



Wonder

NEWSLETTER OF THE NATURE ACTION COLLABORATIVE FOR CHILDREN

Where is the Beauty?

Coordinated by Tina Reeble on behalf of NACC

As I was curating the reflections for this edition of Wonder, I found myself contemplating the many ways that a connection to the natural world helps us tap into our own powers. Our power to heal, to express joy, to create and collaborate, can all be drawn from within as we become more and more attuned to the beauty in our world. How does that happen? I recalled a blog post I wrote seven years ago:

I have been traveling the last few months, leading educator workshops across the country. During one of my favorite activities, the whole group takes some time to connect to the natural world, wherever we are in that moment, and consider the beauty that we perceive. A common theme to the discussions that follow is the reminder that natural beauty surrounds us we just need to remember to look. So many of us get caught in the "autopilot" versions of our daily life and it isn't until we are intentional in our thoughts and actions through this shared workshop experience that

we break free and begin to see anew. I often wonder how long it will last.

In her book "The Sense of Wonder," Rachel Carson shared, "A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eye vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood..." A few paragraphs later she adds, "For most of us, knowledge of our world comes largely through sight, yet we look about with such unseeing eyes that we are partially blind. One way to open our eyes to unnoticed beauty is to ask yourself, 'What if I had never seen this before? What if I knew I would never see it again?'" (Carson, 1956)

My personal reaction has been to seek out frequent moments to experience beauty through the eyes of children. When I do, I am gifted with the energy waves that come from their sense of wonder. The past few days I have had charming moments with my seven-year-old son who has been enchanted by the beauty of fireflies. Most evenings this week as dusk settles into darkness, Rory can be found roaming the backyard, which has become his own solitary world of magical insects and make believe. I have seen his discovery, his amazement, his sense of wonder, and with that, a need to engage with curiosity more deeply, a desire to cherish and preserve, the need to stay longer and come again.

There in those moments, because my child has reminded me to, I too am seeing beauty in the world around me. On occasion, Rory has invited me to join him, and I realize now my child is experiencing the world through my eyes as well. How long will it last? Perhaps together we can grow in a way of life that finds long lasting, life-long connections with each other and with our beautiful world.

Today, I invite you to intentionally experience nature's beauty. Ask yourself "what if" questions as Rachel Carson advised. After you read the stories below, think about what's next for you. How about for the children in your care? Until next time, be bold – choose to be extraordinary.



The mission of the Nature Action Collaborative for Children is to re-connect children with the natural world by making developmentally appropriate nature education a sustaining and enriching part of the daily lives of the world's children.

WorldForumFoundation.org/nature

our children had never seen rain. They played and danced with their faces turned up to the sky. It brought such joy to all of us! The rain washed away some of the ash and stench and Mother Nature is assisting us in the healing process.

Our outdoor dramatic play area will continue to be a place to process and heal from these events. Most of our families and staff were evacuated from their homes and our streets were filled with fire trucks and equipment. We will have firefighter equipment (vacuum hoses) and uniforms for the children to reenact their experiences. We plan to have some of our parents who are first responders come spend time with us at school.

Our families and staff have experienced a deep sense of powerlessness. As we continue to look to the resiliency and beauty found in our outdoor classroom, it is our hope that our children too will regain a sense of control, safety and peace.

Multi-cultural and Multi-disciplinary: Diverse perspectives support effective nature-based education in China's first outdoor classroom

Huan Cao, China
Kirsten Haugen, United States and Huajun Li, Beijing

One might expect differences in culture, language, time zone and profession to be barriers to successful collaboration, but a shared passion for connecting children with nature can bridge and even leverage those differences in surprising ways. In the case of designing an outdoor classroom for a conservation park in urban China, both the collaboration and the result have been inspiring.

Huan Cao, educator for Shenzhen Mangrove Wetlands Conservation Foundation explains how it all got started.

"MCF was established in July 2012. It was China's first publicly founded organization that focused on environmental protection, and the first NGO to operate a government-mandated ecological park – Futian Mangrove Ecological Park. Several years ago, MCF's secretary-general Dr. Baohua Yan joined a Nature Explore workshop in the United States. Since then, she always wondered what it would be like for Chinese children to have some place like this. In 2017, after two years of managing the ecological park in Shenzhen, we were ready to act on our desire to build an Outdoor Classroom for children in the community, giving them a joyful and beneficial experience in nature, which is the core value of operating an ecological park in the middle of the city."

MCF gathered a large team at Futian Mangrove Ecological Park in January 2018. A landscape designer and educator from Nature Explore shared their research-based principles for designing and working in an outdoor classroom, while the Gaiascope Design team from Beijing offered experience designing for and with children and a highly creative take on local ecology and culture.

Gaiascope Designer Huajun Li explains, "As a landscape design institution which always focuses on sustainable landscape, we believe that a good landscape should create a better environment for the future, especially for the children. The MCF Outdoor Classroom project brought us an opportunity to design a place for children to build intimate interactions with nature in an urban area."

Other collaborators included the park officials who shared a rich understanding of the park resources, infrastructure and public usage; the park's educators who provided continuity with existing programming; the funders from Danone China who challenged the whole team to dream big about possibilities for the currently overgrown and unused space; and local educators, design interns and parents who gave input and gained a deeper understanding of the design and intended use of the new outdoor classroom.

We focused on the key elements of indigenous nature education, such as mangroves, wetland organisms, native plants and local materials, fully incorporated through the details of our design. For instance, signs to identify each area are represented by a different plant or animal unique to the mangrove ecosystem and the dramatic and welcoming entry was created in the shape of a cluster of mangrove trees.

The international perspectives that we embraced in our collaboration continued and even resulted in an intergenerational collaboration idea rarely seen in China. To design and run the playground infused with Chinese culture and local elements and support community connections, teen-agers were invited to participate. The youngest volunteer is only ten, and they are all doing great.

The extensive involvement and collective efforts from different parties has been the key to the establishment of the outdoor classroom and its better use in the future.

Consider this:

- Whom can you collaborate with to consider and enhance your outdoor space from diverse perspectives?
- What are some ways that you can include families' active engagement with your outdoor space even more? How would greater engagement benefit your program?

References

Carson, R. (1956). *The Sense of Wonder*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.

Future issues of Wonder

Do you have an idea or story to share? We invite you to email your ideas, stories and photos that relate to Connecting Children with Nature to Tina Reeble: tinar@natureexplore.org