

BRINGING THE WILD BACK TO THE CITY

By POLLY L. KNOWLTON COCKETT



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Just what is wilderness? Where is it? And just where do we live relative to the wilderness areas that we – as AWA members, friends, and affiliates – are committed to protecting?

Without belabouring the obvious, most of us probably do not actually live in the wild lands we love, conserve, and visit whenever we can. Thus, if we wish to successfully “defend wild Alberta through awareness and action,” how might we foster a conservation and stewardship ethic within the communities where we do live, work, attend school, and play (when not playing in the wilds)? How can we bring aspects of the wild to our urban spaces and backyards? Why might it be important to do this in the built environment?

I am an inquiry-based learner and educator who rarely answers such questions directly. Instead, let me tell you some of the stories behind Whispering Woods and the Centennial Natureground. They illustrate well how volunteers can

transform a neighbourhood and instill in each other a deeper appreciation of local native biodiversity.

In the 1960s, as Calgary was expanding northwest beyond its young university, a 100 m² parcel of native grassland and aspen parkland somehow escaped being submerged in the surrounding sea of new bungalows below Nose Hill in Brentwood. Its original agricultural zoning code left this westward sloping patch to its own devices between new upper and lower sports fields. This anonymous and overlooked space was nonetheless well loved, especially by local youth, dog walkers, and other passersby. Building temporary tipis with fallen aspen trunks, picnicking in the clearings, playing camouflage, and admiring the prairie crocus, buffalo bean, and wild rose became common pastimes here for many a new neighbour.

Over time though, in blew the litter, in crept the weeds, and long sat the dog leavings. Trails braided after June rains, joy

riders’ doughnuts tore through the native fescue, and arson blackened tree trunks. Rather than coming upon seasonal blossoms, you were more likely to encounter used needles and condoms, broken beer bottles, and discarded household debris. Was this now where we wanted to picnic or have our children run free? Who really cared about this space? Whose responsibility was it? Could anything be done?

Yes, something could be done. The following paragraph, from one of several interpretive signs co-created by students and community members and installed in the area in 2008, helps tell the story:

Whispering Woods, officially named and adopted by students from Dr. E.W. Coffin School in 1995, is sanctuary to a precious remnant of rough fescue grassland. Nestled at the top of this outlier of Nose Hill Park, the inviting Prairie Amphitheatre embraces a magnificent Rocky Mountain view. Here, students and the public learn



Students from Dr. E.W. Coffin School participate in a Weed Awareness Day led by Nature Alberta in the Centennial Natureground on World Environment Day 2006.

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Volunteer-led community-wide Summer Stewardship Bees immerse participants like Valerie Kinnear into peak blossoming in the Natureground and Whispering Woods with fresh coffee awaiting at the post-bee potluck brunches.

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about aspen parkland and grassland ecosystems, conduct science inquiry projects, and engage in community weeding bees. Neighbours and friends work closely and collaboratively with The City of Calgary Parks through the Natural Areas Adopt-a-Park program. The sharing of ideas, visions, and knowledge, while actively protecting native vegetation and wildlife, creates a genuine sense of shared stewardship.

As new Calgarians in the early 1990s, my family and I were also brand new to a prairiescape. With our children attending this neighbourhood school, we are fortunate to have been directly involved in the ongoing care of this wee park for over twenty years now. Little did we know, when we started with simple litter pickups, that our engagement would lead to such close work with the school, wider community, and city government. It also has exposed us to globally relevant issues such as native biodiversity conservation, alien invasive species management, and parks interpretation. Although the work is never done, a cared-for area attracts positive usage and inspires an ethic of care in others.

Through the school we implemented a schoolground naturalization project adjacent to Whispering Woods and brought the native prairie into daily contact with the students. We named this reclaimed space the Centennial Natureground as it was established during Alberta's 100th Anniversary in 2005. We define our coined word as follows:

natureground – *n.* a publicly accessible, reclaimed and reconstructed site-

sustainable ecosystem, featuring native plants which have been rescued, seeded, or planted for the purposes of holistic education and enjoyment, maintained by local stewardship.

Anyone can create a natureground, whether it's in a pot on your windowsill, in your backyard, at your children's school, associated with a community garden, or an enhancement of a local lane, verge, or byway. With a commitment to addressing native biodiversity where you live, and by doing so with your family, neighbours and colleagues, you will support native fauna – such as insects and birds – with native flora wherever you are. And you don't need to be an expert to begin. I knew nothing about grasslands until I moved here and began volunteering with others, learning together as we went along. Now, I often wildly imagine bringing the wild back as part and parcel of the built environment.

The premise of my environmental stewardship volunteerism assumes that the more we understand our ecological and social context, the more we become attached to place, and thus the more likely we will be to participate in sustainable behaviours. But the relationship between education and action is not a one-way street. While some of us may feel a need to be “educated” before we take actions, others will learn through doing. Sustainable actions, in and of themselves, may generate learning and greater understanding.

There are at least two paths then to obtaining a greater attachment to and appreciation of place. All ecological/social educators and leaders would be wise to

adopt the following *modus operandi* in their endeavours. They should, through learning-focused strategies, promote the development of a sense of place. They should also foster opportunities for students and the public to engage in meaningful stewardship activities. This approach presents a straightforward extension to the consideration of wilderness the conservation on a global scale.

Participatory ecological education – arrived at through integrated curricula, in situ experiential learning, community collaborations, and professional development – is critical for developing a connectedness with place and each other, for nurturing stewardship and sustainability, and for honouring the complexity of ways we can and do understand and interact with our world. 🌱

References & Further Reading

- www.natureground.org
- Knowlton Cockett, P. (2010). Place value: Ecological education in northwest Calgary. *Connections: Journal of the Global, Environmental & Outdoor Education Council of the Alberta Teachers' Association*. 31(1). p. cover & 10-15.
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