

Rekindling the children-nature link

Nature education camps in the Himalayan high altitudes

by

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One of the major transformations to have impacted children across the world in the last few decades is an impoverished natural environment in their immediate vicinity leading to reduction or complete disappearance of direct contact and experience of nature irrespective of whether the child lives in urban or rural areas. This combined with the breakdown or degradation of the socio-cultural institutional mechanisms for the transfer of local knowledge about wildlife and our links with our bio-physical world has severely influenced the awareness of nature among today's children.

The world of a 12-year old child residing in a remote village in the Spiti region of the Indian Trans-Himalaya is no different. From a generation of children that enjoyed a semi-wild existence among the lofty mountains, following the herds of yak, goats and sheep; attuned to the change of seasons, watching wildlife each day and knowing a vast range of local flora; the present day child spends seven hours in the class-room of a local school and almost the whole day in some kind of constructed space if attending a residential one. She studies about the world while mostly alienated from her local environment. To her mother, the knowledge of local plants and their uses just came naturally – through direct contact and passed on by the earlier generations, or from more knowledgeable friends with whom she grazed livestock or went collecting dung and useful plants. But, for this child; there's no way to connect with her surrounding landscape or flora and fauna. The space and wildlife are still there; just a few yards away from either school or home, yet she does not have any link with these elements of her environment. This is the situation that most rural children face today. In a sense, it is worse than urban children whose parents or schools expose them to some form of 'nature' in the form of visits to protected areas and zoos or to parks and gardens. Since human survival is dependent on the health

of the rest of life on earth and their interactions with the physical environment, this 'disconnect' could prove perilous for our species.

Bridging this disrupted link between children and nature which is so crucial not just for nature conservation but also for healthy development of the child and expression of her creativity is the focus of this article. Here, I share the experiences and learning of an attempt to reconnect children with nature through direct exposure to the natural world. It is about nature education camps for school children that we have been conducting for school children of the Spiti Valley. These are conducted at a pasture located at about 4,500 metres on a plateau above Kibber village. Each of these camps is a three-day springboard experience for children of classes V to IX. Children arrive in the morning on day one and leave after lunch on day three.

So, what does the programme have in store for kids? Well, with a mix of excitement, activities and time to just be with themselves; the focus of the module is on experiential learning and immersion in the natural world. It is a storyline based programme that challenges them to locate the secret messages hidden around by the demon guarding the pasture. Each message that they find is a matter of joy and excitement and leads to an activity. There are about ten to twelve activities with components of exploration, use of senses, knowledge generation through direct contact/experience and documenting/expressing the learning. Most activities are team and pair based, while a few involve solitude. The day typically begins with some light exercises, silent sitting (meditation) and sharing a good thought. After breakfast children are drawn to the challenge of finding the hidden messages and the process continues for the day with lunch, afternoon lemon juice and dinner providing the energy breaks.

The activities include exploration of the environment using all senses, learning about plants and animals of the high altitude pasture, expanding and filtering their view to notice the whole as well as parts of the landscape using binoculars and magnifying lens respectively. In between and at the end of each day, there are sessions to facilitate the processing of learning that takes place. These include value clarification activities such as

role play and writing the experiences/learning. One of the most interesting aspects of these camps is the time we provide for reflection as each child is an active learner and we recognize her ability to go back to analyse what she's learnt and how it's useful for her. This is generally done through an activity called the "magic spot" or "silent spot", where children just sit and relax or even lie down and ponder. They can choose their sitting places and these often tend to be rocks overlooking a pond. They can do anything here except talking and walking! This solitude gives them the time and space to be themselves and reflect on the whole day. We encourage them to use this time to be creative or descriptive and write. Much of what they think or jot down over here, they share during the campfire each night. We encourage and support them irrespective of how much they share. By day three, each child develops the courage to speak in front of all. This activity thus facilitates the development of a key feature of healthy democracy – freedom to express your concerns/feelings.

The activities have different goals with respect to the kind of learning that is brought about. A majority of activities revolve around the theme of developing positive values and feelings about life and the landscape. These include love and respect for all forms of life (inherent value of life), appreciation of patterns of beauty and harmony in nature, joy of being in touch with nature and valuing the natural ecosystems and landscape for their inherent worth as well as for their 'free' services. Some activities create knowledge and understanding of the local flora and fauna, however, this is done without emphasizing names. Instead, children are encouraged to create names for these species based on what they observe. We do give names but only after being sufficiently sure that they have observed the creatures for long to create an identity in their mental folders or when we need to caution them or when they already know the creature but not the correct name for it.

A natural question to ask will be "how effective is the programme?" So far, we have had over 300 children and 20 teachers from 10 schools participating in the nature education camps. Analysis of their written feedbacks and sharing during the programme indicates good learning among the majority. From creating knowledge based on direct observations

to creating/nurturing positive values and emotions; the camps are indicating positive gains on these fronts.

Below are glimpses of the feedback that we have received from children and teachers:

- “I learnt that nature is full of surprises and peaceful...we are so lucky to be born in the Himalaya...I’ll remember for my whole life that we went for summer camp.” - Lobzang Tandup
- “We should not kill snow leopards because they are less in population all over the world...” - Sonam Dhomden
- “This 3-day nature camp has been a great educational experience for both students and teachers...the positive effects could last for many years to come, even a lifetime...” - Griffen Schutt (Teacher - Highlander school, Shego)
- “I learnt how to make out which creatures are found in a pasture based on droppings, footprints & feathers.” - Tanzin Dolkar
- “The best activity that I liked was of ‘smelling the plants’...” - Deachen Dolma

Through these three-day modules, we are able to document change in perceptions, values, emotions and often in attitudes. These are all precursors to action. In a sense, we are creating favourable conditions for responsible action to take place in children who spend the rest 362 days without getting connected with nature. Further, we emphasise repeated and sequential exposure i.e. taking these children outdoors each year and build on the previous experiences and learning. This long-term contact is more likely to lead to action or behavioural change. Finally, I share here an example of real change observed in a group of 12/13 year olds at Kibber village. This group of about 10 children, motivated by their camp outing spent almost the entire winter looking for, following and understanding wildlife in the village pastures. They did it on their own and also sought help from our

local staff. An MSc student carrying out research on blue sheep was flummoxed when they started rattling out names and numbers of various species present in and around the pastures when he met them! The nature education camps have thus provided us with a window to peep at the child-nature link in Spiti. Strengthening this initiative has the potential of creating a generation of adults who are more likely to be responsible and sensitive....we eagerly await their blossoming.

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