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Listening to Children: Perceptions of Nature and Biophilia at Mountain School

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Listening to Children: Perceptions of Nature

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Background

Partners
Western Washington University
North Cascades Institute

Focus
This exploratory study investigates children’s perceptions and experiences of nature during a residential outdoor environmental education program and contributes to an understanding of how nature experiences arouse biophilia, a love of life and all living things.

Research Questions
1. What are children’s perceptions and experiences of nature in nature?
2. What types of experiences with nature support the development of biophilia in children?

Research Context
Two grade 5 classes from an urban school participate in three-day wilderness-based residential environmental education program.

Methods
To understand children’s responses to nature we conducted interviews, observed children during the program, and collected students’ written work.

Data analysis procedures
Transcripts from interviews and the samples of student work were read and rereded and coded for the common themes that appeared. Kellert’s value categories provided a place to begin our analysis of the data and identification of “dispositions associated with the human inclination to affiliate with the natural world” (Kellert 1996, p. 26).

Findings

Children’s perceptions of nature changed over the course of their involvement in Mountain School. This change was evident in both their interview responses and written work. We observed an increase in the number of children who expressed scientific-ecological, naturalistic, aesthetic, humanistic, moralistic, and symbolic valuing of nature and a corresponding decrease in the number of children who expressed negativistic views (Table 5.1).

Table 5.1: Range of Children’s Expressions of Environmental Values (n=33)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Pre-Program</th>
<th>Day 1-3</th>
<th>Post-Program</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ecological</td>
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<td>14</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Symbolic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ecocentric</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naturalistic</td>
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<td>16</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Further Research

There is a need to study how children’s biophilic expressions can develop through urban nature experiences, such as surveying local wild species or mapping open space and parks in and around urban centers. Also, since studies suggest that the majority of outdoor activity occurs along trails in urban and state parks and in established campgrounds, research into children’s biophilic experiences in “front country” or day-use areas is warranted.

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References
(Kellert 1996, p. 26).