

**Connecting with Nature:  
A Journey to Find a Deeper Connection Within the Natural World**

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We accept this Final Report as conforming  
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### **Abstract**

Developing a deeper connection with nature can benefit one's physical, mental, and spiritual well-being, as well as society through an increase in pro-environmental attitudes and greater empathy for the rest of the natural world. This project builds on existing methods of deepening one's connection with nature including Goethean imagination, White's Mindful-Affective-Perception-Imagination-in-Nature (MAPIN), and Forest Therapy's focus on bringing awareness to one's experience in nature. It uses an art-influenced, self-reflexive, phenomenological approach to explore my own experiences in finding deeper connection. Applying Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore these lived experiences, a five-step self-directed programme, consisting of discovery, greeting, meditation and contemplation, activities, and gratitude, emerged to facilitate a deeper connection with more-than-human nature.

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## Connecting with Nature: A Journey to Find a Deeper Connection Within the Natural World

### Introduction

*The forest calls me, come closer and sit with me  
I will tell you my story if you listen  
Tales of growth and tales of death and tales of regrowth  
I will tell you of great storms and tiny animals  
If only you will listen  
Come closer and sit with me*

### Background

Increasingly the world is becoming a more disconnected place, particularly in how we, as a society, connect with and within the natural world. This journey of disconnection is not new. Orr (2004) posited that the rise of what he termed *biophobia* (“...the culturally acquired urge to affiliate with technology, human artifacts, and solely with human interests regarding the natural world.” p. 131) has its roots in Cartesian thought with its viewpoint that non-human beings are machines and not sentient beings with their own agency. He further argued that this initial viewpoint in seeing non-humans as inanimate has led, through a focus on hard facts and transforming the world into useful *forms*, led to our current perpetual growth, mass consumption society that has resulted in many people feeling this biophobia. He went on to argue that what is needed is a “biophilia revolution” to recover a greater sense of place in all that we see, touch, smell, and experience with nature. This case for developing a greater connection with nature was further argued by Bonnett (2007) who posited that the current environmental crisis gives us a chance to re-focus on our relationship with nature, asking the question:

Why should knowledge of nature that [science] enables - a knowledge ever increasingly articulated mathematically - be regarded as ‘truer’ or more authentic than, say, the

knowledge achieved through the experience of helming a sailing boat in which one is acutely alert to, and in harmony with, the subtle nuances of wave and breeze. (p. 714)

This focus on experience both with and within nature is key to a long-lasting and deep connection with the natural world.

As time moves on, environmentalist thinkers argue that the urgency for society to reconnect with nature in deeper and more meaningful ways increases if we are to mitigate our worsening impact on our shared home. Unfortunately, we continue to lose the diverse ecosystems that contain the wisdom of nature. In Scanlan's (2022) editorial, she argues that the forests in Nova Scotia are no longer like they were, with the *Wabana'ki* (Acadian) Forest containing very few old-growth stands. She commented that, although growing up she did not connect with any forest ecosystems within her urban world, she did have a memorable connection during a camping trip when she remembers having "time to walk curiously through the forests". This connection with "the old" was further argued when Briggs (2022) reflected on the thousand-year-old oaks in Blenheim Park in the UK and wondered when sitting underneath one, what history it has witnessed. To return to Nova Scotian context, and further emphasizing the urgency, Plourde (2022) offers a cautionary tale of efforts of the provincial government in Nova Scotia to fast-track development approvals, reducing public input and bypassing the municipal planning process on a number of proposed *greenfield* (a project on previously undeveloped land) housing developments, many of which are actively opposed by local citizen groups concerned about the loss of local natural spaces for them to connect with. These ancient natural places contain a deep and inherent wisdom that provides a foundation for a sense of connection with the natural world, and this would be lost if they are developed.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> One such connection I had was during a reflection practice when I had the sense that the soil profile I was sitting with was a family, with young soil, parent rocks, grand-parent boulders, and their friends, the vegetation around the



This connection, however, is not a one-way sense; it is a two-way relationship based on reciprocity. The more-than-human world benefits as much from this connection as we do. As discussed by Abram (2017), not only are things such as our hands able to touch other things, but they are also touchable things to the other-than-human world. As he states so beautifully when discussing our relationship with this world:

Walking in a forest we peer into its green and shadowed depths, listening to the silence of the leaves, tasting the cool and fragrant air. Yet such is the transitivity of perception, the reversibility of the flesh, that we may suddenly feel that the trees are looking at us. (p. 68)

Another similar view on the relationship of reciprocity is posited by Forbes (2022) in that, “that which the tree exhales, I inhale. That which I exhale, the tree inhales” (p. 128). Not only are we in a reciprocal relationship with the other-than-human world, this relationship is foundational in our learning about each other. This viewpoint of nature as *co-teacher*, or *co-learner* as I prefer in that I perceive it as a journey with nature in which we both learn together about not only each other but also ourselves, is one of the touchstones of the wild pedagogies as argued by Morse et al. (2018). Their work acknowledges that the learning about the other-than-human world occurs with, within, from and through the other-than-human world. Finally, in keeping with Indigenous education practice, the land itself is the pedagogy and any education about the other-than-human world must come through the land (Simpson, 2014). We must therefore develop our own deep sense of connection with the natural world both for ourselves and the inhabitants of the other-than-human we share this planet with.

A deep sense of connection with the natural world is important from many perspectives. From the personal perspective, it is important to recognize that, as stated by Robin Wall

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soil profile. If this area had been developed, rather than protected, I would have missed this opportunity to develop my connection with the soil family.

Kimmerer, the “whole world is alive” (as cited in Hynes, 2020, para. 8). Further in the interview, Kimmerer recounts a story of cutting flowers for her house, she first tells the flowers how beautiful they are and how grateful she is that they are growing there before asking them if she can cut them to add beauty to her house. If they say “yes”, she does; if they say “no”, she moves on. From the societal perspective, a deep connection to the natural world is an important way for members of society to develop a strong pro-environmental stance that leads to positive change actions in protecting the environment (Charles et al., 2018). Finally, there is a glimmer of hope in Nova Scotia for future generations with a pilot project for grade 12 students, utilizing two Mi’kmaq concepts of two-eyed seeing (*Etuaptmumk*) and the seeing of all living things as being connected (*Netukulimk*), where outdoor activities are woven into the course. With future generations hopefully enlightened, I turn my attention to the current generation in an attempt to find ways to help deepen our sense of connection within the natural world.

### **Research Questions, Objectives and Purpose**

There have been many ideas explored over the years about our connection with nature and its importance and with this study, I sought to coalesce some of these into an approach to further this work. In it, I explored a deeper personal connection with nature and then used these experiences to develop methods, in cooperation with the Ecology Action Centre (an environmental NGO in Nova Scotia who are known for “...taking leadership on critical issues from biodiversity to climate change to environmental justice” (Ecology Action Centre, 2020)), to educate adults in Nova Scotia towards a deeper personal relationship with nature. To guide and frame my research, I explored two research questions:

*RQ1 – What are my own experiences in finding a deeper connection with nature?*

*RQ2 – How might we facilitate this kind of connection for others?*

As such, this qualitative study used an arts-influenced phenomenological approach to explore a deeper connection with nature and then used these experiences to develop methods to educate others to deepen their own sense of connection with and within nature.

### **Research Method and Design**

This project used an art-influenced, self-reflexive phenomenological approach to develop a connection with nature. It encouraged the study of phenomena through both self-reflective journaling of the personal experience with the phenomenon and visual recording, through photography, the object of the connection. As posited by Merleau-Ponty and Bannan (1956) in their seminal work on phenomenology, the researcher is both the source and sense-maker of their own experiential data— “I am the absolute source” (p. 60). My selection of a phenomenological approach spoke to my choice to conduct an exploration of my own experiences. Further, the choice of phenomenology to explore what, for some would be an ordinary everyday experience in nature can be summed up by Gorichanaz (2017) who said that phenomenology can show that ordinary experiences bring a sense of wonder. For many people who walk or run in a park or along a nature trail, the other-than-human world around them becomes a part of their ordinary experience, but how many stop to notice the small details of this world? By first examining what I experienced when I connected with nature and then taking note of how I enhanced this connection, I was able to use these experiences to develop a programme to guide other adults to foster their own deep connection with nature, something beyond the passing ordinary experience of their routine activities.

My research approach and procedures were modelled on Goethean phenomenology ((Dean Robbins, 2006) and (Skaftnesmo, 2009)), White’s MAPIN model (White, 2011) and elements from the practice of forest therapy (Felber, 2019). From using Goethe’s approach, with

its slow and deliberate deep study of a phenomenon with the imagination of its life, to White's MAPIN approach with its broad focus using many senses, to the use of meditation, breathing and rituals from forest therapy, the important outcome was a deep and rich connection within the natural world for both personal and societal benefits. I used elements of these approaches to form a foundation to explore different methods that fostered a deeper connection between me and the natural world. Through trial and error, I practiced different techniques from these approaches as well as developed some of my own approaches. The end result was, building on these past works, I developed a programme with activities for adults to use to develop their own deeper connection with the natural world.

There are a number of ways of conducting a deep explorative connection with nature, in particular the methods of Goethe as well as White's (2012) MAPIN approach and elements from the practice of forest therapy. As I noted in the introduction, this path to exploring the natural world first began when, during one of my courses, I had an experience with a soil profile during a field study that led me to see them as a "soil family" with children, parents, grandparents, and friends all sitting around me. As argued by Dean Robbins (2006), Goethe's phenomenological approach to observing nature involved a slow and deep exploration. Much like Thoreau used with his "first-hand study of nature", as discussed by Root (2005, p. 236), my field study to connect with the natural world welcomed nature to tell its own story. Goethe's approach to studying the phenomena of nature, in his case flowering plants, focused mainly on the sense of sight to observe followed by the use of one's *mind's eye* to imagine the life of the plant, a deep connection with the natural world should involve, as much as possible, all the senses to get the full connection rather than just an observer.

Not wishing to limit my exploration to one approach and in looking for methods that explore the use of many senses, I also used elements from the MAPIN approach of White (2012) to allow other senses, such as hearing, touch and smell, to be used in my study. Additionally, I examined some of the practices from forest therapy, such as meditation and breathing exercises, slow and deliberate sensory walks and rituals, such as building mandalas, to inform my study. As such, my approach to connecting with the natural world was to try, during the data gathering, a combination of the three approaches into a new approach of my own emergent design.

My study involved the more traditional use of self-reflective journals and field notes of my experiences; what I was connecting with, what were my experiences across many senses and how I achieved a deeper connection; as well as the use of photographs of what I was connecting with. As posited by Knowles and Cole (2012), in their work on Arts-Influenced Research, the use of photographs taken with an artistic and aesthetic eye would involve an infusion of artistic process and form into the production of knowledge. In particular, I focused on the use of the *form as medium* to present the idea of connecting with nature and the *form as communication* to later help with the presentation of the ideas to others. By noting and photographing what and how I was connecting with phenomena in the natural world that might otherwise be missed and passed off as ordinary, I showed that, on close examination, they became extraordinary. Much like a photographer uses different lenses, I see Goethe's approach of focusing on close details not unlike using a macro lens to capture images such as a flower on the forest floor or a slug on a mushroom, while White's (2012) MAPIN approach, being more expansive, would be like using a wide-angle lens to show the expanse of the natural world, while the techniques from forest therapy use a blend of both macro and wide-angle perspectives.

## Data Gathering

The data was gathered by two connected and concurrent methods. Firstly, as used by Mikaelis and Asfeldt (2017) when they had their students record their experiences in a reflective journal during a rafting trip, I kept a reflective journal. This journal was used to capture my experiences connecting with nature and focused on what I am connecting with, my feelings and emotions while connecting, the methods I used with each connection, and whether it was effective at providing a deep connection or, as White (2011) calls it, a heightened eco-consciousness. Ultimately, I looked for what activities fostered a relationship, and thus a connection, with the other-than-human world around me. It was, however, recognized that it was not easy or clear to define how this connection manifested itself other than to explain it as similar to how one feels when one enters into any other deep and personal relationship.

Secondly, I took photographs of beings I was connecting with and recorded information about what was photographed. As posited by Weber (2012), I was the researcher taking new photographs that represented the idea of connecting with nature. Additionally, as discussed by Emmison et al. (2014), this was similar to the *participant-centred approach*, except that I was both the participant and the researcher. This arts-influenced method was used by Seppänen and Väärö (2003) who argued they used photographs as a “sign or symbol of what the idea represents”, which, in my case, entailed connecting with nature. They further posited that taking photographs was similar to taking a specimen from nature. Finally, Thomsen (2015) argued that the taking of photographs can provoke a reflexive self-inquiry that can develop an emotional connection with the subject of the study. Both of these methods, the written and the visual, are linked in that they each can be used to both describe the object of connection and show the emotional connection you feel in your relationship with it. While one might argue that each

method of observation can, in one sense, encourage a distancing, clinical approach, I believe that it can foster a closeness by an emphasis on a close study of the phenomena you are building a deep connection with. Through a combination of observing the surroundings, using a variety of senses, and then reflecting on their significance to both me and our relationship, this will provide insight into the relationship I was exploring.

The field data was gathered during 15 weekly or semi-weekly field studies along trails in areas around my home in Fall River, Nova Scotia between October and December 2022. On each trip, I visited a different location along the trails in Oakfield Provincial Park (Oakfield, NS), MacDonald Park (Waverley, NS), Shubbie / Portobello Connector Trail (Waverley, NS), Lake William Trail (Waverley, NS) and Sandy Lake Park (Bedford, NS) (Appendix A). As such, the specific sites were not the same throughout and I travelled along the trail until a site “spoke to me” and invited me to sit down with it. Each data-gathering session lasted approximately one hour. This approach is based on the work of Haskell (2013), except that he visited the same m<sup>2</sup> area during his yearlong study of a forest area. In his work, he offered two pieces of advice that guide me—leave behind your expectations and hope for an “enthusiastic openness of the senses” (p. 245), and to return your mind’s attention to the present when connecting.

### **Data Analysis**

My overall approach to the analysis of the data is heavily grounded in *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis* (IPA) as outlined by Smith et al. (2022). They argue that IPA examines experiences in its own terms. They posit that the analysis is contextual in that “it wants to know in detail what the experience for *this* person is like, what sense *this* particular person is making of what is happening to them” (p. 3). In this way, the analysis is heavily centred on the experience a person has with a phenomenon and how to make sense of it. They further argue that

an ordinary and everyday experience can become an “*experience of importance* as the person reflects on the significance of what has happened and engages in considerable *hot cognition* in trying to make sense of it” (p. 27 - italics added). The discernment of themes emerging from a study of the experiences felt, as outlined by them, is key to my analysis of what my connection within the natural world was and how I achieved it.

### ***Analysis of the Field Notes***

The first step in the analysis of the field notes was to transcribe my handwritten notes to a Word file. Using the methods discussed by Smith et al. (2022), these notes were then studied to identify key phrases that spoke about either my own experience connecting with nature, including any feelings and senses I had, and what I imagined my friend was experiencing. From these highlighted key phrases, I drew out *Explanatory Notes* to summarize what these phrases meant to me.

From these explanatory notes, I synthesized what was important to me about my experience connecting with nature to develop a series of *Experiential Statements*. From studying these statements, I then grouped them into similar categories which were reviewed to confirm that each formed a cohesive group of experiences. Each group was then studied to discern a *Sub-Theme* to capture the common experience within that group.

These sub-themes were then further grouped into similar themes of experience to form a *Personal Experiential Theme* for each to capture a sense of my overall experience in connecting with nature during my fieldwork. As this research only involved one participant, a further grouping of the personal experiential themes to develop *Group Experiential Themes*, as discussed by Smith et al. (2022) was not required.



### ***Analysis of the Photographs***

The analysis began by studying the content of each photograph taken during the fieldwork and identifying what the key or main subject of it was. The photographs were then grouped by subject. These groups were not pre-defined but emerged as the photographs were grouped. After the initial grouping, each group of photographs were reviewed to confirm if all photographs accurately reflected a similar subject group. Each group of photograph subjects can be thought of as similar to the experiential statements from the analysis of the field notes.

These groups were then studied to further group them into sub-themes as was done with the field notes. The final step in the analysis of the photographs was to study the sub-themes to discern the one or more personal experiential theme(s) that captured what I was connecting with during the fieldwork.

### ***Putting it all Together***

The final phase in the analysis of the fieldwork was to combine the analysis of the field notes and photographs to discern what the overall personal experiential themes, and their associated sub-themes, were. The final step, after the common personal experiential themes had been discovered involved returning to my notes, and combined with my memory of the fieldwork, pulling out the techniques I used to realize each experience. These techniques were then used to develop the self-directed programme to allow others to experience a similar connection within the natural world during their own outings.

### **Trustworthiness, Credibility and Dependability**

Since the results are of my experiences and are written by me, they are, in keeping with a self-reflexive phenomenological study, true reflections of those experiences, as long as they truly and accurately reflect them. However, do they compare with the experiences of others? To

answer this question, my experiences were compared with the current literature to confirm if they are similar. It must be stated that, because of the subjective nature of this kind of inquiry, the results were not identical but were similar in the type of experiences had when connecting with nature.

As I am both the researcher and the researched, it was possible that pre-conceived ideas of connecting with nature influenced how I reported and analyzed my experiences. During the entire MRP, I endeavoured to remain conscious of this potential bias and tried to approach the data with an innocent and open mind. In an attempt to minimize the potential bias as much as I could, I collected the data first without reviewing it and then analyzed it in a separate phase so as to, hopefully, minimize the potential effects of an early review on the integrity of collecting. In keeping with the argument by Gorichanaz et al., (2018), when referencing the work of Husserl, my research used the lifeworld to reconstruct the connections rather than the scienceworld approach of first conceptualizing and theorizing the phenomena before investigating it.

## **Ethics**

This project was broken down into two main parts, the first of which involved the collection and analysis of my experiences fostering a deeper connection with nature. As this part of the project involved only myself collecting data from my own experiences, there were no ethical issues from this part.

The second part of the project involved the design, testing and release of a self-directed programme, intended for adults, to provide them with guidance on fostering their own deeper connection with nature. As with the first part, I did not see potential ethical issues with the design or release of the output, however, the testing of the proposed self-guided programme involved the solicitation and analysis of feedback from a trial audience. To protect the participants, all of

whom were either staff or volunteers of the Ecology Action Centre, a Request for an Ethical Review was approved on 17 February 2023 with the following ethical safeguards:

- All participants were to be over the age of 18,
- All participants were to be volunteers,
- All participants were to be presented with a statement discussing the purpose of the research project, their role in participating in the research, and the purpose and use of the final self-directed programme (Appendices C and D),
- The feedback sheets were to be returned directly to me and will not be shared with any other party (Appendix E), and
- Their input was to be anonymous and no personally identifying information will be included in either this final research project report or the self-directed programme.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

As discussed above, this study was from a single point of view, mine, and, therefore, may have been seen as limiting the validity. However, I believe that the key point of this study was to explore my experiences, grounded in theory and other studies, and then to use these experiences to develop a guide to help others foster their own deep connection with nature based on a relationship of reciprocity.

The primary delimitation in this project was that of time, principally the time available to collect the data being practically limited to a three-month period. It would have been interesting to see this data collection conducted over a longer period of time, as was done by Haskell (2013) during his yearlong study. The choice to change the site with each visit based on finding one that “speaks to me” allowed the research to cover data over space and harkens back to my

geographical roots of studying phenomena over space, but also empowered the natural world to have agency in this research by helping me find spots that have a story to tell me.

## Output

The core output of this research is a self-directed programme to help adults in Nova Scotia and elsewhere develop a deep connection within the natural world. While both a self-directed programme and group-guided programme would work in covering the proposed techniques, my preference is towards the self-directed programme as it affords participants the ability for deep self-reflection about their connection. This is confirmed by the study by Kim & Shin (2021), who when studying a number of forest therapy programmes found that while participants in guided forest therapy programmes reported “positive emotional changes” (p. 12) and that the programmes promoted social bonds, self-guided forestry programmes provided an opportunity for self-reflection and for participants to focus on their inner self.

This programme was a mixture of a Goethean approach, elements from both MAPIN and forest therapy, and techniques that I discovered during my visits within the natural world in the data collection phase. The programme was designed to be self-administered however, it could also be later adapted to serve as an outline for a group event. Once developed in draft, the product was trialled with members of the Ecology Action Centre (EAC) in Halifax for their feedback and suggestions for improvement before being released. The intent of the proposed programme was not to provide a cookie-cutter programme for participants to follow in sequence, but to provide a guide with different techniques for them to choose from that encouraged them to walk with, and not just in, nature and to allow, as argued by both Morse et al. (2018) and Simpson (2014), nature to be their *co-teacher* or *co-learner* as I prefer in a relationship based on reciprocity.

The programme is provided in two separate but related formats (Appendix F). Firstly, it is provided in the form of a written illustrated guide with the various methods one can use to foster their own deep connection with nature. The other is in the form of a video to both explain and demonstrate the different techniques I found to be useful for me in achieving a deeper connection with the natural world during my information gathering in the field. The programme will be released to the EAC for their use and for them to share with other groups and environmental NGOs in the fall of 2023 (Appendix B) as well as the products will be placed on a website that was been developed by me ([www.connectwithnature.ca](http://www.connectwithnature.ca)). Based on this programme, following graduation, I also intend to refine and offer it to environmental and community groups to use with their own or community members. Lastly, in the fullness of time, I intend to expand this work into a book that, hopefully, will get published, to help adults develop a deeper connection within the natural world.

### **Literature Review**

The literature surrounding the question of connecting with nature is deep, rich, and varied. Following a review of available works, focusing primarily on peer-reviewed articles from the past ten years, four general themes emerged: the personal benefits of connecting with nature, the benefits to society when people connect deeper with nature, the barriers that prevent or reduce people's ability to connect with nature, and methods people have used to develop a deeper connection with nature. It should be noted that many of the articles touched on two or more of the themes found, but generally focused more on one theme than the others.

#### **Personal Benefits of Connecting with Nature**

The literature is clear that the benefits to one's physical health are often expressed as a principle reason people want to *get outside*. In their study of users at two botanical gardens / urban parks in Malaysia, Razak et al. (2016) noted that the most common reason people gave for

using the parks was for recreation and exercise, with stress relief, relaxation and the park's beauty following as other reasons. In their study of community woodlot users in Scotland, Logan et al. (2021) noted that *physical well-being* was the common reason for visiting their community woodlot, enhanced by the lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic that prevented travelling far. They went on to comment that other, lesser reasons expressed were to enhance their mental well-being and to *connect with nature*. In their studies, both Razak et al. and Logan et al. show that people regularly visit natural settings, both urban and rural, to help maintain their physical well-being as a significant reason for being outside in nature but were unclear as to how this can deepen any connection. Finally, Edwards (2018) argued, in a limited study of one patient with respiratory illnesses, that their condition improved when they followed a programme of a combination of slow and brisk walks in a forest.

Beyond the surface of physical benefits, articles have also shown that people seek a connection with the natural world to help aid their mental health and well-being. In their review of the benefits of connecting with nature, Capaldi et al. (2015) discussed the benefits to mental health within two aspects, *hedonic well-being* (associated with pleasure and enjoyment), and *eudaimonic well-being* (associated with meaning and purpose). Within hedonic well-being, they argued that even brief contact with nature boosts one's mood and that people are happier in a natural environment than in an urban one. They go on to argue that long-term contact can increase emotional functioning and reduce mental distress. Within eudaimonic well-being, they argue that a connection with nature increases both a feeling that life has meaning and a sense of autonomy. Finally, they provide examples of programmes for adults to increase their connection with nature, from The David Suzuki Foundation's *30 X 30 Nature Challenge* (spend 30 minutes

per day in nature during May) to the Canadian Mental Health Association's *Mood Walks* to increase physical activity, mental health, and social connection.

In White's (2012) review of his methods to enhance a connection with nature, he noted that the participants reported the immersive experience led to a sense of peace, calmness, and love and that the effect can unlock joyful times from the past. In their review of *human-nature connectedness*, Ives et al. (2018) noted that this connection is multifaceted, consisting of material, experiential, cognitive, emotional, and philosophical connections. In looking at the practice of Forest Therapy, Rosa et al. (2020) their meta-analysis found that the practice is linked to a decrease in depressive symptoms among participants, however, the effects are only short-term. Similarly, Rajoo et al. (2020) in their study of female middle-aged participants in Malaysia reported that they felt rejuvenated at work following a session of Forest Therapy and that they experienced lower blood pressure for three days afterwards. These studies all argue that connecting with nature increases both happiness and general well-being as well as both mental and physical health and has been used as a treatment for anxiety and depression as a *dose of nature* prescription. While people often first identify the physical benefits of connecting with nature, and these are important, the mental health and general happiness benefits can often run deeper and maybe unseen by people experiencing them.

The final leg is the triad of personal benefits of connecting with nature is that of enhancing one's spiritual self through a deeper connection with nature. In his "four domains model" of spiritual well-being, Fisher (2011) argues from a secular humanist perspective that humans are spiritual beings that have four domains of spiritual well-being: personal (relates to self), communal (relates to inter-personal), environmental (relates to connecting with nature), and transcendental (beyond the human level). Within the environmental domain, he posits that

people report a sense of awe and wonder with the natural world and express the value of nature and creation. In his review of deep ecology from the Hindu-based belief that “one’s self is part of the world’s environmental wholeness”, Haigh (2006) argues that there are three steps to ecological self-realization: self-scape (within your personal boundary), social scape (includes your social interactions), and earth scape (within a global system). He goes on to argue that this process of finding self-realization within deep ecology is based on Vaisnava within the Hindu faith whereby followers “strive to reconnect their self with the supreme Self and thus return to Godhead” (p. 47). By extrapolating from her Christian faith, Loorz’s (2021) autoethnographic work explores her experience of establishing the *Church of the Wild* or *Wild Church*, a work in which she takes an animistic perspective to consider how the natural world is an “alluring invitation into the sacred”. She argues that the church she helped to found was the Church *of* the Wild rather than *in* the wild. In telling her story, she recounts a time when, sitting, leaning against an oak tree, she heard a voice saying, *draw me*. First thinking it was God, she then realized it was the tree inviting her to connect with it. Regardless of one’s religious convictions, or lack thereof, the literature offers varying viewpoints on how connecting with nature can help us to develop a personal connection with a higher entity or something larger through nature as a co-teacher of the spiritual.

These three facets of the personal benefits of connecting with nature (physical, mental and spiritual) form a continuum of a deep connection with the natural world. Within the literature studied, there is little indication that, while being exposed to nature increases one’s physical health, this benefit didn’t significantly foster a deeper connection with the natural world. However, being in the natural world is a draw for people to engage in physical activities that provides them with increased physical health. The personal benefits of connecting with nature on



our mental health begin to show a deeper connection with the natural world with people reporting a sense of peace and calm and a decrease in depression when being in the natural world (White, 2012 and Rosa et al., 2020). The personal benefits of connecting with nature in one's spiritual sense affords an increased and deeper connection within the natural world, when, as argued by Fisher (2011) people report feeling a sense of awe and wonder with the natural world. The feeling of seeing, at least in one's mind's eye, or sensing the presence of spirits or higher beings when within the other than human world leads to a connection beyond one's physical or mental inward needs, towards a deeper connection with and within the natural world that forms the basis of the relationship I am seeking with the rest of the natural world.

### **Societal Benefits of Connecting with Nature**

When a person connects with nature, it not only benefits them but has benefits for the wider society in how the impact of this connection affects our interactions with each other. In their study of ecological embeddedness and its implications for public health, Lewis and Townsend (2015) argue that a deep eco-connection can, especially when started in childhood, be often associated with pro-environmental attitudes later in life that leads to a move from an *ego-centric self* to an *eco-centric self* that fights for nature. Similarly, a study of university students by Zelenski et al. (2015) where they were shown images of either nature or urban scenes and then engaged in a game to assess cooperation found that those who viewed positive images of nature demonstrated more cooperative behaviours. Even though these are only instances of a virtual exposure, they speak to the potential positive societal effect of connecting with nature. Similarly, the study by Williams and Chawla (2016) of former participants of a nature-based programme in Colorado found that they formed an eco-identity from a direct connection with nature that led to an increase in their sense of the importance of the natural world and that they

identified with the world of environmental action. Finally, the study by Merenlender et al. (2016) of past participants of naturalist programmes in Virginia and California indicated that, while many had pre-existing pro-environmental attitudes, the programmes deepened this attitude and they felt that such citizen science programmes served as a link between formal science and environmental action. As it has been shown, connecting with nature benefits society by either developing or deepening pro-environmental attitudes that may lead to an increase in cooperative behaviour and environmental action. This driver of a deepening pro-environmental viewpoint is a key outcome, for me, of a programme that helps people to foster their own deep connection with nature; so more people will be moved through an empathetic and reciprocal relationship with nature to work to protect it from us.

### **Barriers to Connecting with Nature**

While many people have access to natural areas, others face barriers that limit or prevent them from connecting with nature. In their study of users and providers/managers of urban natural areas around Manchester, UK, de Bell et al. (2018) noted that users remarked that natural areas should be accessible and not be *fenced off*. They also expressed the view that they wanted areas that felt safe and not *too wild* and were managed with amenities. They looked for urban parks that have paths so that people using wheelchairs, walkers and strollers can access the park, playgrounds for the children, and amenities such as toilets. For the demographic of this study, they looked for natural areas that, while they had a form of nature, were largely cultured with amenities and other, *more wild*, areas of nature without amenities and easy access were seen as a barrier to connecting with the natural world. Other factors like aging affected people's access to gardens, Freeman et al. (2019) noted that people with access to green spaces, such as gardens, had fewer health problems. However, while older adults have more free time to be able to

connect with nature through their garden, as they age, declines in their, or their partner's, health reduce their ability to be able to connect. Thus, the effects of aging becomes a barrier to being able to connect with nature, even in their own home garden. Finally, the study by Merenlender et al. (2016) discussed earlier also posited that barriers such as programme costs and time competition with other commitments, such as family and career, made participation difficult and likely prevented some people from attending. While connecting with the natural world in any form is beneficial, not everyone can connect as much as they would like, if at all. Barriers can be overcome such as paths for physical barriers, park facilities or home programmes for age barriers, or examining cost and time commitments of programmes for life barriers, and these changes can help more people connect with nature. In developing my proposed programme, I must always be mindful of potential barriers and strive to minimize or eliminate them as much as possible.

### **Methods for Achieving a Deeper Connection with Nature**

While getting people out in nature is a good first step in connecting with it, to fully connect would require an ability to find a deep connection beyond a superficial experience and there are a number of practices and approaches for connecting with nature. One such approach can be found in the phenomenological approach of the philosopher, author and naturalist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe who inspired a number of naturalists in their own work. Harding (2009) reviews and discusses James Lovelock's Gaia theory and offers his experiences while studying the muntjac deer. While collecting data on the habitat of the deer, he rested in the woods and felt they were *deliciously wild*. Leaning against a tree he looked up and felt like he became a part of the being of the woods. Harding's approach was based on those of Goethe in that focuses on studying the close details of the deer and imagining what the deer's life is like. Dean Robbins

(2006) discussed the phenomenological approach to studying nature used by Goethe and described it as an *activity of disclosure*. As such, the practice is “participatory, morally responsive, and holistic” with a hope that “earth yields to us ‘new organs of perception’ to behold earth’s latent sensibility” (p.10). Furthermore, Skaftnesmo (2009) argued that Goethe created a *hypothesis-free method* by merging two cornerstones of the scientific process, the theoretical level of scientific theory to explain a phenomenon with the empirical level of the use of the phenomenon itself as well as facts to verify the theory. Finally, Simms (2005) posited that Goethe mistrusted the mathematization of the natural world and that the observer must be free from the *sedimented cultural paradigm* in practice at the time. Goethe moved beyond the clinical descriptions and sketches common in science, although he did produce highly detailed examples, to using one’s imagination to see beyond the observed and into the life imagined. He used his approach to create a close and deep connection with the plants he was studying and could envision them from seed to flower and back to seed. Goethe’s approach has been adopted and used by many students of the natural world from Stephan Harding to Henry David Thoreau. In her review of Thoreau’s journal as well as his *Walden*, Root (2005) discussed how he used Goethe-like methods to experience nature and liked to walk at night so that the small objects, highly visible during the day, would become blurred and thus the other aspects of the landscape (the fog, mist, light, wind and so on) would become primary:

Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me. I was so distinctly made aware of the presence of something kindred to me, even in scenes which we are accustomed to call wild and dreary, and also that the nearest of blood to me and humanist was not a person nor a villager, that I thought no place could ever be strange to me again. (Thoreau, 2022, p. 131)

In this way, the Goethean method adjusts one's normal point of view on the natural world to an alternate one that can provide a unique perspective. This Goethean approach to studying the details of the natural phenomena and then, using one's mind's eye, perceive the life, past, present and future of it, as a way of developing a deeper sense of connection with it.

However, Goethean science is not the only approach to studying nature to develop a deep connection with it. White (2012) developed a process to create an eco-consciousness he referred to as *Mindful Affective Perception in Nature* (MAPIN) in which the participants followed a process involving place familiarization, meditation, sound mapping, connecting with the senses of hearing, sight and touch, and then reflection to deepen the connection. Before using this process on others, White (2011) tried his proposed process on himself and found that it created a *heightened eco-consciousness* (HEC) and this enhanced the human-nature connectedness. Within his approach and use of all one's senses, I am reminded of Muir's (2006) account of being in a windstorm in the mountains and his description of the sound of the wind and trees moving and creaking, the feeling of the wind on him, sense of motion as climbed one to the trees to get a sense of the storm and the sight of the trees around him moving in different directions.

In addition to the approaches of both Goethe and White, the practice of Forest Therapy, also called Forest Bathing or *Shinrin-Yoku*, is a public health practice that began in Japan to help reduce various ailments, including cancer, by following a programme of activities in a forest to enhance a connection and improve both physical and mental health. There are a variety of forms of practice, but typically include the triad of mind, body and soul (Felber, 2019). Within *mind*, Felber focuses on mindfulness and sensory experiences and sees "the forest as a power source" due to the interaction with the "aromatic, terpene-rich atmosphere between the trees" (p. 393). For this triad, she posits activities such as a *path of the senses* (a slow deliberate walk, paying

attention to both your steps and various senses you experience the forest with). Within *body*, she focuses on breathing and meditation with both *active meditation* (a combination of breathing and gentle physical exercise) and *passive meditation* (sitting or lying focusing on purposeful breathing). Lastly, within *soul*, she focuses on conducting forest rituals, such as building a mandala or making an offering of thanksgiving.

Finally, not all methods to connect with nature need a structured self-exploratory journey. As discussed by Pitt (2018) gardening, and in her case, community garden plots, can, in some cases, help to enhance a connection with nature. Although the results were mixed, she did find that some felt a connection with nature that influenced their gardening practices, such as not using slug bait for fear of increasing toxins in the environment and not using peat moss in their gardens to help protect the ecologically sensitive peat fields.

## **Summary**

People seek a connection with nature for a number of personal benefits; from a desire to increase their physical health through activities in nature, to maintaining better mental health by spending time in nature, to finding a spiritual connection with and within the natural world. Beyond these personal benefits, society also benefits by deepening eco-centric attitudes and a greater desire for cooperation. However, despite the benefits of connecting with nature, both personal and societal, for some, barriers, from physical, to financial, to social, impact their ability to be able to connect with nature and thus must be examined in any programme design. A number of methods to achieving a deep connection with nature have been developed, all with merit. From Goethe's phenomenological approach through the close and detailed examination of plants that influenced writers such as Thoreau, to White's emphasis of using all the senses to explore the natural world, to the immersive practice of forest therapy to take in the essence of the

natural world. To develop a deep connection, one based on a relationship of reciprocity, relies on a combination of all three. One that focuses on the small details of the natural world, examines the interaction with this world through all senses in a full and deliberate immersive way. This multifaceted approach formed the foundation of my study in looking to foster a deeper connection with the rest of the natural world.

## **Analysis and Findings**

### **Analysis of the Field Notes**

#### ***Experiential Statements***

From a review of the field notes, with an emphasis on the highlighted key phrases and associated *Explanatory Notes*, 49 distinct *Experiential Statements* were discerned (Figure 1).

**Figure 1***Experiential Statements from the Field Notes*

Putting myself into the tree's mind to imagine what it is feeling.	Feel a need to slow down to sense the smaller details.	Sensing the sound of water and wind – feeling calm.
Feeling grateful to be invited to spend time with the tree in its home.	Expressing the need to listen to the trees in a poem.	Sensing the sound of the running water and the texture of the needles and presence of the moss and rock friends.
Conversing with the tree as it plays with me.	Sensing the sound of water and a human family playing.	Sensing that the other humans pass by with barely a notice.
Immersing my senses in the sounds and smells of nature.	Sensing that this area has been impacted by humans over 200 years but is still “natural” in spots.	Harvested some balsam – a gift from their home to mine.
Thinking how much we impact nature with our sounds.	Need to embrace that nature moves different than us.	Sense the calming sound of the waves and shelter from the wind off the lake.
Feeling respect for the age and wisdom of the trees.	Need to both talk with and listen to nature – reciprocity.	Sensing the magic in the forest, from ground ice to slow oaks and fast firs living together.
Sensing the sounds of human's impact on nature.	Even though near human impacts, feeling calm.	Sensing the frosty air and coming shorter winter days.
Realizing this is their home – not mine.	Feeling respect for all the O-T-H world – they are my friends and I feel safe and calm.	Hoping we make the right decisions to prevent the further suffering of nature.
Imagining what the tree has felt and seen of us.	Sensing the human intrusions into nature – from noise to “flagging tape” – harder to get a sense of connection.	Seeing the frost but sensing the warmth of the sun while feeling the roughness of the bark and needles and the smoothness of the moss.
Sensing the sounds of nature.	Sensed the death of the felled tree as food for the future – mind's eye.	Feeling grateful for the invitation to spend time in their home.
Imaging the life of the tree and how its death will continue to support its neighbours.	Imaging what the tree has seen of the humans & what it thinks.	Sensing the clean air.
Felling connected with the ground by being pulled towards it.	Sensing the touch of the trees & ground and freshness of the air.	Imaging the fallen trees as future homes for animals / insects.
Giving gifts back to nature as thanks.	Sense the trees as individuals in a system connected by a web underneath.	Left gifts of seeds for the animals.
Feeling stress-free.	Grateful to be invited to be invited to spend time in their home.	Need to slow down to spend time with nature at its speed.
Sensing the different textures of the bark, needles and moss.	Sensed the intrusion of the humans into and blocking nature.	Sensing a journey measured in time with, in terms of years/decades.
Sensing the sounds of nature over the human.	Imaging how the trees feel being close to the highway – suffering, sad?	
Imaging what the non-human think of us – curious?	Sensing the bonding and energy exchange when touching the tree.	



## Sub-Themes

From the experiential statements, they were studied and clustered into eight groups of similarly themed statements. Each group was studied to discern a *Sub-Theme* for each (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

### *Sub-Themes and Associated Experiential Statements from the Field Notes*

Sub-Theme	Experiential Statements	Examples from Field Notes
<b>Imaging the Tree's Life</b>	Putting myself into the tree's mind to imagine what it is feeling.	...hemlock has been here for centuries... some of its kin has fallen... Older ancestors have disappeared... next generation of hemlock and fir (Oct 22, p. 1)
	Imagining what the tree has felt and seen of us.	How long has he (I assume) been there? What has he seen?... Did he feel the blasting the old nearby quarry? What does he think of the nearby new trail? (Oct 30, p. 3)
	Imaging the life of the tree and how its death will continue to support its neighbours.	My tree friend is younger... three cousins or siblings that have fallen over... Will they provide shelter for animals? (Nov 6, p. 4)
	Imaging what the non-human think of us – curious?	...what do the inhabitants think of the human visitors and their companions... Are they curious about them? (Nov 11, p. 5)
	Sensed the death of the felled tree as food for the future – mind's eye.	...old tree, felled by a storm past. Soon it will feed future generations (Nov 17, p. 7)
	Imaging what the tree has seen of the humans & what it thinks.	What has my friend seen in its life? Did he see the houses being built? Did he see the original trail become a road being cut by settlers? (Nov 20, p. 8)
	Imaging how the trees feel being close to the highway – suffering, sad?	What does my friend feel, being close to the highway... can no longer hear the sounds of birds and squirrels... do they suffer with the tree? (Nov 27, p. 9)
	Imaging the fallen trees as future homes for animals / insects.	...amount of trees down is sad at first... shelter for animals, homes for insects and food for fungus and plants (Dec 27, p. 13)
<b>Imagining Our Impact on Nature</b>	Thinking how much we impact nature with our sounds.	Distant highway buzz, human impacting nature? (Oct 27, p. 2)
	Sensing the sounds of human's impact on nature.	...distant buzz of highway, occasional noisy car / bike...(Oct 30, p. 3)
	Sensing the sounds of nature over the human.	Air is still... squirrels chattering, birds singing and calling... hum of the highway... (Nov 11, p. 5)
	Sensing that this area has been impacted by humans over 200 years but is still "natural" in spots.	...sit spot today is a bit more "human"... area has been impacted by humans for over 200 years...(Nov 13, p. 6)
	Sensing the human intrusions into nature – from noise to "flagging tape" – harder to get a sense of connection.	...saw a line of flagging tape... first sign of the encroaching "civilization". (Nov 17, p. 7)
	Sensed the intrusion of humans into and blocking nature.	... I see individual trees... individual and is important. They are surrounded by kin...(Nov 27, p. 9)
	Sensing that the other humans pass by with barely a notice.	... walkers and runners... barely noticing... they are "in nature" I doubt they are "with nature". (Dec 4, p. 11)
	Hoping we make the right decisions to prevent the further suffering of nature.	At this time, we need this hope that we will make the right decisions and choose the correct path or

Sub-Theme	Experiential Statements	Examples from Field Notes
		all of nature will suffer at our hands. (Dec 22, p. 13)
<b>Listening to the Sounds of Nature</b>	Immersing my senses in the sounds and smells of nature.	I breathed in the air, I could smell the scent of pine. What can the tree smell of me? (Oct 27, p. 2)
	Sensing the sounds of nature.	Breeze through the treetops. Squirrels say hello... Crow cawing in the distance. Muffled rumble of a nearby passing train...(Nov 6, p. 4)
	Sensing the sound of water and a human family playing.	Sound of water from the canal competes and merges with the sound of the nearby road, sound of a family playing and birds overhead. (Nov 13, p. 6)
	Sense the calming sound of the waves and shelter from the wind off the lake.	Meditate with the sound of waves... protected somewhat from the north wind by tree friends. (Dec 11, p. 12)
<b>Sensing the Textures and Other Feelings</b>	Sensing the different textures of the bark, needles and moss.	Slow, deliberate walk... smell of the mud... roughness of bark... softness of the moss... gentle but pointy needles...(Nov 11, p. 5)
	Sensing the touch of the trees & ground and the freshness of the air.	Slow meditative walk – The smooth touch of the beech, the ragged smoothness of the birch, the roughness of the pine and hemlock, the sponginess of the hummocky ground, the freshness of the cool air... (Nov 20, p. 8)
	Sensing the sound of the running water and the texture of the needles and the presence of the moss and rock friends.	Rushing water competes with sound of the nearby highway. Air is still with the occasional soft breeze but no sound. The needles of the fir is so soft... ever-present rocks and their moss friends. (Dec 4, p. 11)
	Sensing the frosty air and coming shorter winter days.	Air is still and frosty, ... Winter Solstice, long shadows across the land. (Dec 22, p. 12)
	Seeing the frost but sensing the warmth of the sun while feeling the roughness of the bark and needles and the smoothness of the moss.	Nature walk – Frost today, masks the smells... warmth of the sun... roughness of the trunks and pointiness of needles counter the smooth softness of the moss. (Dec 22, p. 13)
	Sensing the clean air.	Meditate and breathe in the clean air... (Dec 27, p. 13)
<b>Feeling Calm and Stress-Free</b>	Feeling stress-free.	Feel awake and stress-free, sitting here surrounded by friends, feel at home. (Nov 6, p. 4)
	Even though near human impacts, feeling calm.	... sense of calm ... This spot is also a transition, the highest spot on the canal. a metaphor of the other relationship with nature, one where we are seen as separate from and the other where we are seen as connected with and at harmony with. (Nov 13, p. 6)
	Sensing the sound of water and wind – feeling calm.	Water lapping on the shore, gentle breeze through the trees... calming sit spot... What do these young trees think of my company? (Dec 2, p. 10)
<b>Feeling Gratitude</b>	Feeling grateful to be invited to spend time with the tree in its home.	...honoured to be allowed in hemlock's home ... take in the atmosphere... (Oct 22, p. 1)
	Feeling respect for the age and wisdom of the trees.	A beautiful old sentinel of the forest... older, grizzled, but with spunk and a sense of humour... (Oct 27, p. 2)
	Grateful to be invited to be invited to spend time in their home.	I am on top of this web. It is an honour to be invited to sit with and within the extended family. (Nov 20, p. 9)
	Sensing the bonding and energy exchange when touching the tree.	...sense a bond and exchange of energy between us. (Nov 27, p. 10)
	Feeling grateful for the invitation to spend time in their home.	Gratitude and thanks to my friends for sharing their home with me. (Dec 22, p. 13)
<b>Feeling A Sense of Connection</b>	Conversing with the tree as it plays with me.	...this tree is a trickster, an old and wise teacher. I fell over, were they telling me I needed to sit on the floor near its roots to meditate? (Oct 27, p. 2)
	Realizing this is their home – not mine.	...two ticks... a reminder we are in their home. (Oct 30, p. 3)

Sub-Theme	Experiential Statements	Examples from Field Notes
	Feeling connected with the ground by being pulled towards it.	...soothing sound of the wind whispering through the treetops. I feel myself sinking (not literally as before) into the ground, as if my spirit is becoming grounded in the forest floor. (Nov 6, p. 4)
	Feel a need to slow down to sense the smaller details.	When I arrive, I move fast, need to slow down... small details appear, sounds and smells... (Nov 11, p. 5)
	Expressing the need to listen to the trees in a poem.	<i>The forest calls me, come closer and sit with me I will tell you my story if you listen Tales of growth and tales of death and tales of regrowth I will tell you of great storms and tiny animals If only you will listen Come closer and sit with me</i> (Nov 11, p. 5)
	Need to embrace that nature moves differently than us.	...moves different, thinks different and lives different... (Nov 13, p. 6)
	Need to both talk with and listen to nature – reciprocity.	...connection comes from talking with nature and listening to its message...relationship of reciprocity... my presence impacts the other-than-human world as it does me. It is a feeling of friendship, love, and respect. (Nov 13, p. 6)
	Feeling respect for all the O-T-H world – they are my friends and I feel safe and calm.	...my tree friends, and the cousins the rocks and soils, the water, the fungus, the animals and birds, and the insects is one of respect. I feel safe, relaxed and calm. (Nov 13, p. 7)
	Sense the trees as individuals in a system connected by a web underneath.	... I see individual trees... individual and is important. They are surrounded by kin... live with other trees, all connected by mycelium... (Nov 20, p. 9)
	Sensing the magic in the forest, from ground ice to slow oaks and fast firs living together.	...magical walk in through the crystals. The fast-growing fir, impatient to be big and the slower but dignified oak, living together. (Dec 11, p. 12)
	Need to slow down to spend time with nature at its speed.	By slowing down and pausing to spend time with them, at their speed and not ours...drink it all in... (Dec 30, p. 14)
	Sensing a journey measured in time with, in terms of years/decades.	...my journey has been in terms of time spent with...measure time in years and decades... (Dec 30, p. 14)
<b>Giving And Receiving Gifts</b>	Giving gifts back to nature as thanks.	Created a mandala for the trees lost to Fiona from objects on the ground. (Nov 6, p. 4)
	Harvested some balsam – a gift from their home to mine.	Harvested some balsam branches – thanked the parent for the gift from their family. (Dec 4, p. 11)
	Left gifts of seeds for the animals.	Left gifts of sunflower seeds and nuts from my pantry to feed the animals, birds and other beings that inhabit the woods. From my house to theirs. (Dec 27, p. 14)

### ***Personal Experiential Themes***

The eight sub-themes were studied and further grouped into common themes and from these groupings three *Personal Experiential Themes* were discovered (Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

*Personal Experiential Themes and Their Associated Sub-Themes from the Field Notes*

<b>Personal Experiential Themes</b>	<b>Sub-Themes</b>
<b>Seeing the Tree in My Mind's Eye</b>	Imaging the Tree's Life
	Imagining Our Impact on Nature
<b>Seeing with My Other Senses</b>	Listening to the Sounds of Nature
	Sensing the Textures and Other Feelings
<b>Developing a Relationship with Nature</b>	Feeling Calm and Stress-Free
	Feeling Gratitude
	Feeling A Sense of Connection
	Giving And Receiving Gifts

### **Analysis of the Photographs**

#### ***Photograph Categories***

From studying the content of each photograph taken during the field work, 17 groups of emergent categories revealed themselves (Figure 4). A sample of these photographs are found in Appendix G. When further examining the categories as a whole, they showed what I was attracted to at each moment and therefore what I was connecting with.

**Figure 4**

*Photograph Categories*

Tree Family	Moss	Running Water
Up at Trees	Moss on Tree	Shore's Edge
Uprooted Trees	Moss on Rocks	Boulders
Tree Stump or Log	Lichen and Fungus	Gifts
Tree Roots	Frost	
Forest Plants	Ground Ice	

### ***Personal Experiential Theme***

These 17 categories were further grouped to form four *Sub-Themes* (Figure 5) and these sub-themes were then grouped within a single new *Personal Experiential Theme* of *Seeing with My Eyes*. The final category in Figure 4 (Gifts) was then included within existing Personal Experiential Theme of *Developing a Relationship with Nature* and its Sub-Theme of *Giving and Receiving Gifts* found in Figure 3.

### **Figure 5**

#### *Personal Experiential Theme and Sub-Themes of the Photographs*

<b>Personal Experiential Theme</b>	<b>Sub-Themes</b>	<b>Photograph Category</b>
<b>Seeing with My Eyes</b>	Seeing my tree friends – My companions along my journey	Tree Family
		Up at Trees
		Uprooted Trees
		Tree Stump or Log
		Tree Roots
	Seeing the very small – Almost invisible and forgotten	Forest Plants
		Moss
		Moss on Tree
		Moss on Rocks
		Lichen and Fungus
	Seeing the transitory	Frost
		Ground Ice
	Seeing the other animates – Often overlooked	Running Water
		Shore's Edge
		Boulders

### **Putting it All Together**

To begin the answer the first research question of the project<sup>2</sup>, the Personal Experiential Themes, and their associated Sub-Themes, from both the field notes and photographs were combined to form four Personal Experiential Themes, with their 12 Sub-Themes (Figure 6).

<sup>2</sup> RQ1 – What are my own experiences in finding a deeper connection with nature?

**Figure 6***Combined Personal Experiential Themes and Sub-Themes*

Personal Experiential Themes	Sub-Themes
<b>Seeing with My Eyes</b>	Seeing my tree friends – My companions along my journey
	Seeing the very small – Almost invisible and forgotten
	Seeing the transitory
	Seeing the other animates – Often overlooked
<b>Seeing with My Other Senses</b>	Listening to the Sounds of Nature
	Sensing the Textures and Other Feelings
<b>Seeing the Tree in My Mind's Eye</b>	Imaging the Tree's Life
	Imagining Our Impact on Nature
<b>Developing a Relationship with Nature</b>	Feeling Calm and Stress-Free
	Feeling Gratitude
	Feeling A Sense of Connection
	Giving And Receiving Gifts

*My Experiences Within the Natural World*

By synthesising down my experiences connecting with nature during my fieldwork in this way, the overall pattern my connection becomes more apparent. Firstly, my experiences connecting with nature was, in part, through our sight, as discerned by the Personal Experiential Theme of *Seeing with My Eyes*. By using the medium of photography and analysing the content of the photographs taken during my fieldwork, I discerned that visually I connected with trees that formed the focus of my sit spots and the beings I was connecting with. However, these beings do not live in isolation, and my analysis of the photographs also showed that I connected with other beings and animate objects around the trees. These included small beings that can often be forgotten such as forest plants, mosses, lichens, and fungi, as well as transitory entities such as frost on other beings and ground ice that are visible under certain conditions and only for a passing time. If one is not connecting deeply within the natural world these can be frequently missed; indicative of a shallower, superficial connection. Finally, within *Seeing with My Eyes*, I connected with objects beyond beings typically seen as animate such as plants and animals, that are not always seen as such, namely earth, in the form of boulders, and water.

Further expanding my sensory connection with the natural world, the Personal Experiential Theme of *Seeing with My Senses* explored the connection through senses other than sight such as sound, touch, and smell. Although not used in this session of fieldwork, one could also include, with some precautions, the sense of taste. By expanding one's connection within the natural world to more than sight alone, aspects of this world that cannot be seen with one's eyes, or camera, become *visible* to our mind and helps to deepen our connection.

Moving beyond our own senses of sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste, one can see the life of the being one is connecting with through the use of imagination. Through this use of my *mind's eye*, as discerned by the Personal Experiential Theme of *Seeing the Tree in My Mind's Eye*, I was able to connect with the being I was spending time with by perceiving what its life is like, its family and neighbours and its struggles and successes, as well as how we are impacting it through our activities. This use of my mind's eye to perceive the life and experiences of each tree I was spending time with allowed me to foster a deep and personal relationship with each one, beyond only experiencing it with my own physical senses.

Finally, the analysis of both my field notes and photographs, showed how my experience within the natural world deepened my connection with it, as reflected with the Personal Experiential Theme of *Developing a Relationship with Nature*. During my fieldwork, I routinely expressed a sense of gratitude towards the tree I was spending time with as well feeling calm and stress-free in their presence. My field notes also indicated a deep connection and relationship with both the tree I was spending time with and its family and friends surrounding it. Furthermore, by both receiving and offering gifts to the tree and its neighbours, I experienced I heightened kinship with each spot and the beings living within it.

### ***My Techniques to Achieve a Deeper Connection***

The final step to answer the first research question was to examine what I was doing, based on a review of my field notes and personal recollection, during the fieldwork that facilitated the experiences I had being within and connecting with the natural world. Some of the techniques I tried to foster a deeper connection were unique within one Personal Experiential Theme while others crossed between two or more themes (Figure 7). These techniques were then used to form the foundation of the self-directed programme developed during the next phase of this project.

### **Figure 7**

#### *Techniques Used During the Fieldwork*

<b>Personal Experiential Theme</b>	<b>Techniques Used to Foster a Deeper Connection</b>
<b>Seeing with My Eyes</b>	Photography of subjects I was attracted to or felt a connection with Contemplative or exploratory sitting
<b>Seeing with My Other Senses</b>	Deliberate walks Contemplative or exploratory sitting Exploring with touch Exploring the sent pallet Exploring the soundscape
<b>Seeing The Tree in My Mind's Eye</b>	Journalling Meditation or contemplative sitting Using my mind's eye in reflection
<b>Developing A Relationship with Nature</b>	Greeting and thanks Meditation or contemplative sitting Giving gifts (building mandalas or offering seeds and nuts, etc.) Harvesting gifts honourably

### **Self-Directed Programme**

The second part of this project was to, based on my experiences during the fieldwork and influenced by the current literature, develop a self-directed programme for adults to use to help them to foster their own deeper connection with nature to answer the second research question<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> RQ2 – How might we facilitate this kind of connection for others?



This programme was developed in two formats, a guidebook, with photographs taken during the fieldwork and from my collection of past shoots, that can be released as either a PDF or as an e-book and as a video, with photographs and videos taken during the fieldwork and from my collection of past shoots. Both versions followed the same outline and main content, however, the specific text varied in order to be more appropriate for each format.

### ***Part 1 – Background***

The first part sets the foundation of the programme and explains to the participant why it is important to develop a deeper connection within the natural world. It is intended to inform the participant what the programme is about and its importance to them upfront. As the target audience for this programme are adults, this upfront and clear information is important to capture their interest early as they easily have the ability to *vote with their feet* if they do not feel engaged and informed.

It is designed to answer:

- What is the programme about?
- What do I need to bring along to participate?
- What are the benefits to the participant of a deeper connection with nature, specifically:
  - Benefits for their physical health;
  - Benefits for their mental health; and
  - Benefits for their spiritual health;
- What is meant by *connection*? The foundation of why we are looking at a deeper connection by expanding on the work of Abram (2017) on reciprocity and Thoreau's (2022) work on what is living.

## ***Part 2 – The Self-Directed Programme***

The second part of the programme is the self-directed programme itself and consists of five main steps. The design is not a prescriptive step-by-step programme with all the activities planned out, but, rather, it's a series of open-ended steps with activities to choose from to suit the participant's interests. The intent of the programme is for the participant to use it as a guide to spark ideas about connecting with nature.

**Step One – Discovery.** The first step is for the participant is to slowly explore a trail, path, or area to find a spot of interest that speaks to them; this is the beginning of their relationship with it. For this step, the participant is encouraged to:

- Slowly discover the small and subtle details of the area that interests them;
- Explore the area and find a spot that is inviting and comfortable which speaks to them; and
- Approach their spot as they would a new friend, with curiosity and desire.

**Step Two – Greeting.** The next step encourages the participant to quietly approach their new friend and ask it if now is a good time to spend with them, keeping in mind that they are in their friend's home. The participant is invited to notice the small, often overlooked, details on and around their new friend. While this step appears, on the surface, to be simple, it can be a very powerful way to begin a relationship that, hopefully, will lead to a deeper connection with both this new friend and the whole of natural world. For this step, the participant is invited to:

- Before doing anything, ask their new friend if they can sit with it;
- Reach out and touch the surface of their new friend and notice its texture, hardness and other sensations;

- Lean into their new friend and place their head on its surface to feel the energy passing between the participant and their friend; and
- Ask their friend about its life and family;

During this step, as well as all the following steps, the participant is encouraged to actively journal about their experiences, thoughts, and ideas. By writing in their journals, they can begin to explore their feelings about both their friend, its neighbours, and their own place within the whole of the natural world.

**Step Three – Meditation and Contemplation.** For this step the participant is invited to sit, either directly on the ground or in a camp chair, and to pay attention to their surroundings as well as themselves. Through this both inward and outward look, they will foster a deeper connection within the natural world as well as heal their mind and spirit. The first activity they are encouraged to engage in is to meditate next to or under their friend by slowly breathing in and out, paying attention to the sound and sensation of their breath. This is done to both slow the participant down and to help them focus inwardly.

Following this, and while still seated, the participant is invited to deeply listen to all the sounds around them, both natural and human made. They are encouraged to imagine how their friend and its neighbours are feeling about the sounds of human activity and their experiences have been with us. The main purpose of this step is to deepen their relationship with their friend by developing a sense of empathy with it by seeing the world through its eyes.

**Step Four – Activities.** The second last step is a list of activities for the participant use to explore the area around their friend through the use of different senses that will help them to understand their relationship with both the area and their friend. Participants are encouraged to,

not only try different activities during each outing, but to create now one of their own design that speaks to their own interests.

***Deliberate Walk.*** This activity involves the participant taking a slow and meandering walk through the trees or grasses, and using their sense of touch, smell, and taste, to experience the world deeper than through the exploration through sight alone. This activity is also a form of meditative walking with the participant focusing on their footsteps rather than their breathing. They are also encouraged to sense the ground pushing upwards against their steps.

***Giving Gifts.*** This activity invites the participant to give a gift from their house to their friend's house, such as an offering of seeds, nuts, or fruit (dried or fresh).

***Creating Gifts.*** This activity encourages the participant to create a gift for their friend's house, such as building a mandala or other piece of art.

***Accepting Gifts.*** The third activity in the trilogy involving gifts is for the participant to accept a gift from their friend or one of its neighbours; a gift from their house to the participant's. This offering can be in the form of branches or flowers for decoration or fruit, seeds, or nuts to eat. In all cases, they are encouraged to follow the *Honourable Harvest* practices of Kimmerer (2013)

***Creative Writing.*** This activity encourages the participant to move beyond descriptive text of place and features in their journals to exploring their emotions of their place and their friend. It involves seeing the world through their eyes and expressing it creatively, such as through a poem or short story. They are invited to either describe the world as seen through their friend's eye or it can be a message from their friend to only them or all of us. The point of this activity is to not only explore the world creatively as seen by their friend but have some fun; the end result is not the importance of it, the creative journey is.

***Capturing Images.*** The final activity for participant to choose from is the capturing of images of their friend and the world around in either a medium they are familiar with or one they have always wished to try. As with the creative writing, this is an invitation for the participant to play. Suggested mediums include:

- Photography,
- Sketching, such as pencil, colour pencil, pastel, or chalk,
- Painting, such as watercolour or acrylic, and
- Rubbing to capture the surface texture.

**Step Five – Gratitude.** This final step of the programme involves the participant saying good-bye, for now, to their new friend. They are encouraged to reflect on their new relationship and their deeper connection within the natural world as well as how grateful they are to have been able to spend time with a new friend and how grateful their friend is to have met them. As with any leaving, this a tender time for all and must not be rushed. The participant is invited to:

- Sit or stand with their friend and reflect on their relationship and how they and their friend feels;
- While tenderly touching their friend, thanking them for spending time with them and for sharing their house with them; and
- With a final “good-bye for now” slowly leave taking in the final sounds, sights, smells and feelings of their place, these are the memories they will carry with them on their journey home.

### ***Part 3 – Closing***

In the closing, the participants are reminded that a deep connection is not always felt with every outing, sometimes they may not be mentally or spiritually ready to connect at that moment,

and sometimes the rest of the natural world may not be receptive to connect with them at that time. They are encouraged not to give up, but to try again another day or location. This final part of the programme ends with a thought on the interconnectedness of the forest and a reminder that they are standing on an interconnected web, running through the soil and rocks, that links all the plants. By standing there, they are not casual observers of the forest, but are also part of the large and complex interconnected world; it is now part of them, and they are part of it.

### **Verification of the Self-Directed Programme**

At this point, I knew that the techniques in my self-directed programme fostered my deeper connection within the natural. However, would this experience transfer to others? To answer this question, three volunteers from the Ecology Action Centre in Halifax, Nova Scotia volunteered to trail the programme and provided feedback by answering seven questions, however, feedback was only received from one member. It is difficult to discern why only one participant responded. Perhaps the ban on outdoor travel early in the summer followed by a long rainy period dissuaded them from venturing out into a local nature area. Alternately, perhaps on viewing the self-directed programme they determined it was not what they were looking for. Either way, with no feedback, this is only speculation.

- Question 1 – What activities did you select or try and why?
- Question 2 – Describe your experiences with these activities.
- Question 3 – Is there anything you would do different if you tried this programme again in the future?
- Question 4 – Did you find this programme helped you to foster a deeper connection with nature? If so, how did this programme help?
- Question 5 - Would you recommend this programme to others? Why or why not?

- Question 6 – What improvements would you recommend to the programme?
- Question 7 – If you also attached some images/photographs, please briefly describe them.

### ***Activities Selected***

The participant chose a *Deliberate Walk* and *Capturing Images* as their activities to try during their outing. When reflecting on their deliberate walk, they reported that it “appealed to me because I thought I would meet other living things that are in community with the main tree I was connecting with”. They then discussed why they chose the activity of capturing images in that it “seemed familiar – I already like to take photographs...especially at the macro level”. They went on the comment that it “helps me to connect with small living things I wouldn’t usually notice”.

### ***Experiences with the Activities***

When reflecting on experiences while conducting their chosen activities, the participant commented that during their deliberate walk they had expanded their viewpoint of the surrounding community around their new friend in that they “met other living things during the deliberate walk, opening my mind to the community that my chosen tree likely connects with... allowed me to see my chosen tree from different angles”. Similarly, the activity of capturing images broadened their understanding of the whole ecosystem then they “took images of things living on the tree, giving me a better appreciation for the tree as its own ecosystem”.

### ***Fostering a Deeper Connection with Nature***

When reflecting on the self-directed programme as a whole, the participant commented that it “helped me to slow down, focus on one ‘individual’ tree, and contemplate their life in space and time”. They went on to contemplate if “we likely have some things in common”. They reported that it created a desire to get to know their new friend more by stating that the

experience “left me feeling curious to get to know them more”. Finally, they reflected that it “sparked thinking about the tree I was connecting with in new ways”.

### ***Programme Recommendation***

When reflecting on if they would recommend this programme to others, the participant stated that they believe it is “a good programme to help participants get to know a new-to-them place”. They further commented that it “could be used at summer camps, for people new to a city or neighbourhood, or for new residents at a long-term care home”.

### ***Recommended Improvements***

The participant suggested a number of improvements that can be made to future programmes. They believe that it might be helpful if the choice of location was more guided. While they liked the novelty of visiting a part of a familiar park that was new to them, and they posited that someone “might be delighted to connect on a new level to a particular spot at a familiar location”, they went on to argue that “another person might be turned off by going somewhere they don’t know or don’t feel safe, or a little bored by going to a familiar spot”. Another suggestion for improvement was to develop an activity sheet to prompt future participants to write/draw during the activities or to provide a prompt to write down questions/guidance in a journal before they head out.

### ***Images or Photographs Captured***

Finally, the participant included photographs they took around their friend, and all focused on the small and upclose details. They commented that the taking of the photographs “caused me to investigate the surface of my chosen tree more, and the ground around it”. They further commented that “I noticed things I hadn’t noticed in the deliberate, like slugs, mosses, seeds, pockets of water, cone bits, light+shadow, lichens, and fungi”.



### ***Conclusion From the Verification***

Although an unfortunately small sample size, the one participant who trialled the self-directed programme had similar experiences to mine when connecting with nature and thus confirms that those experiences were not unique to me. They reported that the programme helped to expand their viewpoint and helped them to see the whole system with and around their friend. As with me, the programme helped them to slow down and notice the small details that can be often missed. The more they explored, the more they discovered and this led to a feedback loop of curiosity. A recommendation that the programme would be useful for newcomers to an area to help them explore and connect with their new other-than-human neighbours is an aspect that I have not thought of and has much merit. Additionally, the idea of guidesheets would be useful in future, more expanded, versions of this programme. Finally, the idea of a more guided location would be useful if this was a part of a more structured programme, particularly a group programme, however a main tenant of this programme, as written, is that it is self-directed. Part of this self-direction is that the person explores an area that interests them and allows the site to emerge during the discovery of the area. I feel that too much structure at this point might not allow the participant to truly find a special place that really connects with them.

### **Conclusion**

I see our own connection with and within the natural world as being in keeping with that of the forest ecosystem with its complex and interconnected network. Wohlleben (2015) posits that forests are a social network, sharing their nutrients, especially with struggling organisms, and effectively communicating amongst each other. In her work, Simard (2021) argues that forests are cooperative creatures connected through an underground network that have agency over their own future. Finally, Sheldrake (2020) comments on the life of fungi in that the

mushrooms you see are “just the fruit” and that they are a part of a network support system sustaining other living systems. With a fresh perspective on the interconnectedness of our forest ecosystems, it is, therefore, important to enter within their world with respect and reverence if one is to develop the deep connection with nature we are trying to achieve.

Henry Thoreau (2022) summarized best how I perceive our relationship with the whole of nature as:

The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit - not a fossil earth, but a living earth; compared with whose great central life all animal and vegetable life is merely parasitic. (p. 307-308)

We are beginning to recognize the importance of developing a deeper connection with nature, not just for the natural world but also for our own well-being. CBC News (2022) reported how doctors in BC are now writing prescriptions for Parks Canada Discovery Passes and recommend spending at least two hours per week connecting with nature for 20 minutes or more per session, such as six 20 minute sessions per week. Recently, this has also expanded into the Maritimes (Smith, 2022). For the CBC radio show “White Coat – Black Art”, Zafar (2021) interviewed a member of a conservation group in Halifax who commented that being outside was therapeutic and that she often used it to offset feelings of eco-anxiety. In interviewing a counsellor from Dartmouth, she commented that “Getting out in nature – to hear, smell and feel everything it offers – also commands our five senses in a way built environments don’t”.

A deep connection with nature is vital, I believe, if we are to undergo the systemic change necessary to protect the natural world from ourselves. With this arts-influenced self-reflexive

phenomenological study, I explored and examined my own experiences connecting within the natural world in two aspects. Firstly, the self-reflexive study helped me to better understand the significance of these experiences and how I can develop a deeper connection within the natural world so that I can live more harmoniously within it. Secondly, it assisted me to create and trial a programme that will help others to develop their own deep connection within the natural world that will, hopefully, lead to them to develop strong (or stronger) pro-environmental attitudes that will drive the systemic change we need to help defend Gaia.

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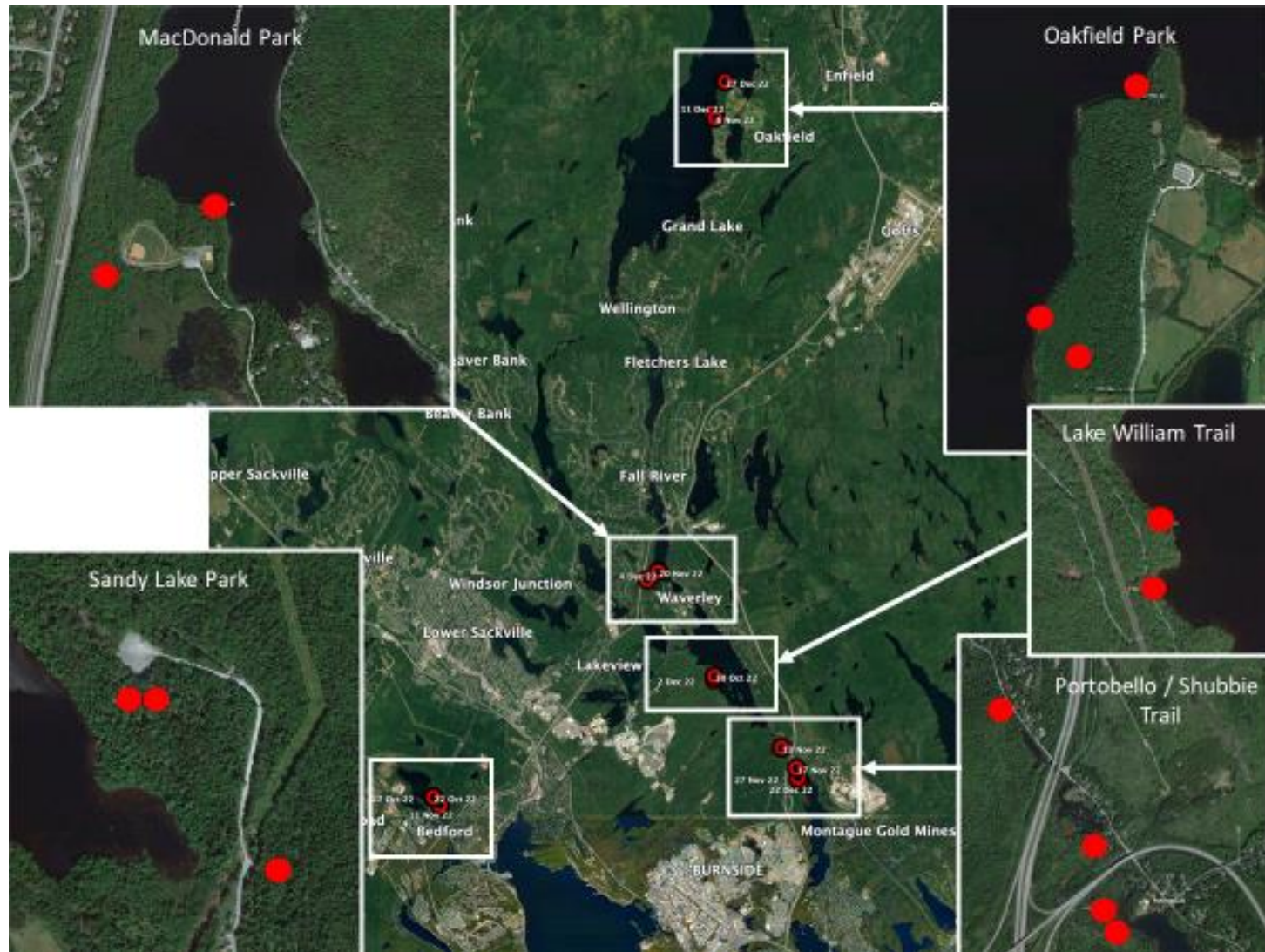
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## Appendix A

### Sampling Locations



## Appendix B

### Letter of Agreement

#### LETTER OF AGREEMENT

This agreement is entered into and effective as of the 27 day of March 2023 ("Effective Date") by and between Tim Wakfer, a Master of Arts candidate residing in Fall River, Nova Scotia ("RESEARCHER") and the Ecology Action Centre, a non-governmental organization with offices in Halifax, Nova Scotia ("AGENCY").

WHEREAS, the research collaboration contemplated by the Agreement is of mutual interest and benefit to the parties and will further the educational and research objectives of the RESEARCHER and the public outreach objectives of the AGENCY in a manner consistent with AGENCY's status as an environmental public educator within Nova Scotia.

NOW, THEREFORE, the parties agree as follows:

#### 1. STATEMENT OF WORK AND SUPERVISION

1.1 The RESEARCHER agrees to use its reasonable efforts to perform the research project ("Project") as set out in the Research Proposal titled "Connecting with Nature: A Journey to Find a Deeper Connection Within the Natural World" and within the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board clearance dated 17 February 2023.

1.2 The RESEARCHER's obligations as stated in Article 1.1 above shall be carried out under the supervision of Jason Young ([jason.young@royalroads.ca](mailto:jason.young@royalroads.ca)), an Associate Faculty member at Royal Roads University located in Victoria, British Columbia ("Supervisor").

#### 2. RESEARCH SUPPORT BY AGENCY

2.1 The AGENCY shall grant the RESEARCHER access to members of the AGENCY's "Wilderness Issues Committee" for the purpose of recruiting volunteer participation ("Participant") to review and evaluate a self-directed programme ("Programme") as developed by the RESEARCHER as part of the Project specified in Article 1.1 above.

#### 3. PERIOD OF PERFORMANCE

3.1 The Project will run from October 2022 until October 2023. Specific to this Agreement, the recruitment of participants will occur during May 2023 and the reviewing and evaluation of the Programme to be conducted at the participant's own pace during June 2023.

#### 4. CONFIDENTIALITY

4.1 The Participant's confidentiality will be safeguarded by having survey forms returned directly to the RESEARCHER attached to an e-mail. The RESEARCHER will download the survey form from the email and delete the original email from the Participant and the survey form will have no personal identifying information on it. FURTHERMORE, the RESEARCHER will use the Participant's information anonymously with no names or other identifying information being used in the Project's report or any further iterations of the Programme.

4.2 ADDITIONALLY, Participants are free to withdraw their consent to participate up to 1 July 2023. All information provided by a Participant who wishes to withdraw their consent will be deleted by the RESEARCHER and will not be used in the Project report or any further iterations of the Programme.

## 5. RESEARCH REPORT

5.1 A copy of the final report of the Project will be provided to the AGENCY and all participants by the RESEARCHER once it has been reviewed and approved by the Supervisor.

5.2 ADDITIONALLY, a presentation of a summary of the Project's report will be given by the RESEARCHER to the AGENCY's "Wilderness Issues Committee" at a date convenient to the committee.

## 6. PUBLICATION AND OTHER USE

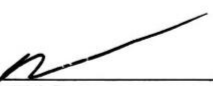
6.1 The AGENCY is free to use the Project's report, in whole or in part, for any internal or external use without further permission of the RESEARCHER. However, credit to the RESEARCHER must be included in any use of the report, both internal and external.

6.2 FURTHERMORE, the AGENCY is free to use the final iteration of the Programme, in all provided formats, for both internal and external education, public awareness and/or support to other agencies. This freedom of use of the Programme extends to any other organization that the AGENCY provides it to without any further permission of the RESEARCHER required. However, credit to the RESEARCHER must be included in any use of the Programme, both internal and external, by both the AGENCY and any other organization using it for education and public awareness.


6.3 HOWEVER, the freedom of use of both the Project's report and Programme does not extend to commercial use, in any form, of either without the express prior written permission of the RESEARCHER.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, signifying their acceptance of and agreement to be bound by the terms and conditions of this Agreement, the signatures of the parties are affixed hereto.

### RESEARCHER

Signature:   
 Name: Tim Wakfer  
 E-Mail: [tim@connectwithnature.ca](mailto:tim@connectwithnature.ca)  
 Date: 27 mar 23

### ECOLOGY ACTION CENTRE (AGENCY)

Signature:   
 Name: Marla MacLeod  
 E-Mail: [marla.macleod@ecologyaction.ca](mailto:marla.macleod@ecologyaction.ca)  
 Title: Director of Programs  
 Date: March 27, 2023

## Appendix C

### Invitation to Participate

[Date here]

Dear Wilderness Issues Committee Member,

I would like to invite you to be part of a research project that I am conducting. This project is part of the requirement for a Master of Arts in Environmental Education and Communication degree, at Royal Roads University. My name is Tim Wakfer and my credentials with Royal Roads University can be established by emailing the program head, Hilary Leighton, at [hilary.leighton@royalroads.ca](mailto:hilary.leighton@royalroads.ca) and this research project can be confirmed by emailing my academic supervisor, Jason Young, at [jason.9young@royalroads.ca](mailto:jason.9young@royalroads.ca)

The objective of my research project is to explore how a deeper connection with nature can be fostered so that we can enter into a relationship with nature based on caring and reciprocity. In addition to submitting my final report to Royal Roads University in partial fulfillment for a graduate degree, I will also be sharing my research findings with the Ecology Action Centre and it will be posted on the website [www.connectwithnature.ca](http://www.connectwithnature.ca)

My research will consist of self-reflective journaling and photography to help me to develop a self-directed programme for sharing with the Ecology Action Centre and it will be posted on the website [www.connectwithnature.ca](http://www.connectwithnature.ca). If you agree to participate, the trial is foreseen to last eleven months I will be asking your opinion on reviewing a proposed self-directed programme I have created, and then I will ask you to select a location of your choosing for you to trial some of the approaches from the existing programme for yourself, and provide your feedback to improve the programme before its revision and release. In addition to submitting my final report to Royal Roads University in partial fulfillment for a Master's Degree, I will also be sharing my research findings with the Ecology Action Centre and it will be posted on the website [www.connectwithnature.ca](http://www.connectwithnature.ca).

Your name was chosen as a prospective participant because of your membership on the Wilderness Issues Committee of the Ecology Action Centre with the assumption that you currently have a connection with the natural world that you may be interested in deepening. This study is voluntary and your participation is entirely up to you. There will be no incentives to participate in this study aside from the benefits of spending time in nature.

For more information, please review the detailed information outlined in the **Research Consent Form**.

If you would like to participate in my research project, please contact me at:

Name: Tim Wakfer

Email: [tim@connectwithnature.ca](mailto:tim@connectwithnature.ca)

Telephone: (782) 414-3900

Sincerely,  
Tim Wakfer



## Appendix D

### Consent Letter

#### RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

#### CONNECTING WITH NATURE: A JOURNEY TO FIND A DEEPER CONNECTION WITHIN THE NATURAL WORLD

My name is Tim Wakfer, and this research project is part of the requirement for a Master of Arts in Environmental Education and Communication program at Royal Roads University. My credentials with Royal Roads University can be established by emailing the program head, Hilary Leighton, at [hilary.leighton@royalroads.ca](mailto:hilary.leighton@royalroads.ca) and this research project can be confirmed by emailing my academic supervisor, Jason Young, at [jason.9young@royalroads.ca](mailto:jason.9young@royalroads.ca)

This document constitutes an agreement to participate in my research project, the objective of which is to explore how a deeper connection with nature can be fostered.

The research will consist of self-reflective journaling and photography to help me to develop a self-directed programme for sharing with the Ecology Action Centre and it will be posted on the website [www.connectwithnature.ca](http://www.connectwithnature.ca). If you agree to participate, the trial is foreseen to last eleven months I will be asking your opinion on reviewing a proposed self-directed programme I have created, and then I will ask you to select a location of your choosing for you to trial some of the approaches from the existing programme for yourself, and provide your feedback to improve the programme before its revision and release. In addition to submitting my final report to Royal Roads University in partial fulfillment for a Master's Degree, I will also be sharing my research findings with the Ecology Action Centre and it will be posted on the website [www.connectwithnature.ca](http://www.connectwithnature.ca).

Your feedback will be recorded on an electronic comment form returned by you and may, where appropriate be summarized, in an anonymous format, in the body of the final report. At no time will any specific comments be attributed to any individual and you will remain anonymous. Please note that your valuable ideas and opinions will appear in the report itself. However, any connection to your personal identity such as your name will strictly confidential. Results will be aggregated and no comments will be directly attributed to you. The comment forms, as well as any images or photographs you wish to share, will be returned directly to me, attached to an email, and kept confidential. Once received, the form and images will be stored in a password protected computer file as well as printed for analysis with pages kept in my locked home office. The original email will be deleted immediately after the form has been copied. Both the electronic and paper copy of the forms will be deleted following the research report being approved, estimated to be late August to early September 2023.

As you will be conducting the trial of the self-directed programme outside, there are potential risks of being outside such as exposure to heat or cold, insect bites, and slips and falls, however the risks are nothing outside of an everyday experience in nature.

A summary of the results of the research will also be presented to the Wilderness Issues Committee at the regular monthly meeting in the Fall of 2023 and will also be provided to you following this presentation.

You are not compelled to participate in this voluntary research project. If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without prejudice up and until 1 July 2023 by contacting me at [tim@connectwithnature.ca](mailto:tim@connectwithnature.ca). Similarly, if you choose not to participate in this research project, this information will also be maintained in confidence.

This research project has been approved by the RRU Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at [ethicalreview@royalroads.ca](mailto:ethicalreview@royalroads.ca).

By signing this letter, you give free and informed consent to participate in this project.

Name: (Please Print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Thank you for your time**

## Appendix E

### Survey Questions

#### Connecting with Nature: A Journey to Find a Deeper Connection Within the Natural World

#### Self-Directed Programme Review and Feedback Survey

#### Instructions

1. Review the program guide and accompanying video that outlines activities you may conduct while on the land.  
  
If you have any questions or are unsure about anything, contact me at [tim@connectwithnature.ca](mailto:tim@connectwithnature.ca) (All conversations between us will be in confidence).
2. Decide which activities you will conduct while in the field and plan what material you will need.  
  
Required items – Notebook and pen; and  
  
Optional items – blanket, yoga mat or chair to sit on, camera (or your smart phone), art supplies (e.g. water colour paints and brushes, pencils, coloured pencils, etc.), items for an offering (e.g. seeds, nuts, etc.).
3. Explore a location and find a comfortable spot, preferably away from people, that calls you.  
  
Plan on being at this spot for between 45 to 60 minutes.
4. Greet the location and ask permission to sit there<sup>1</sup>. If yes, get comfortable (If no, move to different location).
5. Try your chosen activities and make notes of your experiences (the notes are for you to help with your feedback survey later and are not to be shared with me).
6. Thank the spot for giving its time to spend with you and return home<sup>1</sup>.
7. Complete the feedback survey (Do not put your name anywhere on the feedback survey form)
8. Attach the completed form (and copies of any images / photos you wish to share – no faces or signatures that would identify you please) to an email and send it [tim@connectwithnature.ca](mailto:tim@connectwithnature.ca)

**Thank you for your time in trailing this self-directed programme  
and helping with my research**

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<sup>1</sup> This approach is based on the idea that all elements in the world are alive and animate. By asking the elements in your location, such as the trees, rocks, water and so on, permission before sitting with them, you are acknowledging this state and that you are entering into their home.



**Connecting with Nature:  
A Journey to Find a Deeper Connection Within the Natural World**

**Self-Directed Programme Review and Feedback Survey**

Type your feedback into the boxes below each question.

What activities did you select to try and why?

Describe your experiences with these activities.

Is there anything you would do different if you tried this programme again in the future?

Did you find this programme helped you to foster a deeper connection with nature? If so, how did this programme help?

Would you recommend this programme to others? Why or why not?

What improvements would you recommend to the programme?

If you also attached some images / photographs, please briefly describe them.

## **Appendix F**

### **Associated Knowledge Products**

The self-directed programme is developed in two formats, an e-book and a video.

#### **Self-Directed Programme E-Book**

The e-book, in PDF format, is contained on my website ([www.connectwithnature.ca](http://www.connectwithnature.ca)) at:

<https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/04366bcb-ca7e-4c86-ac58-b13d66b15d00/Connecting%20with%20nature-d534749.pdf>

#### **Self-Directed Programme Video**

The video is contained on my YouTube channel (Connect With Nature) at:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qlx\\_dMi0yMo&t=125s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qlx_dMi0yMo&t=125s)

## Appendix G

### Sample Photographs

Seeing my tree  
friends - My  
companions along  
my journey



Seeing the very small  
- Almost invisible  
and forgotten



Seeing the transitory



Seeing the other  
animates - Often  
overlooked

