

1. INTRODUCTION

A connection with nature is one of the most desirable and valuable relationships we can have. It is a relationship that is good for us and good for nature. I know this from personal experience and from the evidence of thousands of studies. For us, it is a source of happiness, well-being and health. For nature, it is critical because nature connectedness motivates us to take care of the natural environment—and if ever there was a time when nature needed our care, it is now.

I am a deeply nature-connected person. That means I relate to nature as I would a friend. I respond to the inhabitants of nature and the environments they occupy with affection, interest, respect and concern for their well-being. Take my balcony plants, for example. I value their company, and I enjoy watching them grow, flower and occasionally play host to birds. I look after them conscientiously. I even feel regret when one of them dies. For their part, the plants give me pleasure, satisfaction, relaxation and pride in my gardening skills.

I enjoy almost everything about nature, especially being surrounded by it. The comedian and film maker, Woody Allen, once quipped: ‘I am at two with nature’. But that’s not me; I feel at one with the natural world. Nature is an important part of how I see myself and how the world sees me. I need regular doses of it just as I need love, nourishment, exercise, rest, happiness and a sense of purpose in life. Caring for the natural environment is hugely important to me.

I greatly value my friendship with nature—my *nature connectedness*. It has broadened and built me as a person, steered my life in unexpected and highly beneficial directions and furnished me with a host of precious memories. The friendship is one of the key strands of my life. Without it, my life would have been much less interesting, satisfying and fulfilling.

I am far from alone in appreciating the importance of nature connectedness. It is increasingly the focus of scientific attention. The University of Derby in the United Kingdom, for example, has set up the Nature Connectedness Research Group for the purpose of studying and promoting it. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) has elevated it to prominence on the world stage. The CBD emerged from the Earth Summit organised by the United Nations in 1992. The purpose of the CBD is to unite the world's nations in preserving the diversity of the Earth's ecosystems and to ensure that the benefits of that biodiversity are available to everyone. The 196 countries that have signed up to the Convention meet and report regularly. The 2018 conference of the CBD issued this powerful and urgent call to action:

The time is now. The evidence is clear. One of the most important things that any of us can do for ourselves, those we love, people throughout the world, and the living systems that support us all is to connect with nature¹.

This is certainly a big call, but it is backed by a wealth of scientific evidence from research in fields as diverse as environmental psychology and forestry; eco-psychology and horticulture; leisure studies and public health; architecture and neuroscience². Much of this evidence tells us that we *need* nature connectedness just as we need food and close relationships with others³. It is an essential ingredient of life. Without water, death is inevitable. Without close and supportive social ties, physical and mental health are in jeopardy. Without nature connectedness, any chance of living our best life is missed. Living without the companionship of nature is rather like playing a piano but ignoring the black keys or having a sailing boat but never using the spinnaker.

Does the CBD's call strike a chord with you? Does it stir you to think about your relationship with nature? Does it move you to strengthen that relationship? Do you feel that the call is relevant to you in any way? If you answer, yes, to any of these questions,

this book is for you because it will help you to connect with nature and derive enormous benefits from doing so.

Connecting with nature is easy, largely because we do not have to look far to find it. Some people mistakenly believe that nature is always outdoors, often remote and sometimes alien. For these people, such things as animals in the wild, national parks, ocean beaches, wilderness lakes and even some landscaped gardens are ‘genuine’ nature, but not the likes of street trees, household gardens, urban zoos, pets, and nature photographs. But nature comes in all these forms and more, making it accessible to everyone. Nature can be as close as the plants in your living room or on your balcony or patio.

My balcony plants are nature for me, not because I have been told they are, but because that is how I think and feel about them. I get a buzz from them as I do from trees, shrubs and flowers in the wild, a different buzz perhaps, but still a genuine one. I rely on my own intuition and feelings to tell me what nature is and is not. If my brain tells me that something is nature, then nature it is. The happy consequence is that I can find some form of nature virtually everywhere. You can look forward to doing the same, especially with the help of this book.

In saying this, I am aware that modern life throws up many impediments to having quality time in nature. The fact is that there is a growing disconnect between humanity and nature as people engage less, rather than more, with the natural world⁴. This is often put down to a lack of time and opportunity. The modern lifestyle is typically a crowded one. For city dwellers, it may also seem that there is little authentic or ‘real’ nature to access. Cities everywhere are becoming larger, denser and taller, almost inevitably at the expense of green space. Nature is being crowded out of our lives for another reason as well—the growing allure and convenience of electronic communication and entertainment. This trend is having a particularly concerning impact on the lives of children. Today’s children have fewer opportunities to play in

nature than did their parents and grandparents. This makes them vulnerable to what Richard Louv calls nature-deficit disorder, which is not a medical condition but a deficiency of intellectual, emotional and social experiences that are necessary for optimal growth and development⁵.

This book describes an approach to connecting with nature that takes account of the personal barriers that may be in the way. It is a simple and direct approach that puts the action of connecting with nature ahead of thinking too much about doing so. This may appear that the cart (acting) is being put before the horse (justifying). Logically it is, but the logical way does not always work best psychologically. Countless times I have heard people say something like: ‘I know that I should spend more time in nature, but...’. Such remarks are made even by people who know that nature is good for them and are aware of what they are missing. *Knowing* about nature’s benefits does not necessarily motivate people to seek them. *Emotions* or feelings are usually required as well, and in many instances, feelings alone can do the job.

The story of my own journey to nature connectedness illustrates the point. The journey itself supplied all the motivation I needed. I was drawn on from activity to activity by the pleasures and rewards generated by the activities themselves. The story also exemplifies the ‘good things’ nature connectedness brings to individual and family life. I hope that there is something in the story that is interesting and encouraging for you. Its details make it my story alone, of course, but viewed broadly, it is the kind of life-transforming story that could easily be yours.

The story of my friendship with nature

I was not always a nature-connected person. My journey to nature connectedness began when I was in my thirties. Prior to then, nature did not figure much in my life. I appreciated natural scenery and enjoyed visiting natural places for recreation and

socialising, but that was about it. The starting point of the journey was a family decision to take up bushwalking as a regular activity. My wife, Margaret, and I were heavily engaged professionally. We had other pressing commitments including caring for aged parents. It was a demanding and stressful time that occasionally put a dent in our emotional stamina and mental health. We both felt the need for a recreational activity that we could share with our two young daughters.

We linked up with experienced walkers from The National Parks Association of New South Wales (NPA), a conservation and bushwalking organisation. Saturday bushwalks became a regular family pastime. The girls were unfazed by having to walk in adult company; if anything, it made them feel grown-up. The bushwalking was also good for their self-esteem. They did not mind that their peers were not into bushwalking to the extent that they were. It helped them to accept that being your own person and doing your own thing are OK.

Not long after joining the NPA, I was lured into bush camping by the opportunity to take part in a bushcraft course where I could learn exotic but fun-to-do skills, such as fire-lighting without matches, making rope from grass, and building a shelter from natural materials. With hired gear and mentoring from the course leader, I found myself pitching a tent for the first time, cooking over a fire and sleeping in a down-filled bag on a bed of dry bracken covered by a ground sheet and a short piece of foam. Having to do this repeatedly and with the leader's expertise to call on, I gradually adapted to sleeping in a tent and living out of a pack.

At the same time, I became more aware of nature's sights, sounds, scents and textures. I also discovered the delights of a campfire, especially the soporific pleasure of 'fire gazing'—watching the dancing flames and glowing coals. Also, for the first time in my life, I was getting to know nature intimately. Although my mind remained centred on what I was doing—learning camping and

bushcraft skills—my emotions were prompting me to experience nature for itself, not just as a setting for my activities. A new chapter in the story of my relationship with nature had opened.

I embraced backpacking enthusiastically. I added regular backpacking weekends to the Saturday family bushwalks. Now with my own state-of-the-art gear, I became very focussed on becoming a competent backpacker. I was happiest after an outing if my boots, pack, tent and cooking gear had served me exactly as I wanted them to.

Although I was intent on honing backpacking and camping skills, my attention to nature was growing; it had to. Wilderness backpacking requires taking note of what is around you, especially for keeping track of where you are and where you need to go. Apart from that, the tempo and shape of a backpacking day expose you to the sensations and rhythms of the natural world—to the softening hues and growing stillness of twilight, for example, and the chorusing of birds at dawn.

I did virtually all my backpacking in national parks, mainly the World Heritage listed Blue Mountains National Park. Experiencing the magnificence, marvels and mystery of the Blue Mountains and places like it continued to deepen and reshape my relationship with nature. Being in nature gradually became as important to me as the activities I did there. I particularly valued the emotional ‘highs’ that nature’s beauty, vastness and wonder evoked. The state of joy, contentment and bonhomie left by these highs—the ‘bushwalker’s glow’ I call it—can last for hours and even days. As these highs are addictive, I found myself hooked on nature.

Meanwhile, my wife and daughters were becoming capable and enthusiastic day walkers. So much so, that they chose to accompany me on a trek in the Himalaya of Nepal organised by Ausventure, a well-regarded adventure holiday company. I was delighted and surprised as they had never camped, but here they

were electing to do just that for 14 days. Granted it was to be a totally supported trek, effectively a succession of day walks, with all aspects of the camping looked after by a Sherpa team. Even so, a fair measure of adaptability and resolve was required, not to mention fitness and stamina. In preparation, we did a couple of practice campouts and many training walks, some on the steepest tracks in the Blue Mountains. Appropriate clothing, footwear and medical items were purchased, and strategies devised for coping with 14 days without showers or flushing toilets.

The trek was life changing for all four of us. We were captured by the majestic beauty of the mountains and the simplicity, routine, rhythm, fun and friendliness of camp life. The unwavering joy and kindness of the Sherpas won our hearts. Cultural contacts with the local people were limited but those we had were heartwarming, mind-broadening and sometimes deeply affecting. Coping successfully with the physical and emotional demands of the trek was especially good for the girls, boosting their confidence, self-esteem and resilience. Overall, the experience gave us new eyes through which to see ourselves and the world. Tears were shed at the end of the trek and for days after. We had fallen permanently in love with the Himalaya and the Nepalese people.

We returned to bushwalking in Australia with renewed zeal. Margaret and the girls ventured into full-pack walking and I introduced variety and challenge to my bushwalking by tackling other outdoor activities. These included 'off-track' exploring, rock climbing and canyoning (walking, wading, swimming, jumping and abseiling through deep, narrow and usually watery sandstone chasms). I also returned to Nepal, co-leading a four-week trek with high altitude components.

When an adult education organisation invited me to run an introductory bushwalking and camping course, I accepted with some trepidation but keen to share the delights of nature activities with others. I did not imagine that the course would run annually (sometimes bi-annually) for the next 25 years and out of it the

Yarrowood Bushwalking Club would emerge. My involvement in the course and Yarrowood greatly enriched my nature activities, especially by widening my circle of bushwalking friends. Soon after I began running the courses, the Ausventure team invited me to join them as an honorary trek leader. Many of my bushwalking friends joined me on my Ausventure Himalayan treks.

By any reckoning, I have had a long and extraordinarily rich association with nature. It was inevitable that I would become a deeply nature-connected person. I was certainly that by 2002, the year I retired from my job as a university teacher and researcher. I knew that I had a deep relationship with nature even though I did not use the terms ‘nature-connected’ and ‘nature connectedness’ to label it. At that time, these terms did not have the currency and meaning they have today. I was also aware that my experience was not special or unique. While teaching the course, walking with Yarrowood and leading treks, I had seen that nature does good things to and for all sorts of people. But I was still to discover just how astonishingly good it can be. Making that discovery was the next (and probably final) chapter in the story of my friendship with nature.

There I was in 2002, newly retired from my university teaching and research position and still passionately engaged (almost as a second career) in nature activities. I had recently co-written a natural history and bushwalking guidebook centred on the Sydney region. Selecting walks to feature in the book was challenging because there were so many to choose from. The task prompted me to reflect on my own bushwalking experiences—what they were, where I had them and how they had affected me. This stocktake made me more conscious of what nature had contributed to my life, its emotional impact especially. Memories of times and places associated with intense pleasure, awe, wonder and fulfilment flooded to the surface. I felt a responsibility to choose wisely so that users of the book would be stimulated by nature in the same way.

I had these bushwalking memories in my mind when I turned my thoughts to finding a retirement project. A merging of my academic and leisure interests gave me the idea of studying what science had to say about nature's effects on people. I had no notion initially just how vast, absorbing and rewarding the project would be. Nor did I anticipate how monumentally it would enlarge my understanding of what nature connectedness had done (and continues to do) for me and what it can do for everyone.

From the outset of the project, I was captivated by what I was learning. In no time, my understanding and appreciation of what had happened to me on my nature connectedness journey were transformed. Like someone finding more in a work of art after being helped to view it more deeply, I was viewing my nature experiences through new lenses. I found myself re-living and enjoying many of the experiences afresh.

Early in the project, I encountered an idea that supercharged my interest and radically changed my understanding of myself and of what it means to be human. This was Professor Edward O Wilson's proposition (or hypothesis as he called it) that we humans are born with a disposition to find nature interesting, attractive and inviting. Wilson labelled the disposition, 'biophilia' (meaning love of living things)⁶. Biophilia is in our make-up, Wilson says, because we are members of a species that has spent up to 300,000 years living in natural environments. Without biophilia, our species would not have survived because it underpins our ability and motivation to understand and negotiate natural environments. Although most present-day humans live in cities and towns, biophilia endures in us because our genes have not yet caught up with our change of address. Even committed city dwellers strive to have some form of nature, real, virtual or artificial, in their lives.

Encountering biophilia gave me an 'Ah ha!' moment. Here in a single concept was an explanation of why my nature activities were so rewarding. All the aesthetic pleasure (the 'beauty buzz'), awe, wonder, tranquillity, relaxation, restoration, rejuvenation,

mental stimulation and curiosity nature had given me stemmed from biophilia, from the deep urge within me to make the natural world my kin. Biophilia directed and energised my nature connectedness journey. At the same time, the journey nurtured my biophilia. This was tremendously important. All of us are born with the seeds of biophilia, but not all experience biophilia to the full. If biophilia is ignored and not used, it can fade and atrophy.

Nature connectedness nurtures our biophilia by increasing our openness to nature and our capacity to benefit from nature experiences⁷. But even before we become nature connected, many of nature's rewards and benefits are available to us. Everyone can enjoy the calming pleasure and other benefits of even the simplest of nature contacts, a stroll through a garden, for example, or watching the waves swirl up and back across a beach. Most nature encounters provide an exciting foretaste of what a deeper relationship with nature has in store.

Other good news is that there are many ways of connecting with nature apart from being constantly or regularly immersed in it. I was intrigued to learn, for example, that photos of nature can affect us in similar ways to the real thing, evoking aesthetic pleasure, relaxation, awe and empathy⁸. I was also surprised to discover how little contact is needed for nature to be beneficial. This means that there are ways of connecting with nature for virtually everyone regardless of their circumstances—an encouraging thought for anyone who is still deciding whether a nature connectedness journey is for them.

A nature connectedness journey for you

This book asks you to consider starting (or resuming) your own nature connectedness journey with action rather than theory. It suggests you begin with an appealing and easy-to-do activity and then proceed at your own pace and on your own terms. Part 1 of the book, the 'how to' part, will help you do this. Part 1 is all about connecting with nature in ways that are suitable for you, beginning

with a chapter that explains how common barriers to connecting with nature can be addressed. A chapter detailing a host of nature or ‘green’ activities follows. Among the activities described are many that can be done as part of everyday life. A full chapter is devoted to making connecting with nature a family affair. Parents, grandparents, relatives and carers can find guidelines in this chapter for fostering children’s all-important free play and for providing activities suitable for children of different ages. Part 1 also includes a chapter on turning to nature in difficult times. This is not a chapter of therapeutic guidelines but one of stories about people who have found comfort, strength and healing in times of grief, mental distress and social difficulties. The final chapter in Part 1 turns the spotlight on caring for nature. Connecting with nature is all about caring—caring for yourself (and those near to you), all life and planet Earth itself.

Part 2 of the book is intended to serve you in the way my project served me. It offers new lenses through which you can view and reflect on your journey. This will enable you to enjoy many of your nature experiences afresh, to get to know them again for the first time, so to speak. There is a lot to be said for having nature experiences first and then reflecting on them. Words alone cannot capture the subjective or ‘felt’ features of most nature experiences. The emotional and spiritual content of aesthetic pleasure, awe or tranquillity, for example, is beyond the power of words to capture. It is only by experiencing such complex emotions that you can say ‘I know them’.

Part 2 delivers the promise of the book to describe what you can expect from your nature connectedness journey. I am confident that you will be astonished by the extent and diversity of the things that are in store. The ‘things’ are so varied that it is difficult to find an apt label for them. ‘Benefits’ is probably as good as any. The benefits of nature connectedness described in Part 2 include aesthetic pleasure, awe, wonder, relaxation, restoration (from mental fatigue), tranquillity, camaraderie, enriched spirituality, strengthened resilience, reduced risk of

disease, a conscience-driven concern for nature and, for your children, an ‘advantaged childhood’.

How to use this book

I suggest you use this book as a companion and guide. Unlike a novel, the book is not meant to be read from beginning to end. It recognises that readers will have different needs and interests according to where they are on their nature connectedness journey. A person new to nature activities, for example, will find much of immediate relevance and interest in Chapter 2 and 3 (‘Getting Started’ and ‘Do It Your Way’). A parent, however, might be drawn first to Chapter 4 (‘Make It a Family Affair’). It is also possible, of course, that some readers may be attracted first to the chapters in Part 2.

The book’s expanded table of contents and index are provided to make it easier to navigate the book in the way that most suits you. All chapters in the book can be read independently, although one or two chapters, the one on health, Chapter 10, for example, draw on the content of previous chapters to some extent, but even these chapters are largely free-standing.

Although solidly science-based, the book is written for the general reader. There are endnotes for anyone seeking more information about the science. Because discoveries about nature’s effects on our brains, health and well-being are being reported almost every week, I will use my blog (www.ourgreengenes.wordpress.com) and the book’s website (www.connectwithnatureguide.com) to keep the book’s contents as up-to-date as possible. You are warmly invited to become a regular reader of my blog posts and visitor to the website.