



# Making Nature

Part of  
the Curriculum

# Practical and Spiritual Lessons From God's "Other Book"

Nature is inextricably woven into the human experience. In fact, nature served as the first classroom for Adam and Eve. After God pronounced His benediction on His good creation, He stated His intention for the planet's stewardship: "[L]et them [humanity] have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."<sup>1</sup>

According to Ellen White, in this first open-air classroom, Adam and Eve "were not only children under the fatherly care of God but students receiving instruction from the all-wise Creator. . . . The mysteries of the visible universe—the wondrous works of Him which is perfect in knowledge' (Job 37:16)—afforded them an exhaustless source of instruction and delight. . . . On every leaf of the forest or stone of the mountains, in every shining star, in earth and air and sky, God's name was written. The order and harmony of creation spoke to them of infinite wisdom and power. They were ever

discovering some attraction that filled their hearts with deeper love and called forth fresh expressions of gratitude."<sup>2</sup>

How different life is today! Few people interact with nature on a daily basis. Most adults work long hours in climate-controlled office buildings or noisy factories; while most young people are confined to classrooms during the day and often play video games or watch TV after school. How, then, is it possible to engage students in activities that will draw them closer to their Creator and the environment He created for us to care for and enjoy?

The answer is simple and satisfying: nature-assisted activities. Such activities "are delivered in a variety of environments by a specifically trained professional, paraprofessional, and/or volunteers who possess specialized knowledge of all facets of the natural environment incorporated into the activity. Some individuals include activity directors, camp counselors, [and] educators."<sup>3</sup>

Nature-assisted activities—both in the classroom and outdoors—provide vital opportunities for both teachers and students within the learning environment to be reconnected to God's once-perfect creation.

## Nature Education in the Classroom

Nature education in the classroom can vary from interacting with microorganisms and plants to observing larger animals. Nature walks, field trips to museums and parks, outdoor school, and presentations by park rangers or other experts can be an exciting addition to indoor education.<sup>4</sup>

When animals are involved, nature education provides a host of benefits, including the following:<sup>5</sup>

1. Talking about animals and establishing a relationship with them help children develop social and emotional skills. "Children can connect with others over their shared interest and experiences with animals, and they can begin to unpack the elements that make up a good relationship, understand for themselves what it means to be 'humane' and practice thinking about the well-being of others."<sup>6</sup>

2. Discussing animals with classmates gives "students an ideal forum to practice the skills they will need in the 21st century, such as listening, perspective-taking and critical thinking; skills

BY LYNDELLE BROWER CHIOMENTI



business leaders claim are missing in the workforce.<sup>27</sup>

3. Learning what animals need and how to provide for those needs help children develop “empathy and the ability to pay attention to another being.”<sup>8</sup>

4. Building experiences into science classes or other classroom activities that concentrate on the care and humane treatment of animals create opportunities for students to learn how to build strong social units whose members work well together.<sup>9</sup>

5. Housing small animals in the classroom ensures that those children who do not have pets at home “can see, feel, touch and make connections to the wide world of animals.”<sup>10</sup>

Classroom pets also help children with several other life lessons. They “learn that all living things need more

than just food and water for survival,”<sup>11</sup> that their behavior directly affects others.<sup>12</sup> According to some studies, having animals in the classroom can reduce tension.<sup>13</sup> Overall, caring for classroom pets can help children learn responsibility and give them a sense of accomplishment and pride.<sup>14</sup>

Teachers can even incorporate small pets into the lesson plans for various subjects. For example, weighing small animals involves math. Learning what animals eat involves science, while researching the habitats of certain small animals involves geography. Students will learn creative writing and proper grammar as they write essays describing goldfish or other small creatures.<sup>15</sup>

PetSmart® Pets in the Classroom Program,<sup>16</sup> a resource available through local PetSmart stores,<sup>17</sup> provides teachers with the know-how and necessary equipment to incorporate a variety of small animals into elementary school classrooms. Grants are available if a class desires to adopt hamsters, guinea

pigs, fish, leopard geckos, and bearded dragons. For information about how to apply for a grant, visit the PetSmart® Website.<sup>18</sup>

### Wagging Tails and Sympathetic Ears

To assist children who experience difficulties with reading, many pet therapy organizations feature a literacy program called Reading Education Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D.). This program involves registered teams that consist of “a handler and a dog who have been trained, evaluated, and registered as a licensed therapy team.”<sup>19</sup>

Teachers who have been involved with the R.E.A.D. program report the following benefits for their students:<sup>20</sup>

1. Reading to dogs helps children develop confidence regarding their ability to read.
2. Reading assessment scores improve.
3. Students who read to dogs often seem calmer afterward.
4. Students who are at first reluctant to read learn that reading can actually be fun.
5. Reading to dogs helps children who are behind in their reading advance to higher reading levels.
6. Students who read to dogs gain more confidence in their ability to read, and learn not to be afraid to sound out words they don’t know because dogs are friendly and nonjudgmental.

To learn if there is a R.E.A.D. program near you, contact your local library, check online to see if there is a group nearby, or call kennel clubs or specific breed organizations in your area.

### Questions to Ask Before You Commit

Integrating pets and small animals into the classroom not only engages students, it also offers an innovative way to provide nature education across the curriculum. However, classroom teachers should consider several things before making such a decision<sup>21</sup>:

1. Why do you and your class want an animal?

2. How comfortable do you feel with the type(s) of animal to be introduced, and how will you integrate it/them into the curriculum?

3. How might school administrators respond to such a request, and what is the protocol for sharing your proposal with them?

4. What insurance will you need if someone in the school is injured or infected by the animal?

5. Will any parents object to an animal in their child's classroom, and how will you respond to those objections?

6. How will you care for the pet during weekends, holidays, and vacations?

7. Will any students be allergic to the type of animal you and/or the students want?

8. Does your classroom provide the type of environment in which the animal will thrive?

9. How will you prepare your students for the possibility that the pet or small animal might die?

While several programs are available to assist the classroom teacher integrate pets and small animals into the curriculum, the teacher should first consider his or her motivations, and those

of the students, for having animals in the classroom, as well as the factors that determine a successful implementation.

### Take It Outdoors

Nature education is beneficial to students both inside and outside the classroom. The American Academy of Pediatrics states: "Today's children are spending an average of seven hours a day on entertainment media, including televisions, computers, phones and other electronic devices. . . . Studies





have shown that excessive media use can lead to attention problems, school difficulties, sleep and eating disorders, and obesity. In addition, the Internet and cell phones can provide platforms for illicit and risky behaviors.”<sup>22</sup>

However, stepping out of the classroom into the great outdoors to use nature as a method of teaching offers many benefits. The Institute for Outdoor Learning classifies these according to the following categories: (1) background benefits, (2) planned benefits, (3) bonus benefits, and (4) wider benefits.<sup>23</sup>

Background benefits accrue from

the experience of spending time in natural environments. They include increased physical, mental, and spiritual health; greater sensory and aesthetic awareness; improved communication skills; and a greater “sensitivity to one’s well-being.”<sup>24</sup>

Some of the desirable goals of outdoor learning are to enable students to “cooperate with and respect the needs of others”; to develop an “appreciation and understanding of the world and the peoples around them”; to “understand the need for sustainable relationships between people and their environment”; and to “enhance practical problem solving and team work skills.”<sup>25</sup>

There are bonus benefits, too, when students learn more than the contents of a lesson plan.<sup>26</sup> Such benefits occur in the moments of serendipity when students begin to explore and to make their own discoveries. Perhaps one of the most important bonus benefits is students’ realization of the interconnectedness of God’s creation; everything we do has a cause-and-effect relationship with other things. Outdoor learning can also have a broader effect, benefiting both the families of the children involved and “future generations (especially in relation to sustainability).”<sup>27</sup>

Above all, outdoor education helps our students learn that, despite sin, God's creation is still marvelous and worthy of attention and care.<sup>28</sup> The world we know came from God's hand perfect in every way. But after thousands of years of sin and mismanagement, the very things necessary for sustaining life—fresh air, pure water, unpolluted soil—are at risk.

Outdoor education thus not only gives students an appreciation for the intricate balance between sustainable life for humans, animals, fish, birds, insects, and micro-organisms, it also helps make them aware of threats to God's creation.

### **Integrating Outdoor Education Into the Curriculum**

One of the strengths of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is its Adventurer program for children ages 6 to 9, and its Pathfinder program for children ages 10 to 15. Both of these programs include earning Honors as part of the curriculum for specific age levels in a variety of categories, including nature (i.e., Amphibians, Birds, Cacti, Ecology, Environmental Conservation, Endangered Animals, Fishes, Flowers, Herbs, House Plants, Marine Algae, Marsupials, Reptiles, Seeds, Soils, Spiders, Trees, and Worms). Each Honor comes with a list of age-appropriate activities that can serve as readymade lesson plans.<sup>29</sup>

Classroom teachers should also consider the possibilities of joining forces with the local church's Pathfinder leaders as children earn these Honors, thus strengthening the nature education of both organizations.

### **Integrating Nature Education Into the Religion Curricula**

Our great and loving God created the world and filled it with many natural wonders. A topical Bible concordance lists many entries dealing with these wonders and reveals how they teach great spiritual truths.

• In Jonah 4:5 to 10, God uses a fast-growing vine to shelter His runaway prophet and teach him a lesson. Students can research the types of plant that might have grown fast enough to

provide shade and reflect on God's everlasting love for human beings, even when they are rebellious.

• In Proverbs 6:6 to 8, Solomon used ants as models to admonish his readers to be diligent in preparing for the future. What do children see when they observe an ants' nest?

• "Eat honey," Solomon said, "for it is good" (Proverbs 24:13, 14). Not only did Solomon compare the sweetness of honey to wisdom, he provided teachers with an opportunity to discuss the importance of honey in history, its role in pollination, and the exquisite planning that goes into a honeycomb; the organization and hard work required to maintain a beehive and produce honey; and human activities that threaten bee colonies.

• In Matthew 6:25 to 34, Christ admonished us not to worry. By observing how God cares for birds, teachers can easily move into a discussion of the migratory patterns of birds, threats to

their habitat, and how we can provide a safe environment for them. Not only do small, seemingly insignificant birds illustrate God's care for us, they also remind us that we are stewards of all we survey, the large ecosystems as well as the common creatures that nest in our yards.

### **Nature Speaks of God's Eternal Care**

Nature in the classroom and out of doors helps teachers and students learn of God's goodness as they develop compassion, learn responsible ways of taking care of animals both large and small, and learn about ecology. Across the curriculum, in reading, math, science, grammar, creative writing, Bible, and so much more, nature may be integrated into daily lessons and classroom activities. Yet, among the many lessons that nature can teach, the most important illuminate God's care for His creation and how He demonstrates this throughout the natural world. Accord-



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ing to Ellen White, “Only in the light that shines from Calvary can nature’s teaching be read aright. . . . In singing bird and opening blossom, in rain and sunshine, in summer breeze and gentle dew, in ten thousand objects in nature, from the oak of the forest to the violet that blossoms at its root, is seen the love that restores. And nature still speaks to us of God’s goodness. ‘I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil’ Jeremiah 29:11. This is the message that, in the light from the cross, may be read upon all the face of nature.”<sup>30</sup> ✍



**Lyndelle Brower Chiomenti** earned a doctorate in education from Andrews University and works for the Sabbath School/Personal Ministries Department of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, Maryland, as Editor of the CQ Bible Study Guide for Young Adults. She often takes her dog Timmer to visit teenagers in a behavioral health clinic.

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Genesis 1:26, NKJV. Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible texts in this article are quoted from the New King James Version. Texts credited to NKJV are from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982, by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

2. Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1958), pp. 50, 51.

3. Linda Lloyd Nebbe, *Nature as a Guide: Nature in Counseling, Therapy, and Education*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Educational Media Corporation<sup>®</sup>), p. 23.

4. See the Nature issue of the *Journal* (Volume 71, No. 3, February/March 2009) for ideas. The articles can be accessed at <http://jae.adventist.org>.

5. Nicole Forsyth, “Talking About Animals: The Benefits for a Classroom and for the 21st Century Society,” *One Green Planet* (September 21, 2012): <http://www.onegreenplanet.org/animalsandnature/talking-about-animals-the-benefits-for-a-classroom-and-for-the-21st-century-society/>. All Websites in the endnotes were re-

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6. Ibid.

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8. Ibid.

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10. “Benefits of Classrooms Animals”:

<http://www.petsintheclassroom.org/teachers/benefits-of-classroom-animals/>.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. PetSmart<sup>®</sup> Pets in the Classroom Program: <http://www.petsintheclassroom.org/>.

17. PetSmart<sup>®</sup> stores specialize in the sale of small animals and pet supplies. Located throughout the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico, the retail chain also provides additional services such as animal grooming, training, adoption, and overall care.

18. PetSmart<sup>®</sup> teacher grants: <http://www.petsintheclassroom.org/grant-app/>.

19. Donita Massengill Shaw, “Man’s Best Friend as a Reading Facilitator,” *The Reading Teacher* 66:5 (February 2013): [http://www.therapyanimals.org/Research\\_&\\_Results\\_files/Shaw%20Mans%20Best%20Friend%20Doogan%201.13.pdf](http://www.therapyanimals.org/Research_&_Results_files/Shaw%20Mans%20Best%20Friend%20Doogan%201.13.pdf).

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21. Nebbe, *Nature as a Guide*, op. cit., p. 218; see also Mark F. Carr, “How Should Christians Treat Animals in Research?” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 76:1 (October/November 2013), pages 16 to 22, with particular attention to the sidebar, “Caring for God’s Animal Creations: Ethical Principles” on page 19 by Gerald R. Winslow: <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae201376011607.pdf>.

22. American Academy of Pediatrics, “Media and Children”: <http://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/pages/media-and-children.aspx>.

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24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

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28. Luke 12:6, NKJV.

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# NOTICE

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For information on ordering materials and tests, contact Lolita Davidson Campbell at [lolitadavidson@gmail.com](mailto:lolitadavidson@gmail.com) or (909) 583-3661.

For information on receiving credit for a CE course, contact your union conference Certification Officer.

For more information about course delivery through ALC, contact Adam Fenner by e-mail at [Adam.Fenner@nad.adventist.org](mailto:Adam.Fenner@nad.adventist.org).

