first time they do this it can be good to give them something to focus on—are there insects on the bark of their tree? What different sounds can they hear? What shapes are made by the play of light as the trees move above them?
- The first time you try it, start with five minutes then increase it to around ten minutes. If given the choice some children will often stay longer than this.
- Use small sitting mats so that the children are comfortable.
- If working with a large group of children, drop them off and pick them up one by one. Place them so that they face different directions and can’t see each other.
- Get the group together before setting off. Have them reach up above them and grasp an imaginary curtain, the ‘veil of silence’, and lower it to their feet. After this no one can utter a sound until the ‘veil’ is lifted at the end of the activity. Remind them that the activity is not for meditating or ‘listening to the little voice inside their head’, but experiencing the world around them.

A variation on this activity is called ‘night watchers’ and is done after dark. This activity is the same as ‘magic spots’ but a night-light or small candle in a jam jar is placed behind each child. If the jar is placed behind them it does not spoil their night vision, but they and you are reassured by the little dots of light scattered through the wood.



“...play comes to children naturally with two related impulses, to use the body to its fullest while interacting with others socially. Inevitably it involves risk, conflict and even fighting but these are the thrilling experiences that children seek out and they drive forward physical and social development... There is a will and a drive to develop and it happens through real play. What this means is using the body as it can be used, finding out for themselves what the body is capable of... Much of children's play is about finding out what they are capable of and pushing themselves on.”<sup>7</sup>

The natural world is the perfect place for this type of adventure. Unlike the adult designed challenges of the 'play area' or the athletics field, the natural world doesn't judge, it just is. “Can I climb that tree? Can I jump the dyke just here?” Children weave the landscape together with stories, they make it their own. This can be a very supportive relationship. It is a time in children's lives where they have very little control, they are at the beck and call of adult relationships and decisions. To feel at home in the natural world is a valuable thing. Amongst the buzzing lives of other species, it is a place where they can go to be alone without being lonely. These explorations and discoveries can also incite a curiosity which can drive a desire to learn. At this age they are able to be excited by ideas and are beginning to be able to understand abstract concepts and the interconnections between living things. If these concepts are placed in the context of their discoveries, and are illustrated by the children participating in a practical way, they can take on a reality that transcends textbooks.

### Rites of Passage

The next stage of a child's development can be very difficult; it involves the transition from being a child to becoming a young adult—adolescence. At this time there is a lot going on in a young



*Collecting berries in the forest garden. Moulsecoomb Forest Garden and Wildlife Project in Brighton has been introducing local kids to ecology since 1994.*

person's life—friends, music, developing sexuality, the future, and having a good time can predominate. They can also be possessed by a self-consciousness that can be almost crippling. At this time the most useful thing that can be done is to maintain an underlying contact and relationship with the natural world, and to help nurture the confident autonomous individual. This can provide a position of strength from which they can make informed decisions about the world that they are becoming active in. During this period a relationship with the natural world is of immeasurable value for the self-esteem, confidence, and security of young people. It has been said of the natural environment that:

“Nowhere, it seems, do human concerns matter less. And yet, nowhere is the simple fact of our existence so exhilaratingly clear. Nowhere do so few trivialising and demeaning assaults on egos exist. Nowhere do humans matter more... By forging connections with plants, animals, and land, by finding some ways to experience some relationship to the Earth, individuals can gain a sense of worth. Herein lies security.”<sup>8</sup>

How important this can be is illustrated in this anecdote: “...in 1974, I heard this from a twelve-year-old black girl who had been bussed to a previously all-white Boston school: ‘I guess I'm doin' all right. I'm studyin' and like teacher says, it pays off. A lot of time, though, I wish I could walk out of that school and find myself a place where there are no whites, no black folk, no people of any kind! I mean, a place where I'd be able to sit still and get my head together; a place where I could walk and walk, and I'd be walking on grass, not cement, with glass and garbage around; a place where there'd be sky and the sun, and then the moon and all those stars. At night sometimes, when I get to feeling real low, I'll climb up the stairs to our roof [she lived in a triple-decker building with a flat roof], and I look at the sky, and



I'll say hello there, you moon and all your babies—stars! I'm being silly, I know, but up there, I feel I can stop and think about what's happening to me—it's the only place I can, the only place."<sup>9</sup>

When relationships have broken down within society or the family, young people can be faced with an overwhelming sense of isolation. The natural world can give a definition of self defined in relation to others, including other species; and the security of interconnected relationships to the rest of the world, a counterpoint to isolation and alienation. Finding your place in the world, and drawing comfort from diversity. As stated by Paul Shepard: "The culmination of this difference-with-affinity is a firm ground of personal confidence and membership in its largest sense."<sup>10</sup>

One way of developing these experiences is through camps and expeditions that encompass challenging activities. These can be intense experiences which involve immersing young people in the natural world. Talking into the flames of the campfire in the seclusion of the night can provide a safe place for them to voice and discuss their hopes and fears. Incorporating 'challenges by choice' can help them test themselves. These are just a few of the elements of something that is generally lost from commercialised society, a form of 'rights of passage', something to delineate the transition from being a child to becoming an adult. When working in small groups in this way challenges should be based around the principles of mutual aid, voluntary co-operation, and organisation without hierarchy, and underpinned by communication, fun, and a sense of adventure. We should not be educating people to become environmentalists, we should be helping young people become strong individuals, secure in themselves, who are able to work with others without domination, and have an abiding love of the natural world. It is from this position of strength that they can make their own decisions. However, we can hope that they will then be equipped to go on and participate within their communities and defend the things that they have grown to love and understand.

Children are amazing; educating them has connotations

that we know best, that we know the things they should know, and that we can best raise them to behave and act fittingly. This form of domination is echoed throughout society—the management not trusting the workers to do the job, the government not trusting the citizens. The children are our hope. In environmental and social terms it's our limited imaginations that have brought about the state we are in, it will take unlimited imaginations to solve these problems. They will be solved by the children, but in order to do so children must be given the freedom to unleash their imaginations. As Einstein said, "imagination is more important than knowledge". What we can do, rather than educate, is to help nurture the experiences and understandings that will catalyse and empower children to think beyond the confines that we impose upon them.

"Since the imagination arises from the child's contact with nature, each child is a born ecologist. Thus: save the children to save the imagination to save the planet."<sup>11</sup>★

## Notes

- 1) 'Why Are We Afraid for Our Children' in *Reared in Captivity: Restoring the Freedom to Play* (Playlink, Freepost EDO 5600, London SW9 6BR)
- 2) 'Don't Blame the Parents', *Ibid.*
- 3) *The Geography of Childhood: Why Children Need Wild Places* by Gary Paul Nabhan and Stephen Trimble (Beacon Press) ISBN 0807085251, p.11
- 4) 'The Cycle of Participation' by Judy Ling Wong FRSA, from *Ethnic Environmental Participation: Key Articles Vol. 1*, (Black Environment Network, 9 Llainwen Uchaf, Llanberis, Gwynedd, Wales LL55 4LL) ISBN 1874444366
- 5) *The Geography of Childhood: Why Children Need Wild Places*, p.60
- 6) *The Ecology of the Imagination in Childhood* by Edith Cobb (Spring Publications) ISBN 088214360, p.57
- 7) 'Risk and Freedom in a Norwegian Play-space' in *Reared in Captivity: Restoring the Freedom to Play*
- 8) *The Geography of Childhood: Why Children Need Wild Places*, p.22
- 9) *Ibid.*, p. xxi
- 10) *Nature and Madness* by Paul Shepard (The University of Georgia Press) ISBN 0820319805, p.12
- 11) Quote by James Hillman from the front cover of *The Ecology of the Imagination in Childhood*

