



The Nature of Learning

By Kylie Robertson

I can't quite recall where I first came across home education, but we did consider it an option for a long time before we took the leap. I had always wondered from the time our eldest was a baby – a highly active and happy-when-outside baby – how he would cope with being stuck inside in a classroom for six hours a day. This was an unnatural way to spend your days for both me and my husband as we are outdoorsy-type people; we work and play outside and it was perfectly normal that we should have a child that was that way inclined. We joke that he will rebel and grow up to work in an office block as an accountant (not that there's anything wrong with that).

So as our little boy grew, and the time came to consider our education options, we looked into home education; I even staked out our local group (sorry guys). I wasn't sure, but not having ever met anyone who home schooled, I just wanted to check that such people actually did exist, and met up with each other and that, well you know, they didn't have two heads or anything! Well, it was not to be at that time, but a special connection was made at the staking out and, little did we know that the person I picked out at the park to ask if it was the home ed group, and have a brief conversation with, would become an important part of our home ed journey.

So we went on to kinder and were fortunate to attend one with a wonderful outdoor space and a Steiner-influenced approach kinder that was about play and exploration and very un-school like. This worked well for Kobhi and we all enjoyed the experience immensely. I was welcomed and encouraged to be involved, and assisted with taking some nature-based activities with the children. Working in the conservation industry for over 15 years doing bushland restoration and lots of environmental education, I had always had a keen interest in education.

Upon reflection, my interest in environmental education came from my experiences working with children in lots of tree-planting projects over many years. I always found their level of enthusiasm for nature activities amazing, but more intriguing was the interesting effects this had on some of the more so-called challenging children. I began to observe that, in every single session we took, a teacher would say to me, "See that child over there?" and I would say, "Yes, the one doing a fabulous job, watering, digging, stacking pots..." or what ever it was. "Yes", the teacher would





say, “yes he”,(and it was always a he) “...is normally my most challenging child.”

I guess that is where the seed of thought was planted: that not every child benefits from school, and that some actually do much better learning outside and actively. From there my interest in this grew, and I even studied and gained a qualification as a teacher, but decided that the classroom was not for me either, and eventually put my skills to use supporting schools in environmental activities, as difficult as that is.

And then along came motherhood and, surprise surprise, I had one of these so-called “challenging” children. So, back to where I was. We went along to kinder and all had a great time and, after having my doubts about school, my son was keen. We had a small school in a country setting, around the corner; surely they would be doing lots of outside stuff. We decided to give it a go and, even after doing loads to support the school in its nature-based learning – doing veggie patches, getting the school through the Sustainable Schools Program and doing a term of biodiversity with the science teacher including ecosystem audits, plant propagation & revegetation, - even then it was still a school system that did not fit my child.

We found ourselves in the principal’s office with a six year old in term three – exactly what I had suspected would happen had happened. Our boy did not suit the classroom and the classroom did not suit the boy. He had become a very different, unhappy and angry person and we decided, somewhat anxiously, that we would give homeschooling a go – just for a year, mind you. I hadn’t committed to home education totally, didn’t know how I’d do it, if it would work. etc. etc. Fortunately, I found a great source of information and support, and now a wonderful friendship, in a mother at the school who had home educated (yes, the one I had stopped at the park a year and half previously). The thought of home schooling grew and, from making more connections and talking with people who had, or knew someone who did, home school, the confidence that I could do it and wouldn’t be alone grew also. It is funny to think that this aspect – of being worried, of being alone – was to be completely unfounded. Now, after home schooling for just a year and a bit in the wonderful community I’m in, with loads of great families home educating and doing things together, I believe that I was more alone before. To me, one of the unseen benefits

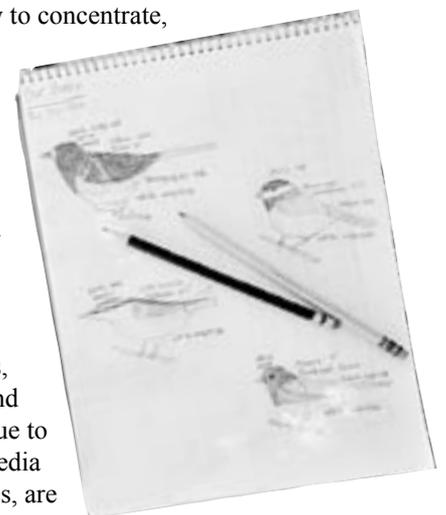
of home education, that I had no idea about, was that community is created again: we have time to enjoy other families and to do things with and for each other.

I think I can thank the community of home educators around me who, by sharing their ideas and ways of doing things, helped me to, relatively quickly but as yet not completely, unschool myself. I also have to thank a rather bad dose of glandular fever that my eldest had, forcing him to do nothing or rather, I should say, forcing me to do nothing school-like with him. It is surprising, even after having what I thought were strong beliefs in alternatives to classroom-based learning, to still revert back to school and education as I knew them and to try to apply them in a somewhat school-based manner. It is about trust – trusting that they will learn if not coerced – and it was through being forced, via glandular fever, to not “do school” to him, that I saw this happen. Through that time I saw how much learning was happening through conversation – learning I had not planned. And, as I love to plan, it has taken a lot for me to learn to let go, at least most of the time. So, this led me back to where I started: nature-based stuff. I let go of a lot of the ‘school at home’ learning and eased back into it with what we knew and loved.

We have always done a lot of nature-based stuff with our children. I guess school got in the road of our education for a while there but we got back to what is natural for us. The nature of learning is nature itself and as awareness of the need to live sustainably is becoming mainstream so too is the awareness of the physical, mental and emotional benefits of spending time in nature. I have followed this line of thought for a long time and I find it intriguing that it should be thought such a novel concept.

During studies for a teaching diploma I was researching the benefits to children of spending time in nature and, at the time, there wasn’t a great deal of research on that. There was loads of research on adults recovering faster in a room with a green view and being more productive in an office with a view but not much on children. What was out there however was quite remarkable in its findings.

In particular there was a study in the U.S. of children that were taken off ADHD drugs and prescribed green time (i.e. time in a natural setting). They have found that “ADHD symptoms in children are relieved after contact with nature. The ability to concentrate, complete tasks and follow directions improves dramatically after play in green natural settings. The greener the settings the more the relief”(Taylor et al 2001). There are plenty of theories as to why this is so. One is that children’s brains, often overstimulated and deprived of rest time due to the use of electronic media and fast-paced lifestyles, are



actually rested and restored by spending time in nature.

Who knows? But I do know that children are inherently drawn to exploring and enjoying nature from a very young age. When in a kinder filled with marvellous toys and equipment to use, the ladybug found in the sandpit will be the most popular thing. And now, thankfully, we are all more aware of the need for, and benefits of, nature-based learning and experiences. In fact, in Melbourne in April there was a conference – “Healthy Parks, Healthy People” – with specialists from around the world, including Richard Louv. Richard is the author of *Last Child in the Woods – Saving Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*, said to be the most influential book on this issue since Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*.

To us, there’s not much to discuss; it’s a part of who we are and what we do, and for us it works well. A key to our approach to nature-based learning is the nature journal. My boys have nature journals, as do our fellow nature learners, and we go on nature walks regularly. Sometimes we go on camps, but more about that later. They may use their journals, they may not; now, however, it is rare that they don’t get them out on a walk. In fact, a nature journal phenomenon has often occurred, where the children will just decide to sit down, get the journals out (if they aren’t already out) and start drawing or writing or sticking stuff in, sharing their discoveries and journal entries. They can do what they want with their journals and how they use them will grow and change as they do. There are times when the journals haven’t been out for ages, and then they’ve been used every day again. I believe they get so much out of the stillness, reflection, concentration, observation, recording, creating and sharing, and I look forward to looking through the many nature journals my boys and I will create over the years.

So finally, towards the end of our first year, we started to find our way of learning without school and at the start of our second year, somehow it happened: we were to share not only what we do as homeschoolers, but what our family business does as well.

My husband and I have been running a bushland restoration and environmental education business for a number of years, and we are fortunate to have an amazing crew with great knowledge and passion. One of our crew, our friend Pete, got his teaching diploma last year and was similarly intrigued, not only by the children’s interest in and enthusiasm for nature-based learning, but also by the disappointing limitations to approaching learning from this angle in the school system. It is especially disappointing when you consider how much can be learnt through nature studies, and the increasing evidence for the benefits of doing so. Especially as the idea of incorporating the natural outdoors as an integral part of children’s learning is not new. In 1903, Gillies and Hall in *Nature Studies in Australia* said, “One of the soundest maxims of teaching is: Strive to form a body of school interests by utilising the outdoors, the LIFE interests of the child.” Yet, over 100 years later, we are still trying to do this.

So Pete also decided the classroom wasn’t for him, and he has been providing his specialist skills to schools and home educators alike. Guess which kids are more engaged with their learning, and acquiring a depth of knowledge in their interest areas?

And so it came about that we would host a camp. What started as a suggestion from my lovely friend to go camping together somewhere natural and beautiful, turned into the first ever Wildthings Camp which we all really enjoyed (see Pete’s article p 31). We had 45 children and their families come along to the Prom, all with their nature journals and heaps of enthusiasm. We all had fun, loads of awesome journalling was done and shared, and we can’t wait to do it again!

For more information on nature journalling or nature-based learning, go to www.peninsulawildthings.com

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My Favourite Books