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# Core Routines of Nature Connection

## Remembering Original Instructions

*Some etymology:*

Instruct *In* + *Struare* = to pile in

Educate *Ex* + *Ducere* = to lead out

Cultivate From *Colere* = to dwell in, cherish

The Core Routines of Nature Connections are *things people do* to learn nature's ways. They aren't lessons. They aren't knowledge. They are learning habits.

Luckily for us as nature guides, shifting our mental habits into these Core Routines of Nature Connection comes as second nature to all human beings. This way of knowing was not born a few hundred years ago, or even with the rise of civilization thousands of years ago. Rather than *informing*, our teaching job *educates* ourselves and those we mentor to discover what the Haudenosaunee people call our "original instructions." Humans evolved with original instructions designed for dynamic awareness of nature. If we can inspire practice of these Core Routines, remembering our original instructions will happen on its own.

Decades of experimentation and wide-ranging research with people in the forests and fields, deserts and coasts, as well as dialogue with elders from many traditions, have culminated in the list of Core Routines found here. They belong to no culture in particular, but are universal, belonging to all who live on the Earth.

These routines are the underlying practices we inspire and facilitate people into doing whenever they go outdoors. They rest beneath all structured and seemingly unstructured lessons or activities, whether we engage one-on-one or students cruise the trails by themselves. Routines will work magically with freedom to come and go as they please like the tides and the seasons. Some routines will jump to the forefront, begging to be practiced, while others fade in emphasis. Each human being comes into this world with an ancient blueprint

*Secret Spot Prose, written by  
Earth Arts youth, Ithaca, NY*

The Song of Nature  
Most people do not  
hear the song of nature,  
but, if you sit in a special place,  
and notice everything  
around you,  
sometimes you hear it.  
It's not like hearing a bird  
sing, or bees buzz,  
It's rather a song of  
understanding,  
warmth, and feeling, and  
not of notes and words  
So, have you heard the  
song of nature?

*Addy Davidoff, age 8*



for connecting with the natural world that has its own timetable for learning. Let it flow.



## *SOME Core Routines of Nature Connection*

On the remaining pages we describe thirteen Core Routines. Our list is not THE definitive Core Routines of Nature Connection. Up until now, many affiliated organizations and teachers have shared Core Routines as part of a liquid, ever-changing body of oral tradition. We picked thirteen we all agree will be the most helpful for readers of this book.

This chapter transmits the spirit of these routines, what they are and why they are important. Further on in the book, you'll see these routines referred to, especially in the Book of Nature. In the Activities section called Introducing Core Routines, you'll find specific ways to start up these practices. But for now, sit back, relax, and let the unique moods and flavors of these Core Routines of Nature Connection wash over you and into you.

As you read, see if you can find versions of these routines within your own childhood or adult life, or in the stories of your friends, family, or heroes. You might be surprised. After all, these are the heritage of all us human-folk.

### *Sit Spot* ☉

*Sit Spot in a Nutshell:*

Find one place in your natural world that you visit all the time and get to know it as your best friend. Let this be a place where you learn to sit still—alone, often, and quietly—before you playfully explore beyond. This will become your place of intimate connection with nature.

### *The Magic Pill*

Our core of the Core Routines begins with the Sit Spot, the heart of this mentoring model. It's the magic pill if ever there was one. Because we've seen it, time and time again, to be so vital and enchanting to the life of both young and old children, we'll take a few more words here than with the other routines, to make sure we pass on the soul of the Sit Spot routine.

The idea is simple: guide people to find a special place in

### *This Tree*

This tree has been living  
for one hundred years,  
through snowstorms, stand-  
ing so broad and old.  
If you listen you will hear  
her words of long ago  
and hear about the children  
that played under her  
when she was only a sapling  
and she will also tell you about  
the little family of doves  
that lived in her for  
so many years  
and how one of her  
branches fell off  
when she was playing tag  
with her friend the wind.  
If you sit there long  
enough, she'll also  
tell you about her story.

*Sierra Helmann, age 7*

It seems those days all you  
had was the seat of your  
pants. That's how they like to  
tell it anyway... You didn't  
just open a book and teach.  
You by god were the book,  
outright in all ways, blunt and  
dogeared and coverless.

*Paul Hunter, foreword to Headmaster  
on a Bulldozer, Building a School  
from the Ground Up, by Ellen Haas*

As time went by, I...realized that the particular place I had chosen was less important than the fact that I had chosen a place and focused my life around it... What makes a particular place special is the way it buries itself inside the heart, not whether it's flat or rugged, rich or austere, wet or arid, gentle or harsh, warm or old, wild or tame. Every place, like every person, is elevated by the love and respect shown toward it, and by the way in which its bounty is received.

*Richard K Nelson,  
The Island Within*



### *Don't Kill The Sit Spot!*

We have seen parents become militant about their children's Sit Spot time: "You can't eat your desert unless you've been to your Sit Spot!" Please do not do this!

The Sit Spot works because of magic. As soon as it becomes a chore or a punishment, the magic dies. Use cleverness to get them there, not the crack of a whip.

nature and then become comfortable with just being there, still and quiet. In this place, the lessons of nature will seep in. Sit Spot will become personal because it feels private and intimate; the place where they meet their curiosity; the place where they feel wonder; the place where they get eye-to-eye with a diversity of life-forms and weather-patterns; the place where they face their fears—of bugs, of being alone, of the dark—and grow through them; and the place where they meet nature as their home.

The Sit Spot routine was the heart of Jon Young's early mentoring by tracker Tom Brown Jr. With Tom coaching from a distance, questioning and inspiring. Jon visited one spot by himself nearly every day for seven years. Jon says today that his Sit Spot in the forest near his New Jersey home had more to do with his development as a human being, not to mention as a naturalist, than anything else. The place will forever be a part of him. His relationship with that place was the pebble thrown in the pond that started Wilderness Awareness School and all its concentric rings.

### *The Essential Attitude of Sit Spot*

The essential attitude of this routine grows to know one place really well—one biome, one community of soils and plants and animals and trees and birds and weather systems—at all times of day and night, and in every season and weather. In other words, the place becomes your nesting niche, your study site, your tracking playground, and your retreat and renewal center. The Spot itself becomes the home base from which you explore outward—where you leave your upright human self behind and get down and crawl on hands and knees, raccoon style, to sniff and feel around.

While it is very important to have one's own oft-visited Sit Spot, we can apply the attitude of Sit Spot to any place with similar ecological features, not just our own special place. The place feels of familiarity, relationship, and in-depth knowledge, and when you go to it your attitude overflows with childlike curiosity, discovery, and uninhibited playfulness.

### *Sitting Still*

The other part to this routine is about sitting, about stillness. On the simplest level, to sit silent and still for a long period of time will slip open the door of a world that most humans



never know: the private world of wild animals and the language of the birds. Sunrise and Sunset are especially magical times, when wildlife actively pulses with life. Once you sit quietly long enough, the birds sort of shrug you off and accept the fact that you're there, and there for good. As they return to their daily tasks, a previously hidden dimension of your landscape opens up.

Wild animals—weasels, raccoons, bobcats, owls, for example—know the patterns of human activity and move out to its edge to go unseen. Sitting still initiates you into their undomesticated realm, a wild place that plays by different rules than the human world. By being a quiet, unobtrusive guest, you will come to know the "Jungle Law," and learn to make yourself welcome again, as an accepted member of the natural community.

### *Sneaking into Sit Spot time*

We never want to force people into going to their Sit Spot as if it were an assignment. Instead, we subtly guide them there by wisely playing games that build up their comfort level, telling inspiring Sit Spot stories, and asking questions about the activities of squirrels and birds and dandelions. If you, the mentor, also spend time in your own Sit Spot and tell fresh stories about what happened earlier this very morning, then of course your stories provide an invaluable role modeling tool.

Many of the activities here are games that will help us lead people into the Sit Spot routine in a roundabout, unconscious way. Hiding or sneaking games require stillness for long periods while crouching in a bush, or lying silently on the ground. With the adrenaline of a game rushing through, students hardly noticed the bugs crawling over their skin and soon a new comfort level in nature emerges.

### *Finding the Right Spot*

We recommend you find a good spot near water, shelter, and food for wildlife, that you can get to easily and often without doing damage to a fragile landscape, with little danger of predators or other hazards.

But this can be found almost anywhere. Our editor, Ellen Haas, has an elderly mother who takes endless delight in observing the birds feed, the ducks breed, the butterflies emerge, and the bees pollinate from her spot on her patio of a Dallas retirement community. City dwellers can find vacant lots, ditches off the local baseball fields, or sidewalk gardens that, if invested with quiet attention, brim with wild life. Folks who live in wild landscapes full of ticks or bears or snakes can find safe paths and shelters from which to bathe in their wilderness. And for young children, help them find little places in the back yard where they can be safe and still and alert and enchanted. It's not about the quality of the spot; it's about the quality of attention within it.

Our four-year Kamana Naturalist Training Program is predicated on visiting a Sit Spot daily, so thousands of our friends have established regular Sit Spot routines. We could go on for pages with their powerfully appreciative testimony. It is amazing, however, what terrible wailing and lamentation go on in the beginning as each individual tries

to find the perfect spot. In the end, if all our kinder guidance fails, we advise, "If you can't be with the one you love, love the one you're with."

### *Hitting Cruise Control*

If we can get people going to a Sit Spot near their home on a regular basis then the learning journey takes on a life of its own. We've hit cruise control at that point, then we simply and eagerly listen to their stories, ask questions about subtleties, and send them on errands that deepen the complexity of the Sit.

I remember one of my seven-year-old students, Mira: her parents told me that she hardly ever spent time outdoors, and then only when accompanied by her parents. For a few months, we played a lot of those comfort-enhancing games, and then Mira's parents came to me with a new story from home.

"Whenever Mira gets home now, she doesn't say a word, she just puts her stuff down and runs outside to the back yard and into the trees. She stays out there for hours all by herself. We see her sometimes: she sits for a while, she climbs trees, she goes around looking at things. Before she wouldn't go out alone—now it's hard to get her to come inside!"

Even my own mother, whom you would definitely not consider the "outdoorsy" type, confided in me a couple of years ago: "I had a Sit Spot, too, when I was a child. There was an oak tree in our back yard, and everyday I would get home from school and run out to sit under that tree. Sometimes I would read a book, other times I would just sit, thinking, taking in the world around me."

### *Where's Your Sit Spot?*

Think back through your life and, ultimately to your childhood, and see if you have or have ever had a Sit Spot routine. You might be surprised. Children seem, without ever being told, to instinctively find a place of their own that they gravitate to and make their "outside home." As a kid, a gnarled old tree in my neighbor's yard that was easy to climb, secluded and sheltered, and served to give me a view of the land around me. Many adults keep up a similar practice all through their lives. It may be the window by their bird feeder, the bench behind the tool shed, or the place where they take their break from work. Where's yours?

## *Story of the Day* ©

*Story of the Day in a Nutshell*

After spending time in nature, tell the story of your day. Tell your story verbally with others, or by writing or drawing in a journal.

We'll say it one more time, so you can't say we didn't hammer it home: the Sit Spot routine is essential. But equally important to the development of sensory awareness

and knowledge of place, the Story of the Day assists as its complementary twin, its primary dance partner. Every human already understands and practices this core routine.



### *The Custom of Storytelling*

Growing up, I remember routinely telling stories with my family. We would sit around the dinner table at the end of the day and share what happened at work or school. My parents would question me for more details about what I had learned, and I'd question them, too. Our stories varied: they could be somber, exciting, or sometimes get us laughing so hard we'd choke on our peas. Here, we emphasize the difference as a Core Routine by telling experiences with nature.

A staple practice of hunters and gatherers around the world, storytelling knit the society together. The men would go out for a day of tracking and hunting, while grandmothers and children might harvest berries, root vegetables, or bark to make thread and cloth. Around the fire at night they would gather and report the stories of their days. This exchange of stories seems to be very important to humans. For millennia, survival depended on information gained about food sources and other patterns in the landscape.

### *Story of the Day — In Groups*

A classic form of Story of the Day breaks everyone into small groups. You go out for adventures for a while and then reconvene to exchange the stories of each group's discoveries. These stories move our emotions, entertain us, and can easily turn a wet, cold, hungry experience into a memorable drama.

To invite children to tell their stories to one another, we share many old tricks. You will learn them as you go. Circling up, quieting down, listening to each other, passing a talking stick, loosening stuck tongues, tightening loose tongues, drawing stories on a collective map: all these will come with practice and familiarity.

You can invite adults to tell their stories in a great variety of ways, some using art, some using computers, on-line forums, list-serve groups, graphic arts, songs, skits and just plain storytelling. Grownup storytelling produces great energy. People laugh hard, they cry, they sing, and then they sleep well at night with smiles on their faces. We always get insightful feedback from their story-of-the-day sessions.

Natural history writers are storytellers. Scientists are storytellers. Scientists live and die by their ability to depart from the tribe and go out into an unknown terrain and bring back, like a carcass newly speared, some discovery or new fact or theoretical insight and lay it in front of the tribe, and then they all gather and dance around it. Symposia are held in the National Academy of Sciences and prizes are given. There is fundamentally no difference from a Paleolithic campsite celebration.

*E.O. Wilson, in Writing Natural History. Dialogues With Authors, by Edward Lueders*

Language clothes Nature, as the air clothes the earth, taking the exact form and pressure of every object.

*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

My grandmother laid the foundation for frog-catching and fishing. Grandma knew her role. Her role was to catch my stories. With a grandmother to come home to, there were a lot of things to see and learn and gather.

JY

The Pipes of Pan sound early before the sense of wonder is dulled, while the world is wet with dew and still fresh as the morning . . . . The look of wide-eyed delight in the eyes of a child is proof enough of its presence.

I heard (the Pipes of Pan) in many places as a child, but one of the best was an alder thicket where I used to hide, a veritable jungle that had never been cleared. The swamp began just beyond the garden fence and I went there often, burrowing my way through the maze into its very center.

There I had fashioned a nest on a dry little shelf. It was cozy and warm, and like any hidden creature I lay there listening and watching. Rabbit runways ran through it and birds sang in the branches around me . . . . The alder swamp was my refuge and no one came there but me. Only Mother knew, and she understood it was mine and mine alone.

What I heard there were the Pipes, and what I sensed, I know now, was the result of a million years of listening and being aware, the accumulated experience of the race itself and of ages when man was more a part of his ancient environment than now . . . .

Sigurd Olson,

*Open Horizons, The Pipes of Pan*

Then, the very next day they go out on the trail vigorously gathering more stories to tell.

Sharing stories with others builds a collective knowledge much greater than the isolated experience of one person. We can gain a storehouse of information from others' stories: one saw frogs by the pond with bright red legs; one made rope out of old dead cedar bark; one snuck up on coyotes and aplodontias living in the woods near the pond. Storytelling layers knowledge slowly built up over time, as a living oral library.

Sharing our personal stories inspires us on further. Group sharing affirms everyone's amazing experiences in nature can be accessible to all. "If Danny can catch a frog or Samantha can touch a deer, well then, why can't I?" Curiosity, our greatest resource for learning, becomes contagious. If you listen to someone tell about catching the frog by "the most beautiful pond just down the street," you just might want to go there soon. Or maybe you wonder, now that we've mentioned it, who ever heard of an "aplodontia?"

This constant pouring of individual experience and knowledge into a collective pot for the community unveils one of the great advantages to group learning. Many people recognize the value of and crave such a learning community. As participants begin to trust that there will be a constant rhythm to this routine, that they will get many chances to tell their stories, the momentum builds into a palpable group zeal at storytelling time. Age matters not. All people respond to this cycle of learning and sharing in a magical way.

### *Story of the Day—For One*

If not in a group setting, stories can be told to a journal. With young children this might be done through drawing or art, or dictating to you, the writer. Again, we share many tricks for this which may depend on your skills and the skills objectives of your program.

Older youth can journal tracks they find in the field, or write about Sit Spot experiences, keeping weekly "Field Inventories," as students do in the Kamana Naturalist Training Program. If you like to inspire sketching and drawing, let it be in the spirit of expressing a story rather than coloring inside the lines. If you love how words clothe experience, you can guide people into finding strong and vivid words and ways to unfold all the sensory input of their moment in time.



Writing and drawing can end up back in the story circle as Show-and-Tell. Something about knowing their writing will be performed or published, or their drawing displayed or mounted, fires up attention to their work . . . as if a predator might be watching! For some, this enhances their experience, for others it can block them with fear. Again, use this response as an opportunity to guide their paths with the intent of empowering them to find their own storytelling gifts.

### *How Stories Reveal Edges*

Story of the Day encourages self-expression and self-confidence in the validity of each person's personal experiences. With many people, you might see a progression from trembling shyness to charismatic power. At first, some may demonstrate a collapsed, drawn inward body language. With no eye contact, the timid offer only a low and mumbled speech. After many opportunities to listen to others and share their stories, even the shyest gradually transforms into a bright voice, a lifted chest, sparkling eyes that pour out excitement, and unerring self-assurance.

Whenever you listen to a person's story, you have a golden opportunity to discern their edges and inspire them with fitting questions. As a routine, careful listening to Story of the Day gives you, the Coyote Mentor, leisure time to hear what captures the attention, what your students notice and don't notice, what they feel proud or awkward to talk about, and what words they choose to express themselves. The chapter ahead called Questioning and Answering will be a very helpful guide to place questions right at the edge of their stories. Good questions, aptly chosen and well timed, will get your people curious and push them to bring back even better stories.

### *The Big Two Routines*

These two routines, Sit Spot and Story of the Day, feed each other constantly, like a call and response. The other eleven Core Routines that follow can be found contained within these two, as specific techniques to enhance time spent outside and daily reflection on it.

The antidote to Nature Deficit Disorder may be this simple: get people to spend time in nature, and when they return, be there to catch their stories.

## *Expanding Our Senses* ©

*Expanding Our Senses in a nutshell:*

Use and expand all your senses as fully as you can. Pay attention! Look Alert! Stretch Out! Use all the senses, one at a time, and together.

### *Pay attention!*

For nature connection, we use only one golden rule: notice everything. Get down

*The book contains 12 more exercises in this Chapter...*