



nature awareness



what is it?

It's understanding and appreciating the natural world. This can be sparked at a young age by contact with pets, gardens, rock pools or woods - or books or TV programmes (David Attenborough has been responsible for igniting a love of nature in a lot of people). A modern aspect of nature awareness is understanding the damage that is being done to nature, and what can be done about it. Humans are part of nature too, and what harms nature harms us.

Humans evolved to be in nature and we have an instinctive connection to it. The biophilia hypothesis suggests that there is an innate and necessary bond between us and other living things. It's why we have pets or houseplants. We're becoming increasingly disconnected from nature (and what contact we have is often highly managed and sanitized), with serious consequences for humans and for nature.

Prior to the agricultural revolution, humans lived in groups of hunter-gatherers, and according to writers like Murray Bookchin, took what they needed in terms of food, fuel, clothing, medicines and shelter, moving regularly so as not to deplete resources and not creating any waste that nature couldn't deal with – although they often made large mammals extinct because they represented either danger or a too-easily harvested source of food. After the birth of agriculture, the relationship with nature became more of a struggle – to keep farmland weed- and pest-free and to prevent wild animals eating livestock or crops. The aim was to 'tame' nature – until the Romantic movement in the 19th century made wild nature fashionable. However, interaction with it involved hunting, zoos, collecting butterflies etc. – studying by destroying. Nowadays, most people prefer photographs to stuffed animals, and safaris to zoos. Unfortunately though, Westerners flying to



Nature is cheaper than therapy.

holidays in nature on the other side of the world is contributing to its destruction. Maybe the ideal would be for all of us to live in beautiful, natural places so that we don't feel the need to fly somewhere else to escape.

Today, just over half the world's population lives in cities. Since the Industrial Revolution, when people started moving to cities *en masse*, we've gradually lost touch with the natural world, to the extent that most of us now don't really know where our food comes from or how it's produced. We spend more time than ever indoors, often in front of screens, experiencing the world at one remove. This lack of connection with nature results in people paving their front gardens, spraying poisons on weeds (aka wild flowers), or replacing hedges with walls or fences etc.

Obesity, particularly among children, is fast becoming a major health issue. Many parents are now reluctant to let their children play unsupervised in the park or woods as they themselves used to. There are, therefore, growing concerns that children are growing up less healthy and well-adjusted than the previous generation due to a lack of contact with the natural world.

Valuing nature, however, doesn't mean putting a price on it. Nature keeps us alive on this planet – how can you put a price on that? But also, it's just as impossible to put a price on the health, aesthetic or psychological benefits that nature gives us. Attempts by economists to put a price on nature in order to protect it is the wrong approach, not just because of its impossibility, but also because people or companies with the most money (or the power to do it anyway, without paying) will be able to do the most damage. This approach strengthens the position of those with the most power (banks and corporations) at the expense of the rest of us. Nature has value for its own sake, not in terms of economics. Economics is a subset of nature, and all economic value is ultimately derived from it.



Parks bring nature into the heart of the world's busiest cities – like Central Park in New York.



what are the benefits?

Even in cities, property values are highest near to natural, green spaces. A growing body of empirical evidence is providing links between exposure to nature and better physical, emotional and mental health. Being outdoors encourages you to move your body and hone your observation skills in a changing environment.

Humans have a stress reaction to noise. Back in the cave, a loud noise meant potential danger, triggering the 'fight or flight' response. Peace and quiet is one of the benefits of going into nature. The Japanese have shinrin-yoku, or 'forest bathing' – spending time in the woods, absorbing the atmosphere to reduce stress.

Nature therapy involves taking people into natural spaces to treat conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder or dementia. It has a long tradition - the Quakers in the 16th century took mentally ill people out of asylums and into the countryside.

If children form positive associations with the natural world they'll be fitter and healthier, and will develop enhanced senses, empathy, imagination and creativity. While not yet fully recognized by the mental health community, the theory of nature deficit disorder suggests that spending insufficient time in nature may contribute to behavioural problems like attention deficit disorder.

Reconnecting people with nature is important to the field of environmental conservation. The less connected we are, the less we care, and the less will there be to protect plants, animals and wild spaces. This has a knock-on effect of further ecosystem degradation and species loss.



Some animals prefer to stay as far away from humans as possible, and you'll have to get into the wilds to see them – like this golden eagle.

what can I do?

Appreciating nature means getting yourself into mountains, forests, rivers and the sea, and getting your hands into the soil in your garden, allotment or window-box. Even the largest, most chaotic of cities have green pockets where you can go and watch the birds or smell the flowers. Nature is free and accessing it doesn't have to be any more expensive than the cost of a bus or train ticket.

If you want to try fun and challenging activities in nature, a number of organisations run courses in bushcraft, foraging and nature observation etc. If you prefer to learn about it under your own steam, there are literally thousands of guide books you can buy or free resources available online to help you identify plants, birds and animals. Knowing just a little can improve the experience no end.

The natural world is not without its dangers and must always be treated with respect. A little common sense goes a long way. If you're going for a walk in the country make sure you have a good map and make sure you're properly kitted out. Take sufficient food and drink, check transport timetables, tide tables if you're by the sea and have your phone fully charged in case of emergencies. If you're going off alone, tell someone where you're going and when you'll be back. If you're considering trying more challenging bushcraft activities, doing a course or obtaining a guide is a good idea before you begin.

Finally, remember that your interaction with nature should never be to its detriment. Be respectful of the spaces and species you encounter and take your rubbish home with you.

resources

- lowimpact.org/nature-awareness for more info, courses, books etc, including:
- RSPB, *Wildlife of Britain*
- George Monbiot, *Feral*
- Helen Babbs, *152 Wild Things to Do*
- Richard Mabey, *a Brush with Nature*
- field-studies-council.org – env. education charity
- Inhs.org.uk/Links.htm - list of specialist groups covering everything from badgers, ferns and dragonflies to whales, moths and rocks
- nbn.org.uk/ - National Biodiversity Network
- opalexplorenature.org - open air laboratories
- wildlifetrusts.org - restoring places for wildlife
- botanicalkeys.co.uk/flora - identify wild plants

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