

## Trees, grass, and the sounds of the forest

“Children’s Nature Canon” aims to outline vital experiences for young children

BY HELLE NEBELONG

How does the rain smell? What is the sound of the forest? What is natural when you are a four-year-old kid and go into the kindergarten?

Two hundred Danish early childhood educators have recently given the Danish Outdoor Council, an international non-profit, their ideas on the subject.

The Danish Minister for the Environment has decided that Denmark should have a Nature Canon — a list of some of the most important and interesting natural wonders of Denmark. In spring 2009, all Danes were invited to deliver proposals for the canon, and more than 1,400 people and organizations did so. A board of experts now works on publishing the final Nature Canon, which is supposed to come out this autumn.

In the meantime, early childhood educators with Green Kindergartens in Denmark were given a green light by the Outdoor Council, because they work seriously with sustainability and the environment — and they have

created their own outline of important experiences for children.

“The Children’s Nature Canon” outlines 52 basic nature experiences that children should have had before reaching the age of six.

The taste of soil, ice on the water, and play in tall grass are among the experiences in nature that should be experienced by children in early childhood.

“Experiencing nature is essential for all children,” says Ida Kryger, director of ‘Green Sprouts’ in the Outdoor Council. “Nature is unpredictable. The playground is always the same and the children know what to do. Out in the wild they never know what they come home with,” she says.

Among the 52 points that educators have listed, a number surprised Ida Kryger. She described them as transcending and provocative because they challenge the idea that children should not do things that potentially could be hazardous.

“To carve with a knife and make fire breaks with the notion that children

must be wrapped in bubble wrap. But it has many qualities, when children have tried their own borders. They are, for example, better prepared for entering school, simply because they know themselves better,” says Ida Kryger.

Three hundred twenty-five day-care centers are members of the ‘Green Sprouts,’ a project on natural environment and pedagogy run by the Outdoor Council.

The Outdoor Council itself is a non-governmental organization

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*The mission of the Nature Action Collaborative for Children is to re-connect children with the natural world by making developmentally appropriate nature education a sustaining and enriching part of the daily lives of the world’s children.*

# Learning to play and explore in nature

BY SOPHIA WILLIAMS

Recently, our family of three went camping for two nights in the Australian bush, next to a river at a place called Wee Jasper, near Australia's capital, Canberra. Another family joined us with their two children (aged two and four) and dog.

We took a few toys along for our 20-month-old son, but mainly offered him a bucket and spade (his favourite play things). We also had a few cars, books, and toys, just in case!

I have been feeling concerned that Orlando's physical risktaking was not keeping pace with the rest of his development; that he seems to be a bit of a "scaredy cat."

Well, as soon as we arrived at the river, Orlando was off playing with the children he already knew well. I was fascinated as I watched him over the three days, exploring the natural environment. Suddenly, I saw my child through different eyes.

My "scaredy cat" climber was carefully negotiating his way over complex hurdles interconnecting roots, stones, and loose leaves. He was wandering off over mounds to climb in and under logs, and squeeze between trees to find the most precious leaf, feather, or stone. He tiptoed through slippery mud and cold stones to find the pebble that had caught his eye. He negotiated all of this with only a single slip, in which he caught himself, paused, and tried to get himself back up.

He played for hours finding stones and pebbles — "egg rocks," "car rocks," "cold rocks," "boat rocks" — a plethora of rocks for him to choose from and he valued each one.

He used them to experiment with water and the sound created when he threw them in. He saw how the colour changed when the rocks got wet, and heard what sound they made when you

banged them together.

He lined them up in a row and counted ("1, 2, 1, 2, 6, 7, 9!"). He stacked them on top of each other like blocks, and selected a few to treasure, holding them in his hand or stashing them in his pocket.

The three children conversed over the rocks, working together to cart "big and heavy" rocks from one workspace to another. The four-year-old who was taking natural leadership informed her workers that they were building a wall. She also discussed distance with them while throwing the rocks in the water: "Wow, that was far! That one went a long way! That one was only short."



By contrast, when the children found my stash of store-bought toys, the nature of the play changed. They sat inside the tent reading the books and playing with the cars and animals. Not a bad thing, but such a contrast.

Suddenly, two of them emerged from the tent in tears, as the third child had hit them while fighting over a book. Then, an adult found them with a knife, trying to cut one of the books. Up until this point, no behaviour had needed managing, but now adult intervention was required. Then, fights started over the cars. Although there were plenty for all, this still wasn't enough. Yet, there had not

been a single fight over the rocks and pebbles.

So I quickly confiscated the toys and hid them in the car. For about 30 minutes, the children were lost, bored, didn't know what to do.

"They're bored!" my friends told me, as they set up a portable DVD player in their car so the children could be "entertained" by a movie.

My heart sank. They had been completely entertained previously, while they were engaging in meaningful teamwork and exploration. Now they were watching a movie inside a car with the engine running, while surrounded by a wondrous bush setting.

I took a few deep breaths and lured Orlando away. I took him back down to the riverside to share a snack and started to talk to him about the pebbles. Within a few moments, his interest was hooked and he was re-engaged. We made boats to float down the stream, splashed about, and continued to explore the beautiful space.

I had gone away camping with vague thoughts about the playgroup I am setting up this year for parents with 0-3 year olds. Having previously established a Creative Play Group, with a strong emphasis on Visual Arts, this was at the back of my mind for this new venture. But now the way forward was clear. Our three-day camping experience had taken me back to my own childhood and its special memories.

I want our child to re-capture the essence of natural play and the way it inspires children to step out of being "scaredy cats" and to find their own place and their own pace.

These commodities need nurturing more than ever in a busy modern world. Nature Play Group, here we come!

*Sophia Williams is a teacher at Blue Gum Community School in Canberra, Australia*

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founded in 1942. It operates as an umbrella organization, today with 94 individual member organizations. These are all national organizations, and together they cover practically all types of outdoor recreational activities as well as nature protection interests.

The aim of the Outdoor Council is to promote outdoor recreation for organizations and the general public under consideration of both environmental needs and needs for nature protection.

The member organizations are all represented in a General Assembly, the highest body of authority of the Council. The daily operation of the Outdoor Council is managed by a Board and carried out by a Secretariat.

*Helle Nebelong is a landscape architect from Gentofte, Denmark, with her own private practice, Sansehaver.dk.*

## “A kindergarten child *must experience:*”

- climbing trees
- playing in tall grass
- jumping in puddles
- falling into the water
- walking on bare feet in the snow
- climbing up a level where they cannot come down on their own
- a tadpole becoming a frog
- eating from nature
- swinging in a rope
- hearing the lark sing
- rolling down a hill
- building dens
- tasting the soil and the sand
- muddying themselves and be hosed down with water
- eating the snow
- bathing in rain
- crab fishing
- building dams in rivers
- flying kites
- tobogganing
- the sounds of the forest and the ocean
- the scents of the forest floor
- the smell of rain
- life and death
- amazing stories from the wild nature
- all kind of weather types; finding that all weather is good weather
- the beach, the forest, the moor, and the meadow
- ice on puddles
- the feeling of holding a fish or other creature

– from “The Children’s Nature Canon”

## The NACC Leadership Team: Who We Are

The NACC Leadership Team is a core group of early childhood educators, designers, and landscape architects who came together in 2006 with a dream to change the world for young children.

They represent six continents across the globe, and serve as key contact points for others around the world who have a desire to improve the lives of young children.

The Leadership Team meets periodically to discuss strategies for increasing NACC’s outreach and membership, and to find new ways for all of us to work together to further our common mission.

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# Learning in nature through exploration

A window into a school where children are always encouraged to explore

BY GILLIAN MCAULIFFE

A group of three-year-olds experiment with earth and sand to make marks.

They discuss the different colours and textures, the way some sands "stick" and others don't. They seek ways to explore earth to make better paint by adding milk, or perhaps glue or more sand.

In another part of the school, four-year-olds and their teaching staff choose the gazebo in the school's garden and transform the space with light curtains and natural props. The light and shape of the space becomes a perfect backdrop for their exploration of theatre.



Sitting on logs around an open fire, five-year-old students sing, "Bubble Bubble Toil and Trouble," as they watch their "sleeping potion" brew.

They reflect that, "If you look through the smoke things look wobbly," and ask, "Why does water bubble when it gets hot?"

Nearby some children from the same group play in the school creek throwing sticks and watching them travel with the flow of the water,



under the log bridge and into the pond at the base.

Another group of five- and six-year-olds are engrossed in solving the problems of building a fence from natural materials, with no nails and no glue.

The fence is a necessary component of a "Wild Space" that they are designing for the school garden. While exploring the space, they find a dead bird and ponder the mysteries of life and death.

A group of six- and seven-year-olds explain to a visitor that they will be building a mud hut, but were challenged by how they can stop the mud drying out with the sun and crumbling off the walls.

One child suggests that every day they could wet the walls, but this posed another problem.

Would the mud then slip off because it was too wet?

In a dark room, a group of nine- to eleven-year-olds view a slideshow of the photos they have taken in the garden and create a shared vocabulary of words in response to the photos. This diverse list of words will inform their reflection on the photography project which will be included

in a curtain made by the children and dyed with colours from nature.

The staff at the end

of the day reflect on the energy that is evident throughout the school as each group of children engage in their ongoing investigations of the world they live in.

It is a wonderful day that leaves the staff energised and confident that the choice to seek a balance in our school, which includes opportunities to build positive and respectful relationships with our natural world, is the right one.

We feel privileged to be able to share this journey with our students, and to be one of the adults walking alongside the child as they wonder.

*Gillian McAuliffe is founding director of Bold Park Community School in Floreat, Australia.*

