

Plant Yourself on the Ground and Let Your Roots Grow: Human Development through Intimate Outdoor Experiences

By Vienna Carruthers

I enter the forest taking a deep breath of the cool crisp air, filling my lungs and awakening them with its freshness. It is autumn now, the leaves have all changed colour and begun to fall. I absolutely adore the colours of autumn; there is something about them that just mesmerizes me. It must be the way the leaves light up the trees as if they were on fire. They look so lively and vibrant that it is wild to think that they are actually dying off.

I continue to follow the path, hearing the crunch of fallen leaves beneath my feet, being careful to not interrupt the songs of the birds. Curiously I follow the narrow trail, wondering if and hoping that I will find it, that perfect spot, one that I can call my own and learn to know and love. This spot will be my haven. But where? Where do I find it? How will I know if I've found it? Will it call out to me? Will I stumble

upon it? Will there be a sign? Or, will I just know? I want to find it. . . .

— Author's Journal Entry,
October 29th, 2010

Ever since I first read about the concept of a "Sit Spot" in *Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature* by Young, Haas and McGown (2010), it struck a strong chord within me. I've been aware of the concept of having a special place within nature that you are connected to and return to often, but I hadn't known that there are structured lessons created to enable practice.

I don't have a sit spot of my own; I have been curious to have one, but never knew where to go to find it. Throughout my life I have felt connected to many places—some in the natural environment, some not—and had moments in many spots, but never have I had one place stick with me. Due to my on-the-go



lifestyle, I have not had the chance to seek out one of my own. I feel that I can connect with anywhere I go and make a temporary sit spot in any moment that I require one. Nevertheless, after reading about it I knew it was a feeling I couldn't ignore; a spark had been lit within me, inspiring me to explore this concept.

This book encouraged me to think back through my life and, ultimately to my childhood, and see if I have ever had a Sit Spot routine. I was saddened that there was no specific place sticking out in my mind. As a child I was not one to go off and sit by myself in nature; I would much rather be playing in it. In the summertime my sister, two neighbourhood boys and I would spend everyday outside from dawn to dusk, and our many adventures provided me with some of my favourite memories. It occurs to me that the memories I have from childhood that involve nature relate more to the idea of "place" than to a specific spot. I believe that the concepts of "place" and "sit spot" are directly interrelated.

One author writes that "his Sit Spot. . .had more to do with his development as a human being, not to mention as a naturalist, than anything else" (Young et al., p. 37). I connect with the idea that an experience can have such a large impact on a life that it enables human development and that "when you go to it your attitude overflows with childlike curiosity, discovery, and uninhibited playfulness" (p. 38). Interactions with the outdoor environment stimulate people in a way that brings out their inner child and lets their inhibitions disappear.

Sit Spots and the Impact on Development

Can it be true that children are quickly losing their connection to nature day by day? Tom Brown Jr. (1989) put it very simply when he said,

Most children...seem to lose the yearnings of their hearts and are stripped of true awareness, adventure, excitement, and rapture of living fully. Children also lose their connection to the earth and creation as their feet are

removed from the soil and transplanted into a world of electronics, concrete, and plastic. (p. ix)

It has been shown that "children who spend. . .time outdoors are healthier than those who are indoors. . .playing in a natural environment also benefits their motor skills" (Brügge, 2007, p.122). The whole process of having a sit spot can exercise and sharpen a child's senses. It helps them to learn how to "put on the brakes" and start to really pick up on everything around them (i.e., the songs of the winds and birds, the colours of the plants and trees, and the smell of the forest). If given the opportunity, the natural world has the unique capacity to impress.

Ruth Wilson (2008) explains that young children need frequent interactions and experiences with nature that have a positive impact on them in order to give them a "sense of caring and responsibility for the natural world" (p. 6). Without those kinds of interactions, it is believed that it is more probable for them "to develop unfounded fears and prejudices about nature that impede the development of an environmental ethic" (p. 6). Those fears will get in the way of any future positive interactions that can impact their human development. In the sit spot children are given the opportunities to have moments of silence, solitude and stillness. Children are invited to explore their curiosity and the natural wonder as "nature itself invites quiet contemplation or intense fascination" (Tovey, 2007, p. 78). They are able to

get eye-to-eye with a diversity of life-forms and weather-patterns; the place where they face their fears—of bugs, being alone, of the dark—and grow past them; and the place where they meet nature as their home. (Young et al., 2010, p. 37)

"Once children learn to love and respect the Earth, they are likely to care deeply about its well-being" (Wilson, 2008, p. 14). Through these interactions children are given direct experiences and get to observe and create a full understanding of the natural world. This practice provides a great deal of cognitive, emotional and aesthetic development.

Children are naturally inspired to learn and expand their knowledge through exploration and discovery. Through spending time alone, children develop emotional stability and become “in touch” with feelings and emotions.

Connection to Place through Sit Spot Practice and Development

One key benefit of sit spot practice is developing a connection to “place.” While sitting in a “spot,” an intimate connection to that location is created. The essential attitude of this routine is getting 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 (Young, Haas, McGown, 2010).

Cross (2001) examined the multiple ideas of what sense of place means across five separate fields. Collectively they were all very similar and contained the common themes of it being an emotional bond/connection/attachment that provides “understanding of and relation to the environment” (p. 1) and stimulates learning and discovery. It is this connection to place that gives a sit spot its magic. Having a sense of and connection to place gives people a strong feeling of belonging, which fulfills the constant human desire to belong somewhere (Cross, 2001). Once you gain that sense of place, familiarity and comfort of your sit spot, it is then that you learn the most from it. That connectedness motivates you to return, and make that place your own.

Now What?

Through the exploration of sit spot practices and idea of place, I have become more aware of all the developmental benefits they have to offer. The thought that children don’t experience nature the same way they did only ten years ago upsets me. I believe nature experience is an integral part of human development; whether it is through sit spots or direct interactions with the natural environment, it has many lessons to offer that you truly cannot learn anywhere else—lessons that will challenge you, foster growth

and learning, and, most importantly, push you to your limits.

After taking a close look into these theories and opening my eyes to all they have to offer, I have been inspired to search for a sit spot of my own, and to create that connection that can help me to further develop. I am motivated to go on an adventure to find it, and I look forward to what this adventure will bring me.

Curiously I follow the narrow trail, wondering if and hoping that I will find it . . . But where? Where do I find it? . . . I want to find it . . .

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Vienna Carruthers is a third-year student at Brock University currently pursuing a degree in outdoor recreation and leisure studies. She is very passionate about working with children, and strongly believes that engagement in the outdoors is an essential part of human development.