

LAST WORDS

BANANA SLUGS, TRIP ROOTS AND MUD HOLES

Katharine Byers and her family grow and learn while hiking the West Coast of Vancouver Island, Canada

Getting outside and connecting with nature can mean many things.... enjoying a walk in your local park, exploring a nature reserve or embarking on a back garden bug hunt. Nature is our first window into wonder. But, as adults, it often takes a simple walk in nature with a child to remind us of the marvels of the natural world. In the words of Rachel Carson, *'If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in.'*

As a parent and environmental educator I am increasingly aware of the need to offer adventures in nature to my two energetic and curious young sons. They love to spend time on the beach skipping stones, building towers out of pebbles and forts out of driftwood. They also love climbing trees and hiking our many local trails. The boys' enthusiasm for a more challenging hike led us to the Juan de Fuca Trail on the west coast of Vancouver Island, Canada last summer.

Every damp fern, banana slug, tree root ('trip root') and mud hole was encountered up close and personal. The boys were in their element, laughing, learning, living life to the maximum – and not once complaining about the hours spent on a narrow, muddy, hilly trail! Nature was challenging them, and they rose to the challenge.

Although these magical memories were created on a five-day backpacking hike, memorable moments in nature don't just happen on vacation to faraway places. They happen every day, in our own back gardens, parks and neighbourhoods.



HERE ARE SOME OF THE THINGS THEY DISCOVERED:

1. You can still raise a camp fire after a day of rain as long as you have the dry index pages of an accompanying book.
2. Talking with each other as you walk through the forest seems to keep the cougars and bears away!
3. Drying socks too close to the campfire cooks them to a crisp so that they fall apart when you try to put them on.
4. Boulders on beaches are to be climbed and conquered, no matter how tall.
5. Racing sticks down creeks is a fun lesson in hydrodynamics.
6. Counting centipedes crawling across the trail helps take your mind off the distance.
7. Cold filtered water straight from a creek tastes soooooo good.
8. Mud can suck your shoe right off – unless you tie the laces tight.
9. You can identify a bear's most recent meal by scrutinising his poo – lots of grass in this case!
10. Orcas don't lift their tails out of the water but grey whales do.
11. Tree roots come in all sorts, shapes and sizes – trip roots, slip roots and grab-your-boot-lace roots.
12. A six- and an eight-year-old can hike 30 miles of difficult-rated backcountry trail, camp on wild beaches, cook over a campfire – and have loads of fun while doing so!

There are many reasons why connecting children to nature was extensively researched by the American journalist Richard Louv in his book *Last Child in the Woods*; *Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*. Following his interviews with child-development researchers, environmentalists, parents, children, college students, teachers and scientists, Louv concluded that baby boomers are probably the last generation to have 'run wild in the woods, freely explored the nearby creek bed, or built dens and tree houses in nearby vacant lots.' With few exceptions, generations since have been constrained and contained in comparison, with little or no direct experience of the natural world.

It is our responsibility as parents to provide opportunities for those outdoor experiences and share them with our children. In doing so, we are enabling our children to develop an interest in and understanding of the natural world. This is key to ensuring that stewardship of our natural environment is carried forward into future generations.

Louv also concluded that 'early nature experiences are essential if we are to produce tomorrow's creative thinkers and change agents.' He cites biographical experiences of the 'famously creative', showing the influence of nature on their creative passions. Among this list are the names of TS Eliot, Jane Goodall, Thomas Edison, Beatrix Potter and John Muir. 'Nature offers a well from which many, famous or not, draw a creative sense of pattern and connection... Nature is imperfectly perfect, filled with loose parts and possibilities, with mud and dust, nettles and sky, transcendent hands-on moments and skinned knees.'

Add to that list banana slugs and star-filled skies if you find yourself on the Juan de Fuca Trail. And in the meantime get your boots in the bushes and remind yourself of the wonders of our natural world, wherever you find them – close to home or further afield.

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