

Chapter 30

Mindfulness and Reconnection with Freshwater Ecosystems at the Meadows Center Education Program



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Abstract Opportunities for nature connection and equitable access to public green spaces are increasingly compromised and limited particularly within highly urbanized areas. Prevailing formal educational paradigms and pedagogies drive the biocultural homogenization of the mind as they privilege standardized, deterministic methodologies, and predetermined outcomes. The limiting of immersive and kinesthetic learning explorations and authentic meaning-making is problematic to biocultural conservation efforts and the formation of eco-consciousness, particularly among children. In this context, to cultivate an earth stewardship ethic, green public spaces open opportunities for eco-phenomenological, personally relevant experiences in nature and are integral to fostering ekistic understandings of physical, biocultural, and sociocultural environments. Sites for long-term research and education, such as the Meadows Center for Water and the Environment at Texas State University, are vital hubs for understanding socio-ecological systems through interdisciplinary perspectives and approaches with sensitivity and awareness. The center resides at one of the most prolific freshwater artesian springs in North America and is home to eight government-protected, threatened or endangered species. The educational program engages over 30,000 school children annually in outdoor education at the freshwater springs and nature preserve. This large educational interface creates rich opportunities for understanding the vital linkages of the inhabitants, habitats, and habits in an environmentally sensitive ecosystem. Mindfulness is an attentive lens for understanding and enhancing nature connection. Field environmental philosophy (FEP) provides a methodological approach to field experiences which allows students to examine themselves as co-inhabitants in an

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ecosystem, exploring ecological and ethical orientations and behavior. Current interdisciplinary research projects, curriculums, and strategies are explored.

Keywords Biocultural conservation · Contemplative pedagogy · Education · Field environmental philosophy · Mindfulness

30.1 The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment

The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment is one of Texas State University's six research centers. The University and the Meadows Center are located in central Texas in the city of San Marcos, along the innovation corridor between Austin and San Antonio (Fig. 30.1). San Marcos is one of the fastest-growing mid-sized cities in the United States with Austin being the country's fastest-growing large city in 2019 (KIUR 2015, 2019). Amazingly, amidst this urbanization boom, in a state whose land is 98% privately owned, is an almost unbelievable environmental oasis: the culturally and ecologically significant San Marcos Springs.

The springs emerge from limestone formations adjacent to a converted hotel that functions as the Meadows Center's base of operations since 2002. Hundreds of upwellings form a pool, known as Spring Lake, created by an impoundment 1 km downstream. The springs are entirely fed by the Edwards Aquifer, a biologically diverse groundwater system which provides primary water supply to over one million regional human inhabitants (Sharp et al. 2019) and to many economically and ecologically important Central Texas rivers and streams. In addition to their connection to this vital natural system making them a locus for understanding the interconnection of Central Texas ecoregions and hydrological systems, the San Marcos Springs are notable for their consistency and striking appearance. Most of the springs are small, putting out an amount of water comparable to an



Fig. 30.1 Features of Spring Lake and Operations Area of The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment, Texas State University, San Marcos. Source: Texas Natural Resources Information System (<https://data.mris.org/collection/af1ca25e-b38b-4203-90b8-d90f881963ae>)

upward-turned garden hose, displacing sediment with a characteristic boiling appearance. Some sediment disturbances may be 30 cm in diameter or more. By one engineering firm's estimate, most discharge less than 1 L of water a second during average flow conditions, although they are innumerable and account for the majority of the water in the pool (LBG-Guyton Associates et al. 2004).

Large and small springs are interspersed along the first 280 m of the pool and produce the majority of the water in the urban San Marcos River. Their consistency has kept the river flowing since at least the time of humans' first arrival in North America. Archeological evidence suggests persistent human interaction with the springs from the end of the last glacial period (Lohse 2013). For the past 171 years, an impoundment has increased the depth and residence time of the water at the beginning of the river. The springs have seen periods of drastically decreased output due to drought and groundwater extraction, but the quality and quantity of the spring flow continue to support a diversity of aquatic life including several endemic species that would be at risk of extinction if the springs ran dry.

The crystal blue, aquarium-like habitat created by the springs, seen in detail through the viewing wells of glass-bottom boats that have taken visitors on tours of the lake since the late 1940s, or the masks of snorkeling or SCUBA diving equipment, functions as an object of inquisitive curiosity, or as a striking focal point for meditative observation (Fig. 30.2). Using spring-viewing excursions as a central attraction, the Meadows Center engages over 120,000 people annually in environmental programming, 30,000 of whom are local school children and 50 percent of which originate from schools with high proportions of low-income students (Title I Schools according to Federal legislation).

30.2 Four Pillars of Action

The Meadows Center has the responsibility of being the key steward of the springs and the surrounding preserve. The Center fulfills its mission of inspiring research, innovation, and leadership that ensures clean, abundant water for the environment and all of humanity by integrating activities across four pillars of action:

- (a) *Education.* The Meadows Center views environmental education as a chief conservation strategy. Children by their very nature are curious and when that curiosity is sparked, they often ask questions, engage fully in educational discussions, and grow immensely in short periods. The Center invests in environmental education knowing that children are happier, healthier, and smarter in the outdoors. Every time we invest in a child's understanding of the natural world, we imbue in them an appreciation for the world they live in. These children grow up to become adults who care deeply for and often advocate to protect the natural world.
- (b) *Research:* Faculty, staff, and students conduct applied research to address real-world problems. Here researchers provide multidisciplinary expertise to advance

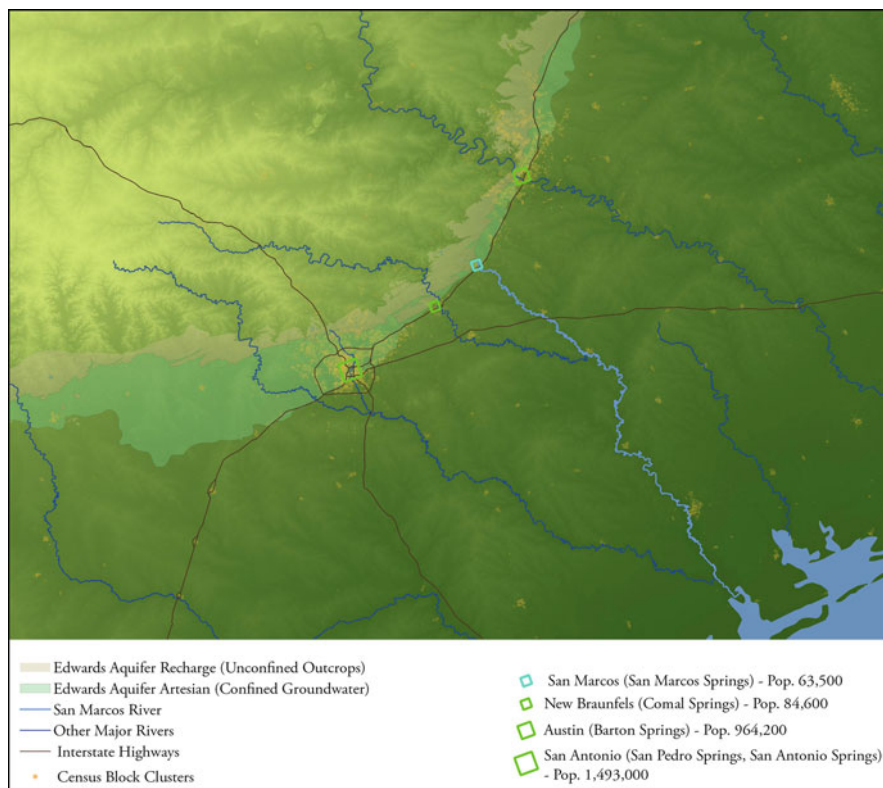


Fig. 30.2 The San Marcos Springs are part of a constellation of groundwater emergences from the Edwards Aquifer, which is in turn filled by rainfall to the north and west. Rhomboids indicate human inhabitation that are closely associated with the springs. All springs associated with the four urban areas shown contribute flow to Major Rivers and discharge to the Gulf of Mexico. River and Aquifer data adapted from Texas Water Development Board, 2020 (<https://www.twdb.texas.gov/mapping/gisdata.asp>), Census Block and Highway data adapted from US Census Bureau, 2019 (<https://www.census.gov/cgi-bin/geo/shapefiles/index.php>), Elevation data adapted from United States Geological Survey 3D Elevation Program (3DEP), 2020 (<https://www.usgs.gov/core-science-systems/ngp/3dep/about-3dep-products-services>). All in the public domain

science-based solutions for the most pressing water resource challenges facing Texas and the world beyond.

- (c) *Stewardship.* The Meadows Center is active in the San Marcos community and beyond. It strives to strengthen those ties by connecting stewardship of water and natural resources to quality of life, and cultivates a stewardship ethic and practice through the community-driven management of Spring Lake as well as local watershed activities across Texas.
- (d) *Leadership.* The Meadows Center supports responsible natural resource and water policy in Texas and convenes stakeholders to address critical water and natural resource concerns. Staff often serves with communities and

organizations in voluntary leadership roles in diverse contexts to build the capacity of local communities for protecting and managing their own water and natural resources.

30.3 The Four-Step Cycle of Field Environmental Philosophy

The four pillars of the Meadows Center offer an approach that is complementary to the methodology of field environmental philosophy (FEP). FEP is centered on the interrelations between the ways of knowing and researching nature and the ways of dwelling (Rozzi 1997). Ecological sciences can play a crucial role in motivating ethical changes in the ways contemporary society relate to the biosphere. Sciences can change the ways humans perceive, know, and understand ecosystems and their place in them. FEP offers a methodology that is appropriate to integrate science and ethics at sites that conduct long-term socio-ecological research, such as the Meadows Center (Fig. 30.2).

FEP integrates ecological research and environmental ethics into biocultural education and conservation through an interrelated four-step cycle: (1) interdisciplinary ecological and philosophical research; (2) composition of metaphors and communication through simple narratives; (3) design of guided field experiences with an ecological and ethical orientation; (4) implementation of in situ conservation areas (Rozzi 2010, 2011). At the Meadows Center, the Four Pillars of Action intersect with FEP's 4-step cycle. The *education pillar* reflects FEP-Step 3. Experiences of "direct encounters" with ecosystems and different organisms in their habitats through field activities such as the glass-bottom boats, snorkeling and SCUBA, "bug picking," and other mindfulness activities transform knowledge about biodiversity. At the same time, these activities also promote the awareness of, and ethical attitudes toward, co-inhabiting with diverse living beings. The Meadows Center's *research pillar* directly corresponds to FEP-Step 1. Interdisciplinary research is based on endangered flora and fauna, such as the Texas Wild Rice (*Zizania texana*) and the Texas Blind Salamander (*Eurycea rathbuni*). The Meadow's *stewardship pillar* bridges FEP-Step 1 and Step 3. The *leadership pillar* converges with FEP-Step 4 in the spirit of developing multi-generational teams of volunteers to continue water conservation in Texas for years to come.

The mindfulness approaches being developed at the Meadows Center are directly linked to FEP-Step 2: communication of discoveries through the composition and use of metaphors and FEP—Step 3: that facilitate a deep understanding of our relationship to this highly diverse community. The four pillars of the Meadows Center show the significant value beyond quantitative sciences. The more we recognize the socio-ecological significance of a site, the more we are drawn into a stewardship or biocultural ethic.

30.4 Reconnecting through Mindfulness

Mindfulness has origins in Buddhism, Greek, and existential philosophy and humanism (Brown et al. 2007). It is important to note the two dominant conceptions of mindfulness in theory and practice. First, *meditative mindfulness* or eastern mindfulness is characterized by being present in the current moment in an open and non-judgmental way. It was popularized by Kabat-Zinn (1994) drawing heavily on meditative practices. Today it is often therapeutically utilized for stress reduction. Second, *creative mindfulness*, or western mindfulness is characterized by having an open, curious orientation to the environment and the development of novel distinctions (Carmody 2014). It has been largely influenced by Ellen Langer (2000). It employs approaches to facilitate the creative state where individuals are actively noticing, restructuring their environments, and creating new categories that are “consciously controlled” (Moscardo 1999).

Mindfulness is a vital ingredient to durable and meaningful nature connection. Schultz (2002, p. 67) suggests that nature connection can be described by the “extent to which an individual includes nature within his/her cognitive representation of self.” Powerful nature experiences and the formation and expression of a vital ecological selfhood can be a catalyst to care for natural spaces and the formation of an earth stewardship ethic.

The genesis for nature connectedness is being mindfully awake and attentive to one’s surroundings and one’s existence and interaction with nature, in the present moment. How easily we can fall into mindless routine! We are so overstimulated and hurried that our ability to slow down, notice, and be fully present is appreciably limited. This current reality, coupled with limited opportunities for access to nature and a compromised ability to “be here now,” accentuates the value and opportunity for robust environmental education programs. This has motivated the implementation of mindfulness into education programs at the Meadows Center. Specifically, understanding how humans connect and engage with nature and the associated meanings and outcomes of informal science programs within urban contexts, are relationships which cannot be examined or resolved in the short term. The ways in which we come to understand ourselves in relation to ecological systems co-evolve with how we understand our connection and engagement with nature in general. This orientation aids us in incorporating the myriad of metaphorical lenses we live by.

30.4.1 Multiple Mindfulness Approaches

Efforts to bridge the fundamental gaps between formal and informal science programs at the Meadows Center are being resolved through mindfulness approaches and practices at multiple levels of the educational program. Dussler and Deringer (2020) explored the effects of mindfulness interventions with environmental interpreters at the Meadows Center and their subsequent descriptions of mindfulness,

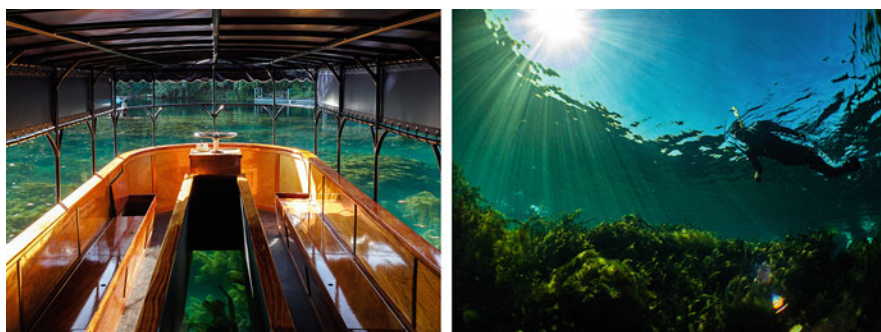


Fig. 30.3 Glass-bottom Boat (left) and Snorkeler (right) in Spring Lake. The “lenses” that grant vision into the waters of the San Marcos Springs can become “conceptual lenses” for socio-ecological investigations. Photos courtesy of The Meadows Center

nature connection, and interpretive practice. Interpreters participated in a 4 week mindfulness program that included an introduction to foundational elements and origins of mindfulness. Activities and meetings occurred at the preserve surrounding Spring Lake and in the waters of the lake via kayaking and snorkeling (Fig. 30.3). Focus groups, journaling, and debriefing provided space for interpreters to process and share their stories and experiences. Accompanying mindful exercises and journal prompts were included between weekly meetings at the lake. Mindful practice included noticing walks, wandering, body radar, engaging senses, nature sketching and “zooming in” with hand lenses, listening and breathing meditations, nature journaling, found objects, and stories of the day.

In qualitative interviewing, and constructivist grounded theory coding and analysis, several prominent themes emerged which have shaped the Center’s future programming and staff development initiatives.

Interpreters experienced the construct of mindfulness in a variety of ways. It enhanced personal experiences of nature. It also created more authentic interpretive experiences of nature. New connections and novel distinctions emerged in areas that interpreters had often frequented in their interpretive programs. Interpreters realized that without slowing down and taking the time to immerse and connect mindfully, it was easy to be in “zombie mode” and just be “going through the motions.” Mindfulness was also seen as a way to connect more deeply with nature. As expressed by one of the interpreters, it “reduced the stress in my head and filtered overstimulation.”

Two mindfulness practices were particularly instructive. First, the practice of *wandering* encourages interpreters to let go of preconceived notions and expectations. Second, the practice of *imagining* the body as a powerful and receptive radar scanning the surrounding landscape can mobilize embodied sense experiences as well as trust in our exploratory capacities.

30.4.2 Mindfulness and FEP's Metaphor of the "Hand Lens"

Mindfulness approaches at the Meadows Center are expanded by FEP educational methodology that enables seeing a place through multiple complementary metaphors or "conceptual lenses." This combination of methodologies provides us with a more holistic perspective of the co-evolving nature of our life habits, the habitats, and the community of co-inhabitants we dwell within.

The *glass-bottom boats* at the Meadows Center is the most iconic lens offered to visitors (Fig. 30.3). The glass breaks the tension between two co-evolving worlds: it shifts our gaze from the surface into the aquatic world of the lake. This aerial perspective is inaccessible without the lens provided by the glass-bottom boats. This lens helps us to see the aquifer, which otherwise remains "invisible" as only an abstract concept.

The metaphors that we use embody our conceptual lenses and inform our behaviors. In other words, our orientation about ourselves in relation to nature functions as poetry that we live by. Our orientation, metaphorically, represents "lenses" through which society explores ecosystems, biodiversity, and the relations that we humans have with them. To "change one's lens" implies action. It can move us beyond observation into conservation. Moreover, it can move us to a new awareness and attitude of co-inhabitation with biodiversity (Rozzi 2011). Through these metaphors, "objects" we observe can be perceived as co-inhabitants rather than mere "natural resources." When we change our metaphor or lens, we see the "invisible" and we hear previously unheard voices. When we change our perceptions about ourselves in relation to the ecosystem we are co-inhabiting, our orientation changes as well. With this lens, a place is perceived as a mosaic of co-evolving narratives with a diversity of names, stories, and heritages, a diversity of co-inhabitants that spans generations.

30.4.3 Bug Picking

A favorite educational activity for our visiting school children is "Bug Picking." It involves tactile examinations of aquatic vegetation, macroinvertebrates, and water taken from the Spring Lake. Students equipped with species identification cards and hand lenses learn about the effects of water quality on biodiversity in ecological systems (Fig. 30.4). They become detectives as they touch, feel, and smell the water. "Eewwww" turns into "coool" and most encouragingly, an "ahhhhhh" as they begin to understand that what lives in the water will let them know about the health of the water and ecosystems. Further study reveals the biological and ecological requirements these species need in order to exist and to thrive. A deeper appreciation is instilled when these young scientists determine that the San Marcos Springs are very clean and healthy. How is that possible given all of the surrounding threats to



Fig. 30.4 “Bug Picking” activity at The Meadows Center. (a) Aquatic macroinvertebrate reflex viewer. (b) A damselfly, (*Calopterygidae*), nymph. (c) A mayfly, (*Baetidae*), nymph. (d) Childrens’ aquatic macroinvertebrate sample bucket and tools. Photographs by Sam Massey

the ecosystem? What does “protect” mean to you? Why would you want to protect this place, this ecological system, this part of you?

These salient moments involve an integration of “emotions and concepts derived from philosophical, scientific, and vernacular knowledge into the observation of surprising and unexpected behaviors of invertebrates, students and other participants experientially apprehend the concept of co-inhabitants” (Rozzi 2019, p. 277). Engaging all of our senses through recognition of our co-inhabitants as well as an awareness of their anatomy and unique habits can set the stage for numerous discoveries.

In addition to bug picking, activities such as observing and donning owl eyes, deer ears, employing raccoon touch, and dog noses can create sensory pathways for discovery and appreciation which are limited through overreliance on our bipedal stance and movement. For example, discoveries were made of an entire realm of olfactory sensations while moving our “dog noses” close to the ground. The fragrant understory of the preserve cannot be experienced from the standing position; hence, it had remained previously undiscovered by interpreters who had walked these trails many times over several years. Adding to the delight and power of such discoveries is the ability to share our experiences with others. Describing our sense experiences

with others, hearing how others qualify sensation, intuition, and lived experience is vital to eco-phenomenological engagement with bugs and other organisms.

30.4.4 *Sacred Springs Powwow*

Understanding the depth and extent of the area's biocultural significance and importance to Indigenous cultures is essential to the Meadow Center's vision. The 1983 documentary *River of Innocence* triggered biocultural awareness when it was aired periodically on Texas public television stations. The documentary filmed underwater archeologists at San Marcos Springs uncovering a remarkably large and diverse assemblage of prehistoric stone tools. This discovery showed the importance of the springs to its past and contemporary Indigenous inhabitants. The archeological discoveries stimulated the first "Sacred Springs Powwow" held at Aquarena Springs in 1994, which evolved into a large annual Native American cultural celebration (Fig. 30.5). The San Marcos Indigenous Cultures Institute (ICI), a group led by local members of the Miakan-Garza Band of the Coahuiltecan Tribe, organizes this twenty-first-century version of the Sacred Springs Powwow in open spaces formerly occupied by a golf course and gift shop. Among the many dances, songs, and stories shared by the various attending tribal groups is the Miakan-Garza Coahuiltecan creation story. This story cites the largest spring in San Marcos as the



Fig. 30.5 2015 Sacred Springs Powwow. Photograph by Sam Massey

place of emergence for the first people onto the surface of the Earth (Xica Media 2020). Smaller ritual and cultural services are held at the springs by members of the ICI periodically throughout the year.

30.5 Environmental Interpretation and Mindfulness

The National Association of Interpretation defines interpretation as “a mission-based communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the meanings inherent in the resource” (National Association for Interpretation n.d.). The starting point for sound environmental interpretation is authentic, emotive, and personally meaningful experiences of nature. Tilden (1977, p. 17) encourages interpreters to provoke emotion and positions interpretation as “an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information.” Provoking emotion through the use of rigid schedules, facts, and rules is highly unlikely. This holds true on both personal levels and within the context of interpretive programming and participation. The revelation of meanings and relationships is forged through “intellectual and emotional connections” (National Association for Interpretation n.d.). The efficacy and durability of environmental interpretation are located primarily within powerful personal experiences in nature. These experiences are cultivated through intentional mindful engagement and practice (Dussler and Deringer 2020). Interpreters are the critical conduit for promoting and fostering nature connection and meaning within the Meadow Center for Water and the Environment’s environmental education programs and public interface. Interpretation can create a forum for a social learning experience and construction of meaning which challenges assumptions and overly simplified approaches to learning and behavioral change (Orams 1994).

30.6 A Philosophical and Pedagogical Shift from Prevailing Formal Education

Informal science programs serve a vital function in connecting a variety of learners (possessing an array of interests and learning styles) to scientific knowledge in personally meaningful contexts. Interpreters are essential “bridges,” carrying meaning from quantitative empirical, measured, and evaluative worlds into qualitative worlds of being. At the Meadows Center, interpreters adopt an eco-phenomenological approach, which asserts the holistic presence of the mind and body interrelated and within natural systems. In this way, “our reciprocal, embedded and embodied experiences with and within nature are seen to be loci of

value, a priori of theoretical and philosophical abstraction and examination” (LeVasseur 2011, as cited in Newman and Robbins 2011, p. 160). Herein lies the critical challenge and tension of many informal science programs such as the Meadows Center: intentionally creating space for sense experiences, personalized learning, and reflective descriptions within the strictures and constraints of a formal educational field trip originating from a standardized paradigm. Standard efficiency and categorization do not lend themselves to absorption and deep meaning that are necessary for ecological consciousness.

Linking the intellect with a phenomenological engagement with nature, moves environmental education beyond a strictly cognitive enterprise. Personal meaning and relevance of nature engagement should include first-hand explorations and discoveries. However, current prevailing pedagogies privilege linear, standardized competencies that often are markedly separate from individualized experiences. In this way, the content of learning and what is determined to be important to the learner are externally located and predetermined; hence, not “in me” (Ergas 2015).

A metaphor might help here: the sitar. This musical instrument from India has both *external* and *internal* strings. When the external strings are moved, a harmonic vibration and resonance cause the internal strings to vibrate, which in turn enlivens the internal “resonance chamber.” The internal strings are known as the sympathetic strings which respond to the external movement creating a unique and holistic sound. The sound is further complemented and formed by structural components of gourd, bone, ivory, and aged teak, of which much homage and mystery exists regarding the elemental influence of origin and age on the voice of the instrument. James A. Milward alludes to the amplification and expansion of resonance noting:

Players of plucked stringed instruments have always regretted the fact that the note of a plucked string starts to decay as soon as it is plucked, unlike a sung, blown, or bowed note on voice or other instruments. By putting a set of tarab strings on a sitar, Indian luthiers partially defeated this problem, providing notes that magically swell *after* they are played (Milward 2018, p. 222).

The metaphor captures the need in environmental education for internal resonances of felt nature connection which have enlivened or accentuated an inherent biophilic quality. The body is a receptor, a resonance chamber, wherein one’s innermost self is moving and being moved (Fuchs 2017). It is an active process that also is sustained beyond the initial moment, with a sympathy, an active empathy, that would not be possible via external stimulus alone. The internal and external sensory experiences, which are lasting, form the foundation for advocacy and stewardship.

This sentient acknowledgment and first-hand experience of being “with and within” is the locus for the recognition of oneself as a co-inhabitant (Rozzi 2019). Alas, the opportunity and capacity to connect in meaningful ways assume an attentive consciousness and presence for the current moment, amidst a culture so prone to mindlessness and routine. Pulkkli et al. (2017) explored environmental education as a lived body experience and situated contemplative pedagogical practices, such as mindfulness, as powerful ways to be present in nature and enliven the inner self as a site for environmental education. They conclude that:

[M]erely exposing children to nature is often not enough. Their abilities to calm down, to focus, to clear their consciousness, to compassionately notice and care are also in need of cultivation, as are the abilities for respect and intrinsic valuation of nature. Without such abilities whatever experiences there are run the risk of dissolving into the continuous flux of “one thing after another” that characterise so much of modern life (Pulkkli et al. 2017, p. 216).

Vital connections demand not only a biophilic attachment to nature but a distinct recognition of the ecological systems and communities that encompass, as Rozzi (2011) so aptly clarifies in the 3H’s, the habitats, the co-inhabitants, and the habits of a community. To be vitally engaged in this way is to be engaged in “a relationship to the world that is characterized both by experiences of flow (enjoyed absorption) and by meaning (subjective significance)” (Nakamura and Csikszmentmihalyi 2003, p.87).

30.7 Conclusion: Snowy Egrets Are Our Guides

During the course of the mindfulness research study with interpreters at Spring Lake, there were awkward moments for the researchers and participants alike as we collectively engaged in mindfulness activities wondering at times if we were “doing it right.” In follow-up interviewing and researcher debriefing it was apparent that occasionally self-awareness and critique were most prevalent and nature absorption was in the background as we wondered at times what we were supposed to feel through the activities and whether we were missing the point. “I’m being mindful, now what?”

In one pronounced moment the group was engaging in a noticing walk at the lake. It was a solo experience, yet the group was gravitating back to our debriefing spot prior to the conclusion of the activity. The mosquitoes had corralled all of us to the peninsula, and in a moment of collective surrender, we waded into the lake for reprieve, the cool waters instantly providing soothing relief and sanctuary. As we stood waist deep in the water, hands sliding back and forth across the surface, here they came. A flock of egrets swooped ever close to us with a dazzling display of aerobatics as they lost elevation, seemingly out of control, and then opening up their wings suddenly to lite gently on the branches of a tall cypress tree. There they would roost for the night, brilliant white dots on a background of deep green, with placid black water underneath reflecting the most wonderful scene and capturing the orange hues of the setting sun.

No one said a word. We turned to look at each other and were so delighted to be here, together, now, in this very moment, all senses engaged, absorbed, and connected. In later reflections a participant shared this poem from Mary Oliver (1983), which we cherished:

Where the path closed
down and over,
through the scumbled leaves,

fallen branches,
 through the knotted catbrier,
 I kept going. Finally
 I could not
 save my arms
 from thorns; soon
 the mosquitoes
 smelled me, hot
 and wounded, and came
 wheeling and whining.
 And that's how I came
 to the edge of the pond:
 black and empty
 except for a spindle
 of bleached reeds
 at the far shore
 which, as I looked,
 wrinkled suddenly
 into three egrets ---
 a shower
 of white fire!
 Even half-asleep they had
 such faith in the world
 that had made them ---
 tilting through the water,
 unruffled, sure,
 by the laws
 of their faith not logic,
 they opened their wings
 softly and stepped
 over every dark thing.

It is in these moments, when we have changed lenses, that we become teachable, mosquitoes

and egrets become our guides. In these moments, beyond our reflection, beyond our abstractions, and as co-inhabitants we experience being part of the community of the Springs—moments when birds can teach us if we are mindful enough to watch and listen.

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