

Is your practice nature connection or nature contact? And does it matter?

Forest School practitioner and trainer Louise Ambrose considers

You might be wondering, what's the difference?

Let me begin with a story of a timeless wander I had this summer with my 10 month old.

We were walking the footpaths near home, talking to the sheep and tasting the first blackberries of the season. We stood in awe for a long time at a butterfly-covered buddleia, marveling at the vivid colours of the red admirals and peacocks. We wondered whether when they were caterpillars they knew what they would become, grateful for their beauty.

A dog walker hurried past, smiled at us and called "Fidget" as her dog rushed up to greet us tail wagging.

As we continued we turned our heads skywards as we heard the buzzard's familiar call, tracking their spiral path through the sky. We were standing wondering what message the aspen's leaves were

sharing with the wind as two walkers marched past complete with rucksacks and poles. They nodded a quick 'hello'.

As we were thanking the mugwort for the few stems we were harvesting we heard a couple approaching, one of whom was on her phone to her grandson. They passed us not really noticing we were there.

I wondered if we might have become invisible and decided to test this notion.

We continued the homeward stretch of our journey as softly as we could. Carefully fox walking and stretching our senses out as far as possible. As we came to the edge of the village we surprised a green woodpecker on the lawn of one of the gardens. He took off, yaffling like laughter.

All the people in this story were outside in nature – we were all in contact, but not everyone was in connection.

So what is Nature Connection?

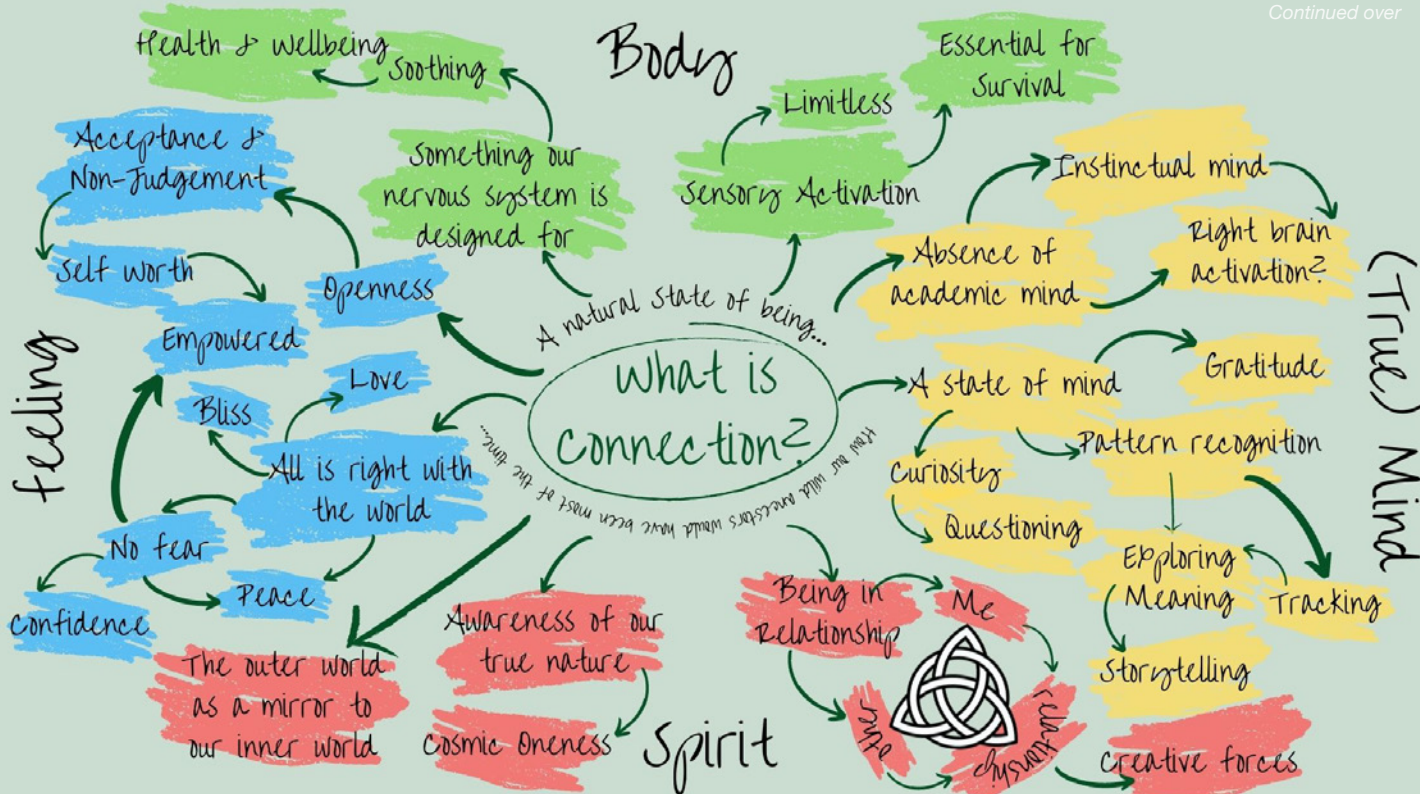
I've contemplated this for some time and mapped my thoughts. I believe that connection involves all aspects of the self; body, feelings, spirit and mind.

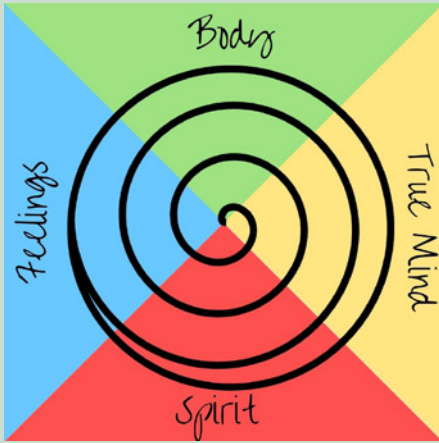
In contrast, nature contact may focus solely on the academic mind, in nature education for example and/or the body, as in outdoor recreation.

Rather than an 'either or' approach, I believe that nature contact and connection are on a spectrum. I visualise this as a spiral of ever expanding awareness as our self grows. Nature contact is at the centre, the beginning of that spiral and a much needed starting point for the journey.

Dr Miles Richardson and colleagues have discovered that although visiting nature once a week (contact) provides general health benefits, it is 'Nature Connectedness' that is associated

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with eudaemonic wellbeing (a sense that one's life has meaning and is worthwhile). Nature connection helps people to feel self-worth and find their purpose - aims also shared by the Forest School philosophy.

One of the six Forest School principles is:

Forest School takes place in a woodland or natural wooded environment to support the development of a relationship between the learner and the natural world.

The statement of 'relationship' between people and other parts of nature suggests to me that nature connection is core to this principle. A 'relationship' suggests much more than just passing through the woods like the people in the opening story.

Another of the principles says:

Forest School aims to promote the holistic development of all those involved...

As we've explored above, nature connection is an inherently holistic process, whereas nature contact usually has a focus on only one area of a person's growth. Connection promotes holistic development.



Louise Ambrose wants to live in a world where everyone is connected to nature; where people of all ages have muddy knees, twigs in their hair, woodsmoke infused clothes, a sparkle in their eyes and warmth in their heart.

She's worked as a Forest School practitioner with groups of all ages, coordinated Forest School development for a local authority and been a Forest School trainer for the last 15 years.

Currently she is enjoying being a mama and having a small human attached to her 24/7, which has enabled her to confront her luddite ways and create a YouTube channel [Forest School Lou](#) to share all things Forest School-sy.

Hopefully I have persuaded you that as Forest School practitioners part of our role is to facilitate connection and that just being outside isn't enough to become connected.

So how do we 'do' nature connection?

As with most things at Forest School, it starts with us. If we want to support nature connection we must be connected ourselves. We will then model practices and behaviours unconsciously as well as consciously as the threads of connection weave their way through us.

One of the challenges we face is that we live in a modern, consumeristic society which does its best to disconnect us - from nature, each other and ourselves. It can be difficult to 'do' connection when other people are looking at us funny.

We need to create a culture of connection - to nature, to each other, to ourselves. Forest School can be an opportunity to create such a container.

Mentor, storyteller, and naturalist Jon Young has spent 40 years trying to figure out why some cultures are more nature connected than others. Spending time with indigenous peoples from across the globe he has repeatedly observed connective practices which he has collated into a map of universal truths and wisdom, referred to as the 8 Shields model. This model holds cultural elements which can be used to repair disconnected cultures. His book *Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature* provides a great overview of the model and how it can be used to create nature connective experiences for all ages.

One of the layers of the model is the

Attributes of Connection, observable qualities that are expressed by a person when they are in a state of connection (see diagram below). We can use these indicators to help us recognize when we (or anyone else) is in connection.

Consider these eight attributes and their significance to an individual's life. Perhaps this is why Dr Richardson found that Nature Connectedness correlated with eudaemonic wellbeing?

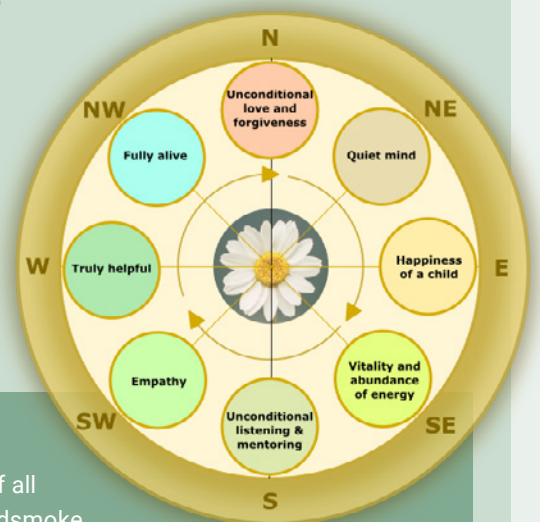
I invite you to reflect on your own connection with nature - how often do you exhibit any of these attributes? How often do you see them in others?

Now take a step back and imagine a culture (or a world!) filled with people expressing these qualities. Imagine growing up in such a culture. Forest School could be that culture if we expand our own spiral from nature contact to nature connection.

References

Miles Richardson blog: [Beyond Nature Contact to Connection: A Missing Link in a Sustainable & Worthwhile Life](#)

Jon Young - [Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature](#)



7 ways to deepen your connection with nature

1 Visit a 'Sit Spot'

Find a place in nature which you can visit regularly, ideally every day. It could even be in your garden. Try to spend at least 20 minutes there (but even 5 minutes is better than nothing!). With regular visits, the unseen world of nature will slowly reveal itself to you.

2 Share your 'Stories'

Find at least one person to recount your adventures in nature to (and perhaps hear theirs in return). Be selective, it can be disheartening to share a story with someone who isn't interested or who doesn't believe you. Tell your stories recalling as much detail as possible.

3 Activate your Senses

Whilst in your sit spot or whilst wandering bring your awareness to the current moment. Become present by focusing on your senses. Consciously notice all of life around you; the sights, sounds, smells, textures and tastes. Try to accept the sensory information you are receiving without judgement and without naming things. Appreciate the moment.

4 Practice Gratitude

Being in a state of gratitude changes our energy so we are perceived as less of a threat. It is also great for our mental health. It doesn't matter what you are grateful for, just that you are grateful!

5 Be in a 'Beginner's Mind'

Try to encounter things as if you are experiencing them for the first time. Take time to explore and discover. Be curious, ask questions, see where things lead. When you return indoors, use books or online resources to investigate things more deeply.

6 Try a 'Timeless Wander'

If you have some free time, go on a walk in nature with no set destination or duration. Wander whichever path feels right to you to explore. Tune in to your body by activating your senses and see what direction it wants to take you in. Initially this is best done in a place which you know well so you don't get lost!

7 Notice 'bird language'

Birds are the messengers of nature. Just like us, they have different tones to their voices to communicate different things. With practice, listening to the birds will tell you what is going on all around you.

