

Conservation Corner:

Nature: Medicine For What Ails You

By Niki Wilson



A few months ago, while working in San Francisco, I received a distressing phone call from my 12-year-old son back in Jasper. He had been sorting through difficult friendships and dealing with bullies, and it had finally come to a head. He was sobbing — the kind of crying that flows uncontrollably from deep despair. I felt helpless as I huddled in the doorway of a candy shop, trying to comfort him from thousands of kilometres away.

I went through something similar when I was his age. My parents had my back and were a tremendous support when I felt lost. One of the things we did regularly as a family was go on “adventures.” Sometimes this meant bushwhacking through tick-infested brush on our way to find a slab of limestone filled with the shells of long-past Devonian creatures. Sometimes my dad had last visited these places when he was young. “They’re around here somewhere,” he would say... sometimes more than once.

These are some of my most vivid memories. There is something magical about turning a fossilized shell over in your hand, knowing it was alive almost 400 million years ago. It lived in the shallow seas that once covered this land, long before humans existed, and certainly long before bullies cussed at kids in grade six.

After a day out adventuring I felt calmer, better. Maybe this came from exploring nature in the relative safety of my family (with the exception of some of the sketchy descents down steep slopes Dad!). Perhaps it came from the perspective I gained from learning we are a small part of a much larg-

er world and timeline. Regardless, being in nature was key.

Today the health effects of contact with nature is a hot topic of study. Evidence that links time outside with improved wellbeing is growing. Even visits to city green spaces are linked to lower rates of depression and high blood pressure. Nature is associated more and more with healthier immune systems. The list of purported health benefits is long, touching on everything from a decrease in acute migraines, to a decrease in urinary tract infections.

Some researchers are even trying to determine what minimum “dose” of nature is required for better health. Folks, this is where

we are at: prescribing nature like a drug to reconnect ourselves to the behavioural medicine that is coded in our DNA. It’s a good thing to understand. Though I suspect many readers of this magazine intrinsically understand the value of time in the wild, by quantifying the benefits (especially as opposed to the health care costs), conservationists can make a clearer, more powerful case for the conservation of green spaces and nature in general.

Given my recent adventures in parenting, I wonder if it is as important as ever to ensure kids have access to these nature-related health benefits. Every generation has their challenges, but these days the siren



Dylan and his cousin head out to explore Jasper Lake. PHOTO: © N. WILSON

call of video games and beckoning of the Truman Show-reality of social media are easier and more convenient escapes from their troubles and anxieties. It's not all bad, but there is a big difference in our son after an hour of online gaming versus an hour in the bush.

I get it. After a day of researching something like the effects of climate change, sitting down to watch an hour of begetting and beheading on Netflix is a welcome distraction. But it never makes me feel as good as running my hand over a bed of Calypso Orchids that have freshly thrust themselves out of the ground.

After I arrived home from San Francisco, my husband and I took a few moments to slow down and have a hard look at what else we could do to help our son through his difficult time. It is particularly heart wrenching to realize that part of the solution is simply the passage of time, and his learning to navigate the social minefield of tweendom.

However, among other things we've decided to spend a little more time in nature on a daily basis. We are prescribing ourselves at least a few outings a week. While we are good at making big outdoor plans on the weekend, the daily interaction with bees and woodpeckers is some-

times supplanted by soccer, Aikido, and homework. A quick nibble on the toe by a curious lake chub won't alleviate all the pressures at school, but it might provide a little joy, calm, and perspective to help offset these harder times. That... and hugs. Here's hoping. 🐻



Dylan and his dad, Geoff Skinner, ham it up on top of Old Fort Point, Jasper National Park.
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