

# nature connection workbook

**explore.  
connect.  
reflect.**



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# nature connection

## what is it?

Nature connection is **any activity that gets you closer and more tuned in to the natural environment.** It's respectful of the earth. It's intentional and purposeful yet open and unconfined. For some, it's completely secular or scientific, while for others, it's deeply spiritual; many people, like myself, fall somewhere in the middle of this spectrum.

When you have a nature connection practice, you are engaging in nature connection activities regularly over time. In this workbook, however, you may see "nature connection," "activity," and "practice" used interchangeably. That's because this book is designed to be a tool for you to use again and again as you discover which activities resonate with you, and a supportive companion as you develop your own practice.

## what can it do for me?

Nature connection is essential to Homo sapiens. We arose from nature and are still a part of it, despite what some aspects of modern society would have us believe. This is something millions of individuals (and many entire cultures) already know logically and feel in our bones: **we need time in green spaces, and commuting with nature on a regular basis is good for us.** As more funding is allocated for positive psychology and similar fields, however, science is catching up, supporting with formal studies the claim that nature connection nurtures healthy humans.

A few specific evidence-based benefits:

- green environments promote creativity
- forest-bathing and park prescriptions can reduce stress
- urban parks could mean healthier hearts



notes:

## getting started

## safety and preparation

When deciding on an outing, no matter how brief or straightforward it may seem, **always plan ahead:**

- Determine when, where, and for how long you'll go.
- Tell someone you trust when you're leaving and when you expect to return.
- Decide what you need to wear and pack according to the weather forecast and how it might change, climate, terrain, season, etc.
- Do your research. Brief yourself on potential hazards specific to the area, like flash flooding and poison ivy.
- Review the rest of the guidelines in this workbook, and do further digging if you have questions.

Beginning your own practice is easy, can be done any time (including right away), and doesn't cost a dime. **All you need is some form of green space.** This could be anything from a vast remote wilderness to a postage-stamp backyard, apartment complex or workplace courtyard, urban park, or even a plant-covered porch. While the following recommendations may not apply to those last couple examples, you should consider these guidelines when planning any outdoor recreation or nature connection outing.



## my questions:

## leave no trace

[the 7 principles](#)

Leave No Trace means that **when we explore the outdoors, we leave no trace of our having been there.** A common adage is, "Take only pictures; leave only footprints." Originally conceived of for backcountry travel, the 7 principles are well-established yet ever-evolving and have been adapted for urban parks and most outdoor activities.

1. Plan ahead and prepare
2. Travel and camp on durable surfaces
3. Dispose of waste properly
4. Leave what you find
5. Minimize campfire impacts
6. Respect wildlife
7. Be considerate of other visitors

These principles are helpful guidelines and provide a valuable ethical framework as more and more people get outside, but as you'll see, they are but one way to view environmental stewardship and navigate our relationship with nature.

We're accustomed to reciprocity with each other, right? We give gifts, lend a hand, listen to our loved ones. We give back to communities we're a part of. But how often do we engage in reciprocity with the natural world? We can learn a lot from indigenous teachings when it comes to giving back to nature. One example is that when harvesting from the wild, someone will offer a sip of water, a strand of hair, a pinch of tobacco, or something else to the plant in return.

Even if we're not foraging on our outings, we are undoubtedly gaining something, whether it's peace, a thrilling sense of being alive, calm clarity, or another gift. So, it can be an enlightening and fulfilling experience to give back to the land you're connecting to. Personally, I like to practice wildtending with LNT principles in mind. Here are some offering ideas: sing or play a song, give water, or remove invasive plants to make room for native ones. As you develop your NC practice, educate yourself to avoid cultural appropriation, and form your own opinions around reciprocity, wildtending, and LNT.

In her both timely and timeless book Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants, Robin Wall Kimmerer explains reciprocity in many poetic ways, but one of them segues nicely into our next discussion, on mindfulness: **"Paying attention is a form of reciprocity with the living world, receiving the gifts with open eyes and open heart."**





## intro to mindfulness

What we call "mindfulness" today has an ancient, complex, and storied history, the details of which are beyond the scope of this resource. It is important to acknowledge its roots, however, which lie in Zen Buddhism and modern Vipassana. Training sati, AKA "moment to moment awareness of present events", and "remembering to be aware of something," is integral.

### ideas:

Broadly, today's mindfulness practices are centered around a deceptively simple act: **focusing attention on sensations and thoughts without judgement or attachment.**

While the scientific jury is still out on some claims, a 2014 [meta-analysis](#) found "moderate evidence that meditation reduces anxiety, depression, and pain." Further [research](#) is underway and needs to be conducted, but practitioners have touted the benefits of mindfulness meditation for millennia.



## additions:

# what to bring gear

**Use this packing list as a starting point.** Adjust as necessary based on the details of your excursion:

- Outdoor essentials: plenty of water (a 3-liter hydration bladder is great), snacks, sunscreen, a first aid kit including bandages and mole skin for blisters
- Trip plan (tell someone where you're going + how long you'll be gone.)
- A charged phone
- A pocket-sized survival guide or survival bandana
- Warm layers (no cotton), even if it's summer
- Hiking necessities: sturdy trail shoes or hiking boots
- UV-protective shades or hat
- A physical trail map
- Insect repellent like Picaridin, which is at least as effective as DEET without the same risks
- Socks made of moisture-wicking material such as wool
- Headlamp (yes, even for a day hike: you always want to prepare for spending the night just in case)
- Optional: trekking poles (or trailside hiking stick), swimwear if desired



## connection tools

**Depending on your practices, you may want to also bring:**

- A jeweler's loupe or hand lens for examining tiny plants and other curious things
- Notebook and pen
- Sketchbook and drawing supplies for sketching or leaf/bark rubbings
- Camera
- Towel, mat, or compact cushion to sit on
- Musical instrument

# what I'm grateful for:

## practices



Go outside and sit with a plant or energy (sunshine, for example) that has somehow contributed to your well-being. Sit quietly. Close your eyes.

Focus on sensations: feel the sunlight on your skin or the texture of the leaf on your fingertips. Then, explore what that being brings into your life, not only contemplating, but also visualizing the sunlight traveling ~93 million miles through space to reach our atmosphere...

See it being absorbed by plants and turned into sugars... See those sugars growing from tender shoots into nutritious leaves and stems... See the sunshine making its way to your plate, your stomach, transformed.

**Feel the gratitude wash over you.** Give thanks and rise with new eyes for these incredible gifts.

The following practices are meant to **facilitate awareness and connection to nature in exciting, deeply intentional ways** which could lead to beautiful discoveries, powerful realizations, or simply a few welcome, relaxing moments.



places to practice  
these:



## observations:

### 4 senses

In an area that draws you in or invigorates you, **ignite your senses of sight, hearing, touch, and smell.**

- What are 5 things you see?
- What are 3 things you hear?
- What are 2 things you can touch? (Use caution; know how to identify potentially toxic plants.)
- What is 1 thing you can smell?

Challenge yourself to repeat this exercise, but close your eyes and omit sight. Did you notice anything different through the other senses?

### eco-journaling

Use your own journal or the pages provided at the end of this workbook.

Find a calming, welcoming place to sit. Greet the beyond-human beings around you. Begin with a simple mindfulness meditation: With eyes closed if possible, visualize yourself extending roots into the earth. Focus on physical sensations (your sit bones, shadows playing across your eyelids, the warmth of sun).

Then, zoom out: what do you hear, feel beyond immediate surroundings? Now, think about this season. What does (spring, fall, summer, winter) mean to you? **Set an intention for today in the spirit of the season:** it can be as simple as one word: renewal, nourishment, expansion, rest, etc.

Use one or more of these prompts during your journaling session:

1. Focus on and free-write about one nature item you're drawn to, like a seed, tangled roots, or interesting rock.
2. Observe two or more beings interacting. What messages or metaphors do they have for your own life?
3. If near a water body, dip your fingers into the water and drip it along a fresh page. Let the water guide and inspire your pen.
4. If experiencing writer's block, simply write "I am open to receive" over and over, or, draw a tight spiral from the center of the page outward until a thought enters your consciousness.

Close your session by thanking the organisms and elements around you.



## things to sketch:

### field sketching

You might think, "**But I'm not creative!**" Know this: You do not have to consider yourself an artist in order to carefully study a scene and do your best to capture it. However, I challenge you to entertain the idea that you **ARE** creative. (We all are.)

1. Choose the view or natural item to sketch. If something complex like a landscape intimidates, experiment first on one item, like a leaf or stone.
2. Lightly and in pencil, divide page into 4 quadrants.
3. Trace the basic outline of your background and foreground, or the outline of the item.
4. Fill in next-level details with the shapes of the main features.
5. Add labels (stem, petals, etc.)
6. Optionally, record the date, weather, perspective, and any other relevant details which will help you remember this moment.

### places to explore:

## mindful hike or run

**Before you embark, pause at the beginning of your route to breathe deeply for 1-2 minutes as you perform a body scan:**

From the crown of your head to your pinky toes, slowly mentally scan your body. Try to suspend any judgement; just note where there is ease and relaxation, where there is tension or pain.

Set an intention for your hike or run. Some ideas: To notice something new in a familiar place. To focus on my breath the entire time. To re-focus on feelings and sensations whenever I notice I'm lost in thought. Or, it could be as simple as one word: Awareness. Grace. Gratitude. Acceptance, and so on. Pause at the end of your hike or run and check in with another full body scan. What, if anything, changed?



# want some guidance?

As you begin your own powerful nature practice, it can be helpful to have a guide along the way to help you set intentions, examine and integrate your experience, and just bounce ideas off of.

**The path home is ever-evolving and never-ending,  
and that's the beauty of it.**

I've been on my own nature reconnection journey my entire life, but I've been walking with others on theirs for years, too. I'd be delighted to walk (or hike, or sit) with you on your trail to reconnection, re-centering, regeneration.

I facilitate small-group and one-on-one **mindful eco-adventures** combining art and adventure with ecology and mindfulness in varying degrees, depending on your desires.

Visit [nataliestickel.com](http://nataliestickel.com) for more information about workshops and free meet-ups in the Richmond, VA, area.



# acknowledgements + further reading

No matter where I am on the path, it's important to name and thank those who came before me and blazed the trail.

While not an exhaustive list (I could fill a book), the following folx, works, and organizations have had an impact on me and my work through their example or guidance.

## Books

Robin Wall Kimmerer's **Braiding Sweetgrass**

Neal Shirley and Saralee Stafford's **Dixie Be Damned**

Rachel Carson's **Silent Spring** and **The Sea Around Us**

**A Line in the Tar Sands**, edited by Stephen D'Arcy, Toban Black, Tony Weis, and Joshua Kahn Russell

Joanna Macy and Molly Brown's **Coming Back to Life**

## Individuals

Vanessa B. - Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz - Kelly M.

Lyla June - Dr. Sylvia Earle - Rachel Cargle - Bobby Whitescarver

My parents, grandparents, ancestors

## More

Holy River

The Earthbody Institute

Juliet Blanckespoor of Chestnut School of Herbal Medicine

Laura Baum of Laura's Botanicals

Countless other named and unnamed, human and beyond-human

teachers

Planet Earth



eco-journaling space

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# field sketch

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questions or concerns i still have:

send them to  
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