

When We really See Nature: Insightful Moments in two Holistic Outdoor Classrooms

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Abstract

Although we all know that nature is the mother of all, as well as the greatest teacher, it is quite challenging to let people learn and benefit from her true merits. People tend to perceive nature as places for recreations, something scenic, or perhaps a bit of harshness that brings up some bodily concerns. In any case, it usually results in a distance between human being and nature, and a reductive perspective of that nature is nothing but mere objects. Therefore, holistic activities were designed in order to let participants to truly reconnect and contemplate with nature and gain some deep experiences. These were carried out in the two different outdoor learning, one in pine forest in the northern region and another in rain forest in the eastern region, Thailand. After such immersions, the majority reflected similarly that they could be aware of their own feelings and become more present in themselves. Their close co-existence with nature allowed them to realize her great beauty in such an unexpected and indescribable way. This was so intense that it led to a strong sense of love and belonging, and wanting to cherish forests, trees, animals, and all things. Apart from the source of basic needs, nature now can become like home, sacred place, and a loved one. And some said now they can see that nature and themselves are one where nature and their body are a part of each other. Under a new and broader definition like this, things can be different; the right interdependence between people and nature is now possible.

Keywords: nature connection, holistic learning, environmental education, contemplation

Introduction

From the World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report 2019, environmental risks markedly dominate the list both in terms of likelihood and impact. Extreme weather events, failure of climate-change mitigation and adaptation, and major natural disasters are three of the top five environmental concerns by likelihood. While failure of climate-change mitigation and adaptation, extreme weather events, water crises, and major natural disasters are four of the top five risks by impact (Myers & Whiting, 2019). Likewise, Scharmer (2018) wrote in his renowned book of its kind, *The Essentials of Theory U*, that in today's world of disruption we are facing three great losses: ecological loss, social loss, and spiritual loss. He added that we are currently depleting world's natural resources 1.5 times as much as our planet earth can regenerate. And this number can soar up to 5 in the United States alone. Reflected by these empirical truths, environmental issues have no doubt become those of global scale and increasingly threatened world economy and political system. The whole world needs to tackle this problem together, and so does education.

As early as in the 1970s, UNESCO first established the goal of environmental education as, *"To develop a world population that is aware of, and concerned about, the environment and its associated problems, and which has the knowledge, skills, attitudes, motivations and commitment to work individually and collectively toward solutions of current problems and the prevention of new ones."* (UNESCO – UNEP, 1975) Based on such statement, the North American Association for Environment Education (NAAEE) has strived to develop a framework for assessing environmental literacy and guidelines for integrating environmental education into K-12 curriculum across the United States, believing that only an environmentally literate public can find workable and evidence-based solutions for these threats (Hollweg et al., 2011). In 2014, Inverness Associates conducted a survey of environmental education and sustainability in 1,056 American public schools in twelve selected states. The survey sought to understand how environmental literacy – regarding knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors – was developed among students through schools' curricula and other activities. It reveals that in overall schools work to make environmental issues a priority, especially in school facilities and operations. And students realize that environmental issues and their impact are all around them. However, environmental sustainability has not yet been incorporated into curricular mainstream as it is taught mainly in student clubs more than in subject or across the curriculum. The environmental curriculum is beginning and is not yet well developed. Further, many schools believe that informal education, including outdoor programs, visiting museums, zoos, parks, and farms can be extremely or very important in helping students be environmentally literate (Chapman, 2014).

In Thailand, learning about environmental literacy is new to educators and its systematic practices are not yet widespread into mainstream, also. Campaigns and social movements regarding saving and learning nature like Magic Eyes Project and Green World Foundation have been publicized in Thai society for approximately three decades but have so far affected

little in Thai formal education. For more than 20 years, the program of “Environmental Detective” has been introduced to educate lay people to be environmentally literate believing that sustainability is made possible by civic action (Green World Foundation, n.d.). Meanwhile, environmental education is more prominent in alternative schools and institutes. Roong Aroon, an independent school in Bangkok providing learning process based on holistic view has initiated a number of outdoor activities to allow its students to have a direct contact with nature. Visiting countryside or taking long walks in forest is integrated into its science curriculum making the learning a more profound and experiential one, for example. *“Not only that students can use their senses of perception to learn about environmental problems in a so-called Nature Classroom, but it is also important to have themselves develop toward maturity even more in a Real Life Classroom”*, said a teacher of the same school (Santiwuthimethi, 2018). In higher education, the Contemplative Education curriculum in Mahidol University has introduced concepts of nature connection and the practice of vision-quest to promote mindfulness learning, and the outcome is positive¹. Recently, at one try out in Karen community forest, north of Thailand, participants gained new insights and vowed to no longer take nature for granted. They began to realize how very essential water, soil, air, and all wild life are and that the wise way to preserve them is obligatory to us all, not only to people who live close to the forest.

As we can see that during the past years there have been strivings from many sectors to raise the awareness and to educate public in environment and the results look promising, still not so many have been documented yet. So this article aims to provide a further elaboration of how holistic outdoor environmental learning is appropriately and successfully carried out in an informal educational context. In addition, the phenomenological outcomes found in participants of such activities are also investigated. The authors hope that this systematic, in-depth study and its thorough understanding will help exemplify the practice and can become beneficial to establishing environmental education back in the mainstream.

Nature connection - the holistic view

Before we jump to the meaning of nature connection, let’s look back philosophically to what disconnecting from nature is like. Long time ago before agricultural revolution, humanity then saw nature as ‘Mother’ who fed, clothed, and sheltered them all, while the ownership toward nature was not yet known. But when people started to settle down in one place, they began to objectify and view nature as ‘Resource’ which was then used to serve human’s needs. Trees were cut, land was plowed, and the eco-system was more deeply interfered. As humanity has moved into the age of industrial development, objectified nature is now seen as ‘Commodity’ where land, water, wild life, raw materials, etc. are equipped with prices. This results in like never before the great depletion and degradation of nature. Scharmer and Kaufer (2013) explain this phenomenon in terms of the ecological divide where the disconnect between the infinite growth imperative and the finite resources of planet earth is

¹ One of the authors, Somsit Asdornnithee was among the team who carried out these activities.

observed. They have also suggested the solution by reframing how we, humanity should view nature:

“In the emerging next stage of economic thought, we might reframe the role of nature in terms of ‘Eco-system and Commons’, which we collectively cultivate and steward for the well-being of future generations and the whole.” (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013)

“Instead of treating nature’s gifts as commodities that we buy, use, and throw away, we must treat the natural world as a circular ecology that we need to cultivate and co-evolve with.” (Scharmer, 2018)

Nature deficit disorder is another term recently used to describe the symptom of human beings, especially children’s disconnect from nature. Coined by Richard Louv, this idea talks about the human costs due to spending less time outdoors. He emphasizes that, apart from the lure of electronic devices that draws children to spend more time inside, the parents’ attitude toward nature could also be a very important cause. Many tend to see nature as an unsafe place where injury and crime could be around. This is worsened by the natural environmentalists’ objective thought putting more of that, nature has to be protected out of reach by human, as it is just nice to look but not to touch. Although nature deficit disorder is not recognized medically, Louv has pointed out some of its adverse effects. Most are those concerning mental health and well-being, including attention disorders and depression. He also claims that interaction with nature can reduce such symptoms in children (Children & Nature Network, 2019; Wikipedia, 2019).

Considering the meaning of nature disconnect described above, on the other hand nature connection can likewise be realized in a holistic manner, starting from the quality of awareness inside to how and what we do outside. Dorothy Maclean, who is a co-founder of Findhorn Community in Scotland, came to communicate with angels, or great Beings whose lives infuse and create all of nature. Maclean (2008) said in her book, *To Hear the Angels Sing*, admitting that she can talk with the angelic realms the same way we talk with ourselves or each other but more deeply and profoundly. She explained that, *“this is not a matter of technique, the true communication arises from our own being and from the wholeness of our lives. It is more something that we become over the course of existence and less something that we learn. What we really communicate is what we are, not so much what we can say in words. To do so really requires the attitude of wholeness towards life, others, and ourselves. It requires a joyful enlargement of our view of reality, a readiness to be open to ourselves and our environment, and a conscious movement to embrace our own wholeness.”*

Satish Kumar, a peace and environment activist, takes deep ecology a step further by speaking about **Reverential Ecology**. What he said has portrayed how people connect with nature in a holistic – relational way, where ones learn through totality and non-violence with nature. To be total means to relate and immerse the wholeness of oneself in such an experience with respectful manner. In other words, this happens when we go into nature with all senses,

including seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, and that of consciousness fully open as we are embodying its qualities. By doing so, we, human beings, are no longer observers, users, or masters of nature, but humble participants who can see and revere nature as sanctity and divine (Kumar, n.d.). Sharing the same worldview, **Vision quest** or eco-quest is a ritual practice found in many indigenous traditions where one goes on a retreat in nature alone to develop profound inner qualities, with a deep understanding in life. A person who is doing vision quest has to go solitude into sacred nature, fast, and contemplate or perform some rituals, including dialogue with the natural world during the period of time which usually lasts for a few days. Despite forgoing food, one would experience renewal and strengthened connection to nature, realizing that one's life and all other life forms are harmoniously interdependent with nature. The person returns home receiving sign or vision which could become one's personal guidance, life purpose, as well as the way one can best serve community and folks people. For some cultures, vision quest is a rite of passage marking the transition from childhood to adulthood, or a three stage journey: release of an old life, stepping across a threshold, and return home reborn. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2016; Rites of Passage, 2016)

All above has depicted what nature connection is about. As researchers in sustainable development projects using cultural ecology concept², the authors intend to do a holistic learning process for two different outdoor classrooms, making nature connection as the main point. This is to allow participants to tap into the deep source of understanding regarding their own self, way of life, local environment, and inherited cultures, so that they could afterwards become capable in sustainability and cultural ecology-based development for their communities. To design and develop the learning, the methodology associated with reverential ecology³ was applied as to form the main attribute, while the principle of 7 Cs⁴ (Nilchaikovit & Jantarasuk, 2009) was used as its supplements. Natural environment was the backdrop, and self and the inner perceptions of participants were the major content. (Figure 1) In these two occasions, the study was then carried out qualitatively and participant observation, focus group interview, and journaling were the tools used in data collection. Subsequently, the elaboration regarding how each of the learning process was created and

² The projects that the authors are currently (2019) responsible for are: The Cultivation of Change Agents amongst the Youth of Aeko-Saenkumlue Village, using the Contemplation-oriented Transformative Learning, and The Bangpakong Grounding: The Area-based Sustainable Development of Bangpakong River Basin Communities using the Concept of Cultural Ecology, Phase 1 Cultural Root Empowerment, Cultural Mapping, and Cultural Space.

³ The methodology of reverential ecology is based on holistic-relational worldview. It employs the wholeness of oneself to participate / to have direct experience with all things to be studied with all senses fully open. This is done with respect, humility, and the realization of the unity, mystery, and sanctity of all things. As the process is going on, the learning emerges from the way one is and does, becoming a practical skill that relates to real life.

⁴ The principle of 7 Cs, framed under the humanistic and holistic concept, contains the attributes necessary for the transformative facilitation. They are contemplation, compassion, connectedness, confronting reality, continuity, commitment, and community.

carried out, as well as the phenomenological aspect observed in those respective groups of participants was reported in detail.

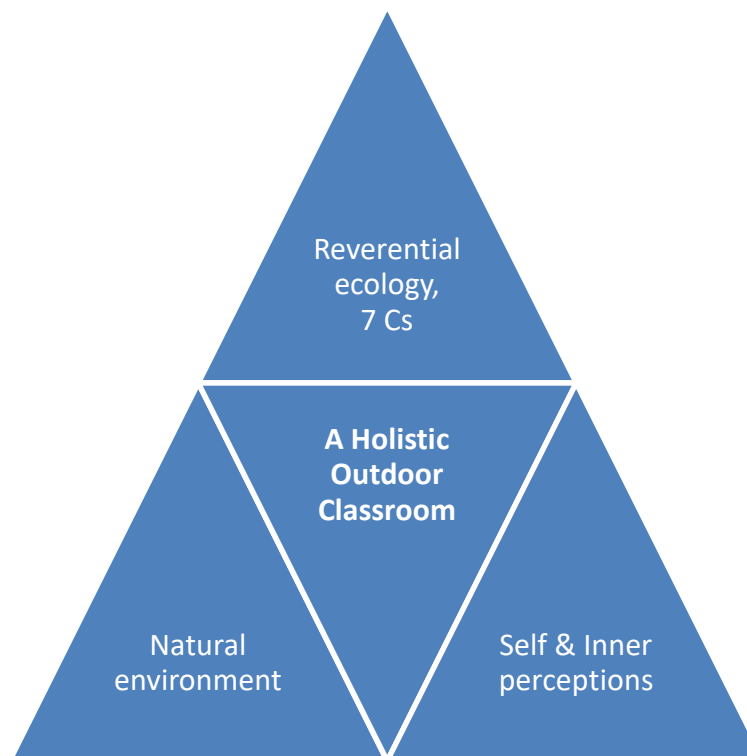


Figure 1 : Three components making up a holistic outdoor classroom

Results

1. Hiking with the Lahu people, in Maehongsorn Province

Background

In Thailand, the Lahu people are one of the major hill tribes where about 100,000 live mainly in northern provinces. They are also known by another name, 'Musso' meaning hunter (Sirisai, 1996). The authors have been doing transformative learning projects with Lahu people in a village of Maehongsorn Province for six years, and the thing we usually focus on is how to get people together and learn to build up group cohesion with harmony. At one time recently, the group has come up with an attractive project of hiking since the village is surrounded by a beautiful coniferous forest. Although it may be started from something fun, but then the activity could become a perfect opportunity for everyone to learn about the Lahu's ecological capital and their inherited wisdom since being with forest is in their blood. The group seemed to be so enthusiastic and eager to cooperate together wanting this to happen. The schedule was co-planned by both the locals and visitors, and tasks were assigned as necessary. Apart from the process design and study, the authors then were also responsible

for facilitating the overall. So weeks before the activity, important questions were sent to everyone involved to deeply contemplate and get ready for the event: *“How the forest is like if it remains best for people and all life? And how really do Lahu people, before and today, take care of their forest?”*

The learning process

The activity was designed to last for 2 days 1 night, consisting of the going on foot of 11 kilometers each way, camping on the mountaintop, sharing meals together, and doing group dialogue. Since this was meant to be for eco-cultural purpose and personal spiritual investigation rather than just a mere enjoyment, the process was given the plenty of time for exposing to nature and going solitude a priority. During hiking up and down the trail, people would spend most of the time, along the way, immersing themselves in natural environment, i.e. trees, plants, insects, rocks, air, water, heat, etc. with all senses open. Meanwhile, some stories and myths were also told; activities in the forest like food, or herbs collecting were performed so that we together could learn about how Lahu people co-exist with nature, as well as some of the great wisdom embedded in their way of living. After that, all experiences received, whether it was good or bad, easy or difficult, or any intuition, memories, or insights, were then shared with everyone to form a collective lesson.

In other words, the learning process was developed under the holistic concept consisting mainly of the following attributes.

- Direct experience: long, direct, and close contact to nature and the surrounding.
- Contemplation: sufficient time for being mindful and reflection.
- Connectedness: relating whatever perceived to self, way of living, and culture.
- Community: supporting and sharing in group for collective learning.

Employing nature as the backdrop or so-called outdoor classroom, the learning theme focused particularly on the Lahu’s folk wisdom relating to how they live with forest, and how the forest means to them and has contributed to their living. We expected that such learning will bring about key understanding, and result in sustainability and harmony of the whole community eventually.

The phenomenological outcomes

“To hike 22 kilometers round trip in two days!” Even though it could turn out fun, one thing that came up in many people’s mind would probably not be so positive, as this was not going to be easy for body. But then that was not all of the first impression. Many who came as visitors felt mostly exciting and were looking forward to this because of the rumor of spectacular view spread out by word of mouth. Meanwhile, the local people who played host to this event also felt so happy no less than visitors. They were so enthusiastic and could not wait any longer.

In the morning of the hiking day, we, 8 local people and 12 visitors, gathered together and had a brief silent moment before start off. The walking was in an unhurried, and from time to time a meditative mode. We considered that the surrounding nature was our classroom, where trees, animals, and all things along the sideways interestingly became our learning materials. So, we occasionally paused to carefully learn and share about certain things at certain spots; mostly they were herbs, big trees, insects, or sacred objects. And many times, we got to a place where the view right in front kept us mesmerized. Some pictures revealing what was happening along the way were shown below.



Figure 1 : Silent moment before start off



Figure 2 : Leaves putting under cap for body cooling



Figure 3-5 : Walking trail and a surprising delight with wild orchids



Figure 6-7: Panoramic views from the mountain top



Figure 8-9 : The way we cook and eat

More than ten different edible plants and herbs were indicated, smelled, or tasted. Many of them, called in the native tongue, were explained about their properties and usage.

‘Ee-suai-jae’ can alleviate body heat and treat sore eyes. ‘Ban-jae’ is eaten with chili paste. ‘Tor-kom’ or bitter bush is chopped, soaked in water, and then rubbed on skin to reduce heat. ‘A-wa-ka-tor-jae’ bears very sweet and tasty fruit. Roots of ‘Sue-ue-guae’ can stimulate lactation in mother. ‘Mae-ja-gui’ contains haematinic property. The alburnum of ‘Ka-pue-jae’ is best for making axe handle.

While walking, our Lahu friends also shared their stories and myths associated with the environment.

Don’t touch unused woodpile seen along the way. Ghosts who own it will follow you!

Once upon a time, banana tree and pine tree had a conversation together. “I can grow tall and reach for the sky if I stay on the mountain”, said pine tree. “But I

can give out water throughout the year if I stay down at the riverbank”, replied banana tree. So, both of them got their right habitats ever since.

On top of Mount Pak-kood, there is a ruined spirit house called ‘Baan-pee-kao’, which literally means ‘Old ghost house’. ‘Baan-pee-kao’ is one of the three most revered places in this neighborhood. It is told that there used to be a group of ghosts who came to play cards here. They left marks on grass, which were discovered by people the following morning.

As we hiked across two mounts, Ling-yao and Bak-kud-tui, we learned that they are the major contributors of water we use every day since the village’s main river and its tributaries originate from here. And when we came close to the source of the river, the need to preserve and keep the water clean was felt. The feeling was even stronger when some of our Lahu friends went to get water from the very water source and bring it back for us to drink and cook. *“The water from this source is always cool, odorless, and sweet.”* We, including many others, received and drank it with great honor and thanks.

Soon after lunch, we reached coniferous forest and the atmosphere changed to that of spacious, shady, and cool, making all of us more relaxed and enjoyable. However, the moment of ecstasy was still to come. In late afternoon, one hour before we got to destination, breathtaking scenery suddenly appeared right before our eyes. It was an open field of pine trees where there were countless number of wild orchids attached to them. All were in full bloom! Many stood dazedly watching this beauty for they never expected this anywhere else except in mythical paradise. Some were moved to tears and had the strong sense that they wanted to protect this fragile nature, and talking on this topic remained hot for a big while. Meanwhile, what made local friends even happier was the opportunity to play host, to welcome, and to present all this extraordinary experiences to us.

Overall, we can clearly see that the Lahu’s folk wisdom regarding indigenous species, especially plants and herbs, is very rich. And many still possess and make use of it in their daily life. In other words, they have it in the way that everything from nature is usable and produces no waste. All basic needs can be simply obtained from forest. This has made the hiking so joyful that everyone seems to take pleasure in learning and sharing all the time, so forget about the hardship of walking. Later, we spent time together to reflect upon the experiences, and here are some of them.

Local people:

- *“Walking up through these areas, I recalled the time when I was young. Thirty years ago, I came here frequently with my parents to grow opium⁵. It used to be our*

⁵ Opium used to be legal in Thailand several decades ago. However, due to the aid of the Royal Project promoting crop substitution, as well as other forms of law enforcement, the overall of opium poppy fields has decreased dramatically from more than 24,000 hectares in 1979 to less than 300 hectares in 2009.

family's farmland, when opium was one of the economic crops in this region. This land was apt to cultivate opium. They grew well all over this place. Its latex was our valuable goods sold to as far as Chiangmai, and also our sacred offering offered for guardian spirits of the forest." The headman of the village recalled and gladly shared with us stories of the places where he belonged.

- Mountains around this area are so important to Lahu people in the sense that they are the location of three most revered places; Baan-pee-kaao (Old ghost house), Tor-maai-mai-mee-bai (Leafless old stump), and Roi-phra-putta-baat (Buddha's footprint).
"They are sacred to us. We, Lahu people always come here to pray and make offerings to the spirits every New Year time. We also tell spirits to help us achieve things." said the headman of the village. The telling of the sacredness of nature like this has been repeated a few times, showing how much important it is for them as this belief and tradition has been passed on for generations.
- *"Today, we are very happy because you guys have come to visit us here. This is the place where our ancestors used to live and our roots and cultures are kept. So, it's such a great honor and good thing that you can make it coming all the way up here and witness our history with your own eyes."*, said Lahu friends proudly to visitors.
- *"I've learned more about how to take good care of the forest and nature while walking with your team. Besides, I am glad to share meals with you guys in nature."*
- *"I hope this trail can become famous and attract more tourists, but I am concerned that the beautiful nature may be destroyed by them."*

Visitors:

- *"All experiences that we have are rare and extraordinary. Never before have we seen such a great beauty of nature like this, and never before have we thought that this could ever exist anywhere on earth. Our impression is beyond words."*
- *"Although my body was tired, my mind and my heart were energized as if there were particles of life force pouring down from the above exuberant foliage when I walked through the dense forest. I felt refreshed. While standing on the top of the mountain, I felt connection between sky and earth. My feelings were expanded, full, and respectful. I could sense appreciation that I had toward the whole nature, including earth, trees, forests, mountains, and sky."*
- *"I meditated during walking. I allowed my head to relax and have a break."*
- *"To eat food freshly got from nature, cooked in bamboo tubes, and nicely decorated on thick and soft banana leaves, for me is more than happy. It's such a privilege. You can't have this in cities."*
- *"I learned so many things about local herbs, trees, and other species, and their usage. This is quite impressive that even many of the Lahu people have never known about it. I would like them to know that this is their assets, this is their priceless capitals which is not just good for them but also for everyone else."*
- *"I just come back to my own livelihood and realize that I could never be able to survive in nature like the way they do. Once they come into forest, they can find anything they want and walk away with everything they need. But for me, I must spend money to live. This is worrisome."*
- *"For me, I had three moments of miracle with nature: first, the full bloom wild orchids, second, the sunset views on the mountain top, and third, the wild flowers*

spinning down from the sky. They are so surprising and spectacular. Besides, everyone was so hospitable to me. Thank you very much.”

- *“By listening to your old dear stories, I feel warm and impressed seeing how much you are connected to this place.” A visitor said to his Lahu friends. “This place will not be known only for its natural beauty, but also for its soul, roots, and history. How can we make the next generations learn to love for their land, just like their parents do?”*
- *“In the future, we should set up guidelines for those who may come here as tourists so that the fragile nature will be protected and traditional ways of life with respectful manner toward nature will still be maintained. I believe that by doing this way of tourism, it could restore the real strength of the community.”*

Summary

From this activity, every local participant felt glad and happy due to many reasons. Many said they were glad because they could welcome guests and show them what they were proud of. They were happy also because they were in touch with beautiful and pure nature, learned about useful herbal plants and their own culture and wisdom, and were able to help each other like cooking and carrying stuff. What the nature around this neighborhood significantly means to them are apparently as follow:

- Beauty and purity
- Sacredness
- The ancestors’ livelihood
- The provision of daily basic needs

They also saw that eco-friendly tourism could be possible, for economic reason, while the ancient wisdom and beauty and sacredness of nature have to be preserved, too. Basically, they enjoyed this hiking in nature very much, including the opportunity to get together to show their spirit of cooperation.

For visitor participants, overall it was the uplifting impression that everyone had toward the amazing virgin nature; beautiful wild life, spectacular views, rich knowledge of local herbs and trees, and the tribe’s historical values. And this became their intense feelings of love, cherish, and even being possessive so that they wanted so much to protect the nature in whatever way they can. They also felt concerned and sad seeing the fact that some animals were killed to give a dinner of welcome at one night. Similar worry was also felt regarding the ongoing degradation of forests around the area at the moment. They just wanted to keep the original state of nature and let it be good for the sake of long-lasting happiness for all Lahu friends. Eco-cultural tourism with appropriate management was discussed hoping that it could help to move this community toward harmony and sustainability. Besides, the hiking itself became a superb meditative moment for some participants so that they could really relax, contemplate about their life, and enjoy the connection with greater nature.

2. Vision-quest in Khao-ee-to national forest, Prachinburi Province

Background

Khao-ee-to national forest is a watershed forest of one of the Bangkok's tributaries. It covers the area of 21 square kilometers, in which there are 5 creeks, with many small waterfalls and ponds, running from north to south. The trees are those of mixed varieties and bamboo groves are prominent. For the activity, we chose one spot upstream of the third creek where it was quieter and the tourists rarely passed by. Vision-quest was actually one of the six workshops that made up the whole transformative process for cultivating social activists, who would subsequently work for communities in the Bangkok area. Since it aimed to work with people's inner qualities like values and worldviews on the holistic paradigm, deep contemplation with a heightened state of awareness was predominantly necessary. And with the great care and support from Mother Nature, one who goes into self-inquiry in solitude may experience renewal and new understandings, so that after coming back he or she, with the new eyes, could then create profound changes in society. Under this intention, this outdoor learning program was then initiated and designed, full of hope and excitement.

The learning process

In vision-quest, the nature connection is more intimate and intense. Participants must fast and be alone in noble silence for the whole period of time. The aim is not at all for physical pleasure, but the inner practice. The main activity was the 2 night solo time camping in nature, flanked by tuning in and tuning out time. In tuning in, each and every participant was invited to share their personal intention, put aside their worries or attachments, and gradually move into the present moment. When the departing evening came, they, in the circle of send-off ceremony, were blessed, did a brief meditation, and then left the circle one by one. Two nights later after finishing the sacred quest, each came back into the circle to receive a welcome with the blessing of transition. Personal experiences, including all sorts of perception, impressions, or insights, were written down and shared in group shortly afterwards.

The learning process was developed under the holistic concept with the following important attributes.

- Direct experience: long, direct, and close contact to nature and the surrounding, as well as the direct confrontation with one's own hardships of both physical and mental.
- Contemplation: sufficient length of time to slow down and be mindful in all sorts of perception; sensing, feeling, thinking, etc.
- Connectedness: relating whatever perceived to self, way of life, and life purpose.

Within the embrace of Mother Nature, one could potentially learn to alleviate the source of suffering, the divide, and regain the life's connection in the profound way. Such change would subsequently affect the way one views life, acts, and contributes things to the world.

The phenomenological outcomes

“Fasting!” or “Going without food!” was quite shocking for some newcomers. They were quite nervous at the first place knowing what was going to happen. And some even withdrew because of their health concerns. There were finally 16 people who decided to join the program. They then were well prepared and the activities helped them to little by little get close to nature. First, all information needed was provided and participants were instructed how to basically take care of themselves in such physical constraints. Furthermore, they were also mentally prepared by familiarizing themselves toward nature, searching the very spot of their own to set up tent by listening to their inner calling, and together performing ceremony of blessing just before departing. After reading the vision-quest creed, all was in a brief silent moment, then left for the quest one by one at their own timing. They now felt collected, safe, and ready.



Figure 10 : The send-off ceremony before going into the quest

Everything went well and two nights later every participant came back safe and sound. After the intense immersion in nature, here are some of their immediate reflections.

- *“I experienced difficulties in myself; my busy mind, I can’t get rid of it. For me, the more solo, the more muddled. I just see how much it’s needed to be aware and come back to take good care of my mind.”*
- *“I was aware of many different sounds around me. From chirping of birds and insects, to termites after nightfall, then back to cocks’ crowing at dawn. I noticed them as if they were my clocks.”*
- *“I spent time reviewing events in my own life, including my works, and my spare times. I also meditated. It’s refreshing and joyful.”*
- *“I saw rocks and trees as if they were there for so long time. On the other hand, we, human beings are new and just arrive. In this sense, I’m afraid we were nothing but mere disturbing things to nature.”*

From above, reflections upon personal perceptions are quite prominent. In other words, each has got sufficient time to contemplate deeply into oneself so that they started to gain one crucial ability called ‘self-awareness’.



Figure 11 - 13 : The surroundings where vision-quest was carried out

Thereafter, each participant was asked to silently write or draw about what they had got from the quest, and somewhat similar results were obtained. Ten people wrote mainly about their own internal states, or what they saw themselves from within. Four wrote about nature and environment preservation. One drew pictures of nature and environment. While another one said she had no connection with the activities.

The contents each participant gave reflected different levels of profundity. For example, many contemplated about their life, allowed things in nature to remind and review what they did or have been doing. *“I see my life as if it’s a stream of water, while problems and challenges are like rocks that block along the way. Nevertheless, water never stops, it flows through. Just like how my life is, whatever hard things happen it still goes on.”* Also, some of them went deep into themselves, observing thoughts and feelings arising within. They could be many things ranging from fears, worries, boredom, to calm, peace, and even insights.

- *“By truly being with myself, I recognized my inner peace. I’ve got nothing to think or to do. Also, I practiced patience, facing my hunger and facing fears at night.”*

- *“Imaginations can make you fear. It may lead you to ghosts or tigers if you follow it. So, if you see that wherever you stay is like your home, the surroundings change. If you can think good, give, and appreciate, you’ll be happy.”*
- *“I spent most of my time observing myself, as well as my surrounding nature. I followed my breath slowly. I listened to birds’ chirping, then frogs, then insects. When sky darkened, I caught the smell of balm and banana inside my tent. I sensed coolness on my skin. I constantly heard the sound of water. I went into sleep feeling oneness with nature around me. I recalled events in my life as far as I could. I saw that there were so many people and many things that made up what I am today. I appreciated them one by one, and suddenly I realized how fortunate I am! Actually, they gave me love, they shared my happiness, they gave me lessons, and they supported me when I despaired. And when I looked deeper, it’s not only people, but they are all lives, all things, and many more things that have co-constructed me so far. I am really thankful to them, I thank farmers, I thank every rice grain I ate, and I thank sunshine, clouds, rain, and rivers that cherish rice. **I feel I am a part of this greater nature and greater nature is a part of me, too. Thanks for supporting me all along, from now on I’m going to support you, too.**”*

Whereas there were some participants who obviously showed concerns about nature and environment. *“We need to keep soil, water, and forests clean. Whatever we bring into nature has to be brought back, and not to leave any trash behind.”* *“Nature doesn’t need us but we, human beings certainly cannot survive without nature. We must take responsibility for whatever changes happening in nature so far, and now we should realize that such changes are harmful to the world. Thus, we need to do make a difference so that humanity shall be able to live on.”*

Summary

Due to participants’ strong commitment and determination, the results were quite positive. Most of them gained awareness within themselves, seeing clearly their own thoughts and feelings. They have also got a chance to retreat, to pacify their minds, and to make their life review. Further, some of them went into deep contemplation and came back with new understandings regarding life and the world.

Persons who experienced vision-quest might transform and broaden up their worldviews. But in order to do this, one has to embody a fundamental quality called self-awareness, the ability to view oneself (body, mind, and heart) objectively. It is to perceive things the way they are, here and now. From the reflections and journals, many participants has shown such ability, in the saying like *“I saw my fear and hunger, all the time.”*, *“My mind became calmer, and sometimes I felt bored and hungry; however, I just noticed them and stayed on.”*, or *“I followed my breath slowly. I listened to birds’ chirping, then frogs, then insects. I caught the smell of balm and banana inside my tent. I sensed coolness on my skin. I constantly heard the sound of water.”* By this ability, one could then have a deep connection with oneself, doing the inner work and come up with a new perspective which affects how

one views the world. This is what it is needed to create social changes and innovations that lead toward sustainability and harmony.

Conclusion

The holistic outdoor classrooms were successfully created and carried out by three main components (Fig. 1). They were:

- Reverential ecology with other attributes of direct experience, contemplation, connectedness, and community; as the methodology.
- Natural environment (mountainous forest, rain forest, etc.); as the backdrop or place.
- Folk wisdom, as well as self, inner perceptions, and personal experiences; as the learning content.

As a result, the outcomes of these two classrooms clearly affected at least two out of four domains of environmental literacy: attitudes and behaviors (Hollweg et al., 2011). First, the activities apparently drew people's interests and improved sensitivity toward nature and environment. Many participants were touched and developed great love and admiration, as well as respect in nature they encountered. This has turned into motivation so that they can, from now on, commit themselves to protect nature and environment in many ways. And for those who gained deeper insights, they could develop greater connection and appreciation and come up with new perspectives regarding life and nature. All of these then could lead to positive behaviors later on. In other words, the right attitudes become determinants of the right behaviors.

Meanwhile, environmentally responsible behaviors were promoted throughout the programs as participants had direct experiences of how to keep nature intact and clean, i.e. no trash throwing, minimizing human intervention, etc. Besides, knowledge and understandings regarding eco-cultural aspect were also interestingly introduced, bringing about deeper and holistic sense that one has for nature.

In short, from the two occasions in nature, insightful moments happened and were associated with the following qualities.

- Self-awareness, self-review, and self-relaxation through meditative states
- Relation of what one perceives to eco-cultural values, seeing nature as source of basic needs, cultural roots, as well as sacred places
- Intense feelings of love and belonging in nature, with the strong commitment to nature protections
- Great connection and appreciation toward nature, leading to new perspectives regarding life living and nature caring

And when we put these up into a big picture of how we, human beings co-exist with nature, the outcome can be more impressive (Figure 14). Imagine if we view nature as oneness, i.e. we and nature are one (such as one mentioned earlier by a participant), then we tend to love it the same way we love ourselves, and we potentially intend to appreciate it and do whatever way we can to protect and take good care of it.

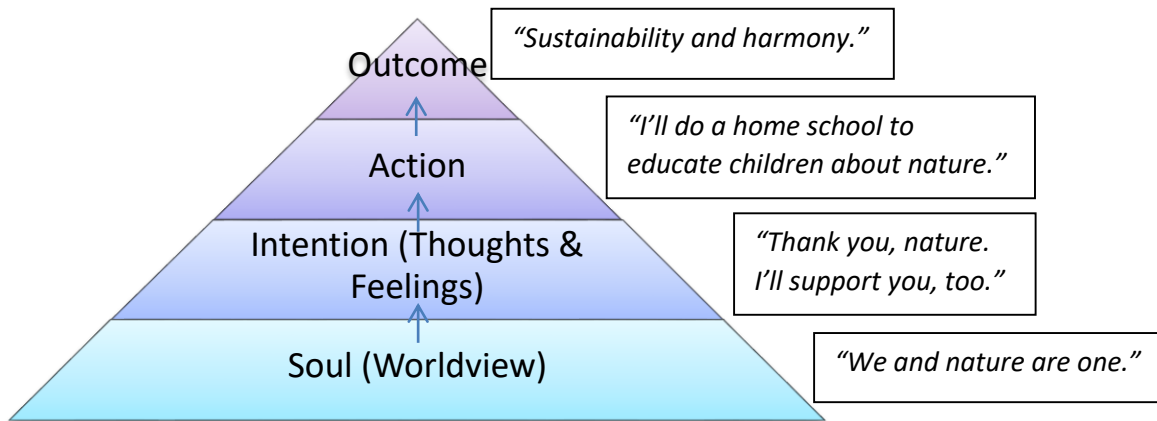


Figure 14 : Four levels of reality in nature connection

In other words, any actions started from right worldview inside shall produce right outcome outside in long run. Most importantly, when coming into contact with nature those who go with his/her soul could find more security and tend to act out accordingly with unconditional love. So, the way they do and treat others will be with love and care and result in true happiness. As said by Phra Paisal Visalo, a highly respected Buddhist monk, *“What if all the trees but one that you are looking after are burnt away? Will you still happily do it?”* You can feel content and be free while doing your best without much worrying about the outcome because you know, from within, that you are doing the right thing (Kunatiranont, et al., 2017).

As they show positive consequences to environmental literacy, soulful outdoor classrooms like these can potentially be appropriate supplements to the mainstream environmental education, in which knowledge and academic skills are predominantly emphasized, yet inner reality and direct experiences are still very much missing.

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