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Rachana Rajendra Essay

Finding Sanctuary in Nature

When we were kids we learned firsthand. We were on a short leash but it felt like we had all the freedom in the world. We ate things we weren't supposed to, constantly got our hands dirty, and we played outside. As children this was one of our only forms of learning, this was our form of sanctuary away from the adults where we could explore our environment. As we grew up we lost this form of learning because our leash shrank and we found ourselves in a classroom, far from nature, where we learned from hearing. But, hearing is only one of the five senses we use for learning; we need to include all our senses for a more complete experience and understanding. We've lost our connection to nature and the sanctuary it offers; a place to escape from the stresses and loud noises of everyday life. As Lord Byron said "There is pleasure in the pathless woods, there is rapture in the lonely shore, there is society where none intrudes, by the deep sea, and music in its roar; I love not Man the less, but Nature more."

So tell me, why have I suddenly forgotten how to play outside? We are taught that the environment is degrading around us, that there's no hope because humans are greedy and take more than there is to take, too fast. We are told to preserve our resources for future generations. But I can't remember the last time I got to play outside and enjoy the resources that I was promised. Our generation is taught to be clean and that nature is dirty. That bugs are gross and food is bought from the store not grown on a farm or come from the woods. What is it going to be like for the future generations? Will they be able to find sanctuary in nature? Will they be taught the things I only dream of knowing and discovering? The outdoor labs provided me the

opportunity to gain the knowledge and skills I need to better appreciate nature; to find the sanctuary I've been missing.

Now I'm in college and I have all the freedom in the world. There is no leash and the whole world is my playground. Yet I still learn from that one sense, hearing, and most of that "knowledge" is short term to get me to that next exam; then it's tossed out of my brain so I can fit more information in. I get excited about working in a laboratory because it feels hands on. When in reality I am so very far from hands on, to the point where I only get to see a fin snip of the specimen that I am working on and sometimes it's so small I can hardly pick it up. We are losing the connection between the species and the data. I know of labs that map out huge beautiful national parks without ever stepping foot in them. This is an amazing concept but it provides a disconnect with what we care so dearly about. I learn best on location and I learn best by doing. You can tell me all you want but unless I get to apply it in a setting where it makes sense then I probably won't learn it. This is something I hope to do with my future. I want to teach and apply information where it makes sense. This type of learning is hard to find. It's considered outdated and an older style. When you find this type of class you need to hold on tight. This is why an outdoor lab where information is collected and analyzed by the same person is so important. It creates the connection between science and the sanctuary of nature. It allows for the hands on learning that is so important to appreciating nature and it allows you to care and create a connection to what you working on.

Something that strikes deep within me is to call things by their right name. We have tons and tons of different species around us and at some point everything starts looking the same. The way we personalize things is by knowing their name. It provides us with a connection that is stronger than just looking at the plant. In our first class of the semester we went to Baker

Woodlot. This was where we made our first connection to nature and truly saw beyond the first glance. We were taught to identify plants, and we were taught to call things by their right names. We dug our hands deep into the soil so we could scratch the surface of what provides the beginning of life. We went back to when we were younger and eight in the morning didn't seem too early. And we began the journey of finding sanctuary within nature and we did this without leaving our home, Michigan State's Campus.

With experience and learning you build bonds with the people you are working with. You can't truly say you're friends with someone until you have stood for three hours in a constant downpour of rain sampling and identifying fish and aquatic plants. When your happiness peaks as you walk waist deep into the water to sample more and you realize there is a leak in your waders there are two options, you can accept that you're miserable or you can laugh and stomp in the puddles like a little child because you just looked nature in the face and agreed that its more powerful than you, but you accept the challenge.

There is a challenge of survival, of understanding that you were made to be a wild animal because we have evolved to the point of overexploitation on a large scale where individuals don't need to worry about feeding themselves. The average person could not survive stranded in the woods. I am now not an average person. With the knowledge gained from learning how to shoot a gun, bow and arrow, skin and gut animals, make a shelter, start a fire in the rain, and forage for edible food, I feel confident that if situation arose where I was stranded and alone I could survive off the land. Nature provides us with the materials; we just need to learn how to use them, to create a mutual relationship with nature.

One of the best places to learn about nature is the Rachana Rajendra Neo-tropical Migrant Bird Sanctuary in the Baker Woodlot. It is an ideal place to study, learn and enjoy the

environment without being disturbed. It's a place to escape to, where I can shed all my worries. Named after Rachana Rajendra by her parents, her love of the natural world and her active life permeate the Sanctuary. It's a place to observe nature, to share in the quiet of the outdoors, to get away from everyday life. Not only was Rachana a sportswoman who enjoyed skiing, hiking, and swimming, she "lived life to the fullest." Her love of birds was so strong that she drove to Michigan from North Carolina to introduce her family to her special bird, Mango. It was on her way back to North Carolina when she and Mango were in a car accident. But her spirit remains in the sanctuary of the Baker Woodlot, a place where humans can go to escape from their stresses and animals can escape from the dangers of humans. It's a wonderful place to observe the large variety of birds soar in freedom. Being able to use binoculars to watch those birds close up is a wonderful skill I gained. As Rachana once stated "When I grow up, I want to have two dogs, a bird, a house, and read books under a tree." When I grow up, I want to use what nature provides us and live off the land.

I want to go back to my childhood when I got my hands deep into the soil and didn't worry if I had dirt, water, or mud on my clothes. I want to eat what nature can provide even if it burns my tongue; feel what cold water feels like when it accidentally rushes through a hole in my waders; smell the so called fresh scent of nature, even if it's really not so fresh. I want to see what makes us work from the inside out, hear the world work around me, and call things by their right name. Those other four senses are the key to really knowing something, to understanding nature at its fullest. And the class provided an experience where all of those things happened. We were outside, using all of our senses to explore and learn about nature and everything it has to offer.

Being outside during our labs, experiencing and learning about all that nature has to offer

gave me the opportunity to grow as a scientist and naturalist. The Baker Woodlot and especially the Sanctuary provided a space for using all five of my senses. I was able to explore nature without disturbing the animals that live there. Animals had no reason to fear the humans who came to explore because their intention was only to share the space, not harm the animals. Albert Einstein said “look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.” As I spent time in the Baker Woodlot exploring and studying nature on a deeper level I am able to better appreciate this quote. Being outside, spending time in the middle of the forest calms my spirit and makes me feel one with the earth and all it has to offer.