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The joys of nature: A cultural mosaic

NINA S. ROBERTS



I was talking with a long-time friend recently about my varied research interests. Exploring cross-cultural experiences of parks and other outdoor recreation spaces has not only been a life passion, for over 20 years, it's also grown into a scholarly interest to study as well. When I noted examples of the social science aspect of what I do, she replied: "Oh, you mean like learning more about the work of John Muir?" I'll add this friend I referenced is an older white woman who loves the outdoors. I found myself withholding a knee-jerk reaction and instead replied respectfully, "No, like other pioneers and unsung heroes across race from different ethnicities and cultures who remain unknown or out of the spotlight until the recent past." I have read plenty of work from John Muir and am indisputably grateful for his historic contributions. Nonetheless, I explained to her both some of his controversial practices (which has led to debate whether he was a **racist** or an **admirer of Native Americans**) and my interest in understanding people's attitudes, experiences, and behaviors regarding their cultural background, upbringing, life influences, etc. Furthermore, to me, while I can shape-shift and reply as a person of color, from a woman's perspective, or based on middle-class upbringing, more often than not, the intersection of all these variables—and beyond—impact the holistic vantage point of my existence and, subsequently, connection to the joys of nature.

This edition of "Coloring Outside the Lines" focuses on "joy" with its expression relating to culture as inextricably linked. As I pondered what



Children playing in Eatonville, Florida, June 1935 | ALAN LOMAX / LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

to write about, I first swept through the titles found in this current issue of *Parks Stewardship Forum*. From nature as healing, and its restorative qualities, to justice in access to healthcare and parks as a vital community condition, the all-encompassing thread of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) is ubiquitous. My relationship to nature, like that of so many of us, began as a child. I built forts, climbed trees, rode my horse in the woods, chased tadpoles in the stream, and much more. My comfort, delight, and sheer awe in nature has transcended my multifaceted, mixed-race cultural background my entire life. As I grow older and wiser (so to speak!), I continue to seek so much from nature in addition to giving back through service and stewardship. I revel in the magic and mystery of our natural environment; and, in a world of Covid, finding safe ways to play, explore, and maintain my need for nature immersion has been paramount since the

beginning of this pandemic (e.g., Roberts & Hart 2020).

Why study impacts and benefits? Isn't it already clear?

Impacts and benefits of nature have been studied for decades. As the medical profession began to empirically test many claims, the world is becoming “woke” in new ways. While various studies have been implemented for quite some time, the park prescription movement within medicine has grown and gained momentum over the last decade (Uijtdewilligen et al. 2019). Research has resulted in fundamental outcomes such that many would question why we need to still study it. The restorative, healing powers of nature have been well documented for centuries. Use of the outdoors for recreation, education, adventure, and related activities sparked decades of research to understand all that, as well as

acknowledging such benefits as physical, social, cognitive/intellectual, mental, and emotional. I find joy in all those facets and, over the years, practiced them as well as paid it forward through taking groups across a range of demographics into the outdoors for a few hours or the backcountry on a multi-day adventure. For me, growing up in the **Christian Science** (CS) church, I knew from a young age I would experience a lifelong love with nature, as inseparable now as it was when I was climbing our family's apple tree. The fundamental healing tenets of CS rest on mind over matter and the belief in the power of prayer to heal and transform. My personal life has been a combination of Western medicine, CS prayer, and alternative healing practices (e.g., acupuncture, massage, herbal supplements, meditation). Subsequently, without nature as both the source of healing, and the outdoors as an environment of thorough enjoyment through activities I love, my heart and mind would not be as in sync as they are now. In many ways, I have reaped these multiple benefits through my travels to such places such as India, Singapore, the West Indies, and Costa Rica. Exploring and learning about such nature connections in other countries can be as powerful and precious as in my own backyard sanctuary.

Education programs, research, and the joys of learning about nature

Additionally, we see new programs and organizations sprouting up consistently across Blacks, Latinx, Asians, Muslims, and more (e.g., diversifyoutdoors.com). More recently, organizations and professional associations have begun to acknowledge their land's Indigenous history to fully remember whose land they occupy during their programs and events. There are multiple, respectful ways to achieve this (e.g., Hughes 2017) and readers are encouraged to learn, embrace, and practice them widely.

Learning as much as we can about the natural environment we're visiting is also important, as it is well known that when we appreciate something, we tend to take better care of it. Although that may be conveyed as a cliché, it is true. Therefore, the more people that experience the joys of nature





from whatever cultural vantage point they exude, the more our planet has a chance of being more resilient; climate change is a major case in point. In an interview, the forest scientist Suzanne Simard shares her story about her lifelong love and passion for trees and forest health, to which she has devoted her career. In closing the article, she notes: “There are no individuals. There aren’t even separate species. Everything in the forest is the forest” (Jabr 2020). How this can be interpreted, and by whom, would be multifaceted. I could resonate with her symbiotic relationship with the forest and all the analogies she provided that have meaning to my own life.

A practitioner at heart, social scientist by training, I continue to be enamored by the awe-inspiring qualities of the natural environment. I’ve explored the depths of the earth (e.g., rafting the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon) and observed the mountains from a mile above our planet’s surface as I took a leap of faith by sky diving. My desire to learn all I can about the natural wonders of the world brings me great joy, satisfaction, spiritual renewal, intellectual challenges, and more. Abrahamson (2014) summarizes “awe” as

what happens “when people encounter a vast and unexpected stimulus, something that makes them feel small and forces them to revise their mental models of what’s possible in the world.” This statement is brilliant, capturing a great deal of the human experience when immersed in nature.

While a large proportion of our global population indisputably cares about nature, if more people truly cared, our planet would not be in the dire straits that it is now. Environmental degradation persists, climate change is dramatic, species extinction occurs daily, biodiversity loss is perpetual, deforestation proceeds unjustified, air pollution goes unregulated, and food waste is preventable. The list goes on. In their study looking at whether immersion in nature can make us more caring, Weinstein, Przybylski, and Ryan (2009) revealed that participants exposed to nature valued intrinsic goals and aspirations more and extrinsic goals and aspirations less than they had before exposure. Furthermore, results suggest that immersion in nature can also influence life aspirations, promote stronger community identity, increase care for others and nature, and subsequently facilitate well-being.

Why does it matter?

Experiencing the joys of nature can make us less selfish, more caring, and more in tune with ourselves and others as well, as we make conscious choices to help steward the lands we've come to know, love, and appreciate as integral to our lives. If more people considered nature as intertwined with the very essence of their being, our planet would have more of a chance of survival. If more people would just hang out in the woods, stand still by a hillside, or face the ocean and listen to the crashing waves, there might be more joy-filled lifestyles and less violence and injustice. When we let nature enter our body through all five senses, both experiential learning and scientific validation will prove even your blood pressure can drop a couple of points! Because humans across cultures evolved from nature, we innately feel most comfortable there despite the fact many people just haven't discovered that yet. A feeling of greater comfort and joy can undeniably be attained if our rhythms are synchronized with those of the natural environment.

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The author enjoying a paddle with friends on Monterey Bay | M. SKY GRAY



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