

The Nest

I explored human connection with land with my research and my art. I researched both the way we interact with nature environmentally, as well as how humans foster personal and collective connections to land. The concept of human's interactions and relationships with nature changes with time and my connection with nature continues to shift and evolve as I grow. I became interested in the homes we create for ourselves within nature. I chose to build a nest using only natural materials found within a half mile radius of my home here at the Oxbow School in an attempt to connect with materials I am surrounded by. I thought about how humans consider themselves separate from nature, yet we depend on it for everything that keeps us alive. The processes which sustain us, particularly in our food systems are often ones we have no personal experience or connection to. I realized that even though I try not to, I participate in this practice of disconnection from my food. Even though I eat chicken, I had never killed a chicken. I decided to use this project as an opportunity to experience something I had no real way to fully understand, I decided to slaughter a chicken. I learned about life and what it means to take a life. I realized that we don't view animals as animals anymore once they're dead we view them as things. I found that people are disgusted with the idea of killing an animal, yet they are okay giving someone else the job. This project made me recognize the scale of the disconnection humans have to the resources we are using, and the importance of reconnecting to what sustains us. I believe if more people were exposed to ways of surviving from nature in a sustainable manner, our society would function far better. My piece evokes ideas about a true self-sustaining home, and a deep connection and understanding of one's surroundings.

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Concepts Of Home And Nature Exposure

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The pull of nature has drawn me to it nearly my whole life. I grew up with a five acre backyard, just a relatively small taste of the expansive wild that exists in the world, but enough to build my love for nature and keep me a part of it forever. I can't imagine what I would be like today if I had not had that backyard, if I didn't have the ocean to swim in, and endless trees to climb. I cannot imagine my life without countless bee stings, fresh fruit, and the long hikes which taught me what I am capable of. I'm filled with a feeling of deep gratitude to have been able to grow in this world, to look at nature without fear. I find myself having a tie to the land I grew up on, to the plants I find familiar. I have learned so much from the earth I have been surrounded by and developed my world view through my exploration of nature. As I grew I learned the most from people who had a connection to nature. I found myself eager to learn from them, wanting more and more knowledge to be passed on to me.

The power of nature education has not only helped me understand why respecting the earth is important, but has also helped me become a healthier and more content person. When I started high school I was in a really bad place mentally; I spent the majority of my time inside in my room feeling awful and purposeless. I couldn't really focus on anything without breaking down and isolating myself. I was having a panic attack every other day and all I wanted was to die. I didn't really care about myself or the world and I didn't feel a part of it. My sophomore year I took biology, and there was a gardening unit involved. I didn't believe I could keep anything alive but I was really excited to try. I really loved the small garden I made and taking care of it taught me how to take care of myself. I was still in a difficult place mentally but it taught me so much. I later joined the eco-action club at my school and worked on the small garden there which completely changed how I view myself and the world. I learned about food systems, soil health, decomposition while simultaneously learning how to take care of myself, what I'm capable of, and that I can create good in the world. Because of my exposure to the land through the club at my school, I became interested in traditional land practices. I learned about Native Americans using land burning as a technique to create a healthier and more bountiful ecosystem at a talk I went to with my eco club. Learning about practices like these taught me that a healthy relationship with the earth is tangible and achievable. It taught me how important taking care of the earth is. I am so lucky to have had that club, but the things I learned there should've been applied to my general education in my school. The practices and concepts that furthered my connection to the environment and brought me a sense of understanding, commitment and responsibility should be integrated into public education so others can have this experience.

Providing learning opportunities in nature and connecting to the land benefits not only children, but whole communities. People need to have this chance to connect with the land in order to care what happens to it. I came to the conclusion that we need to engage in traditional cultural practices and connect to collective histories in order to create a better experience and life for ourselves as well as the earth. The style of education used in various folk schools to teach and appreciate folk practices should be integrated into public education, in order to promote environmental awareness, provide a valuable skill set, and to create a connection with and understanding of the land. Geopoetics and a grander sense of community should have a chance in the spotlight in our education system as well.

In my research of the connection one feels to nature through exposure to traditional cultural practices, I found one concept to come up again and again. The idea of *communitas*, which is defined by anthropologist and author Edith Turner as "the very foundation of community, of living together" and as a "collective joy" experienced across and within a group of people or a community. This word is also associated with rites of passage and communicates a collective

experience. This brought me to the idea of what experiences and places in nature are collective and what connects people to one another. Location most often has deep cultural ties to it, and the people who are connected to closer to these cultural roots often better understand the earth, and the need to respect it. Turner emphasizes the importance of *communitas*, as well as approaching our earth and culture with *conviviality*, which denotes the quality of being friendly and lively, Turner writes that it is “the very foundation of community, of living together”, saying “it is more necessary than ever that we gather together and explore how to live on this earth in more hopeful, joyful, and life giving ways.”

There is so much beauty in the cultural ties humans feel towards land. Geopoetics focuses on literature written about land. Dances are performed, songs are written, and art is created based on land. Humans throughout history have felt connected to and inspired by the earth, and have wanted to celebrate it through their own culture. In industrializing and moving into the modern world, we moved away from this idea of cultural connection to the land and we lost our understanding of the earth in many ways. Mairi McFadyen, a writer and ethnologist with a PhD in ethnology explores these topics in depth on her blog, writing of her experience with Scottish practices and culture. She explores the concept of geopoetics and the deep connection one can forge with a piece of land. Her work stresses the importance of collectively creating a “culture of possibility”, as she calls it, and a deep “togetherness”.

Geopoetics is a sense of geographical consciousness, a connection with a geographical location. Art pieces made about the land as well and traditional practices are both a result of and influential to geopoetics. An intimacy and deep connection to the land are explored in geopoetics. A medium is formed through this concept to understand and appreciate the relationship between man and earth. This concept is important to celebrate and spread a bond to the land and to appreciating and valuing it.

One example of cultural education system is The Shieling Project. The project is located in the highlands of Scotland and aims to teach heritage and sustainability. It is accredited by the General Teaching Council for Scotland, and provides young people the opportunity to learn traditional and modern skills such as peat cutting, sustainable building, and tree planting in addition to tasks like basket making and learning Gaelic work songs. As McFadyen writes, the project’s goal is to combat “ecological degradation, alienation and loss of meaning”, by teaching children traditional practices and appreciation for the land that support their livelihood. This project exemplifies the idea of folkskill education. In teaching these tradition skills in an environmental setting, the kids not only learn the physical skills, but also the importance of preservation and conservation of the earth and of cultural practices.

Several full time schools prosper as well, providing outdoor education starting as young as preschool. The Nature Preschool at Irvine Nature Center encourages children to adventure and connect with 200 acres of wilderness in Maryland that becomes a part of the school’s campus. The educators working at the Nature Preschool emphasize that school should not be boring. Learning should be exciting and immersive, and nature provides this among so many other important values. Schools like these are mainly private or charter. There is a large price to pay for this type of education, but there shouldn’t be. The values and practices schools like these encapsulate should be integrated into public schools, to create access and equality in this extremely beneficial form of education.

Schools like these exist and prosper all around the world, communicating ideas of deep rooted tradition and a connection to the land. The teaching of these traditional practices is integrated with a closeness to the land, they exist in a mutually beneficial relationship. The land

provides beauty, sustenance, and ultimately yields the means for life, while these practices pay homage to the land and demonstrate the immense value in protecting the earth. In this immensely industrial world, creating a space for deeper understanding and appreciation of nature is vital.

I found through my research that the concept of land ownership plays into cultural identity and ownership can come in many forms. The legally binding ownership to land that we see today often overwhelms the important concept that land is culturally owned. Lucy R. Lippard explores this idea in her book *The Lure of the Local*. She writes of how she asked twenty university students to name a place where they felt they truly belonged, and while most could not, two Navajo students and one who had grown up on one farm his entire life could, and felt this sense of belonging strongly. This demonstrates that having a deep connection to the earth creates a sense of belonging and that those who are connected to it are positively impacted by it. Providing systems of education where people have the opportunity to relearn cultural practices and develop an earth based skillset can create this sense of belonging. Through this feeling of belonging, there is a respect that is developed for the land.

Richard Louv explores nature's impact in childhood development in his book "Last Child in the Woods", he writes of the wealth of personal and community growth that comes from exposure to the natural world, especially at a young age. Put simply, Louv emphasizes that "land shapes us more than we shape land, until there is no more land to shape". In connecting to the land and engaging in *communitas*, one can grow to better engage in an understanding and respect for the earth.

The biophilia hypothesis, which theorizes that humans have a strong tendency toward nature and other life forms, supports the importance of human connection with the natural world. It operates within the belief that exposure to nature is a strong need within humans, and that it is integral to our development. This concept extends into architecture and design in order to connect humans with nature when they would otherwise be disconnected. Biophilia shows the positive and integrated lifestyle that is possible and vital to sustainability. Creating this connection to the natural world and diminishing the borders we create between ourselves and it is incredibly important. It creates a far more environmentally conscious society and instills a stronger commitment to the earth and what happens to it. This hypothesis emphasizes that humans attain the most satisfaction from nature like processes, therefore being exposed to nature itself provides positive engagement.

Environmental and folk practice exposure is not only beneficial to the child experiencing it, but also provides educational benefits to the family and community that the child is in. Various studies, particularly Vaughan *et al* [2003](#) and Trewhella *et al* [2005](#), have shown that education between children and their parents is bidirectional, and parents can learn just as much from their children as their parents can teach them. The study Vaughan *et al* ([2003](#)) "showed that following children's attendance at a month long educational course about scarlet macaws (*Ara macao*), their parents' scores on knowledge tests had improved by 38% on average" having never actually attended the course, while "the control group showed no improvement". This demonstrates that environmental and folk education would not only impact the students learning about it, but would also largely impact adults in their life in a positive way. This increases the benefits of providing this type of education tenfold, and creates not only a solution to views on climate change for a single generation, but also for the communities which the enrolled youth are surrounded by.

Exposure to green spaces is shown to positively influence both mental and physical health as well. One study published by the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America showed that the presence of green spaces in early childhood decreased the risk for mental illness by 55% when compared to children who did not have access to green

space. Another study by Gregory N. Bratman, showed that people who went on a 90 minute nature walk and then had their brains scanned and reported their thoughts had less rumination in regards to anxiety and depression than people who went on a 90 minute urban area walk and reported in the same way. Access to green spaces promotes health and a place of calm to environments that are otherwise solely urban. This engagement with nature demonstrates the value of the land to the individual and is influential to their health.

Wilderness therapy is another very clear indicator of the power of ties to nature, and demonstrates the positive impact that connection to land can have on humans. Otherwise known as Outdoor Behavioral Healthcare, this type of therapy confronts mental health, behavioral, and substance abuse issues, with extended outdoor wilderness trips led by professionals as a form of treatment. This environment places the patient in an environment where they are not only gaining support from mental health professionals in an intensive and all-encompassing manner, but also relying on themselves to self-support in nature, and develop the wilderness skills necessary to thrive. These skills transfer over to create a better understanding of what is possible and what can be accomplished by the individual. This exposure to the wilderness and a back to the basics lifestyle creates a sense of self-reliance, confidence, and perspective within the patient, giving them the tools to become a stronger person.

This form of treatment is meant to foster community growth, as well as trust, communication, and problem solving skills. This nature based form of learning mimics a cultural history of many indigenous peoples of independence in nature. By tapping into this practice of being fully immersed in the wilderness, they are able to heal and understand themselves and the earth better.

Land connection is deeply vital to environmentalism. We need to create this connection in order to care, we need to be involved in the land, committed to in to maintain it. We cannot expect people to begin caring only as a result of evidence; people must experience nature to appreciate it. To develop this sense of care, it is integral that children experience this appreciation in their youth

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