

Unlocking the Treasure House of God's Word: Outdoor School *in the Adventist*

When I was about 5 years old, my father brought me a five-foot-long boa constrictor he had found on the way home from work in Belem, Brazil. Throughout my childhood, Sabbath afternoons were filled with fascinating trips into the interior jungle, from which images of huge trees and strange creatures still linger in my memory. Each encounter offered a potential lesson. "As we observe the things of the natural world, we shall be enabled, under the guiding of the Holy Spirit, more fully to understand the lessons of God's Word."¹

Nature is the first word of *Steps to Christ*, a book designed to draw humankind closer to the living God of heaven.² It paints the image of divinity, whispering wisdom to everyone who studies the work of the Master Designer.

Curriculum planners and administrators who want to improve educational practice should consider including an outdoor school program. As they strive to make the Bible real to their students, Adventist teachers can find many advantages to studying in the outdoors. In fact, Adventist educators should be the leading proponents of nature-based learning.

Benefits of Outdoor Education

The Web-based organization "Hooked on Nature" summarized the research on the benefits of nature and found, among other things, a reduction in violence, attention-deficit symptoms, stress levels, heart rates, and anger. They also found improvements in student test scores, optimism, mood, and cognitive functions.³

Twenty-seven teachers attending Southern Adventist University were surveyed regarding the value of outdoor learning. They identified 25 benefits gained from outdoor school, including reconnecting with God, calming the

nerves, refreshing the mind, and increasing student creativity. All of the teachers said that student retention of outdoor experiences extended well beyond those of the more classical forms of education.

Five of the teachers wanted assistance in integrating outdoor school into their curriculum. Several identified cost and planning time as concerns.⁴ Later in this article, we will address these concerns.

What is outdoor school? It is more than a simple, one-shot approach to nature-based learning. Outdoor school must be connected to a total school curriculum and mission. Students can experience the setting for a historical battle or look for endangered species a textbook could only describe. The spiritual mission of a school can be emphasized by inviting a speaker to conduct worships in the setting of God's creation. Outdoor school can form one component of a nature-based learning program that weaves God as Creator into the curriculum.

Input From Teachers and Students

Ask students and adults what memories stand out from their school experience, and they usually will recount, with excitement and detail, an experiential learning program, often involving a field trip. Visits to indoor settings will come to mind, but so will experiences in the great outdoors. There is no better setting than the world of nature to bring Christ to the forefront of student thought. The attitude of worship

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fostered in a natural setting can easily continue beyond the singing and devotionals into the nature studies of outdoor school.

Teachers at Greeneville Adventist Academy in East Tennessee immerse their students in grades 5-10 in an annual outdoor school experience, and have worked to include other schools in the process. One teacher described the program as the highlight of the school year. Outdoor school activities have helped identify students' spiritual, emotional, and physical needs. As they engage in a variety of activities away from their regular classroom setting, teachers are better able to identify withdrawn or troubled students.

Curriculum



The long-term impact of outdoor school cannot readily be measured or quantified, but it can be heard in the stories told by the students who have attended such programs. As a nature instructor at Camp Kulaqua, Florida, and a science teacher, I have found it rewarding to see my students later become wildlife biologists or science teachers in our school system. It has even been more rewarding to work and interact with some of them in planning outdoor education.

Some of the recent comments I have overheard from excited students include: "Where are we going for outdoor school next year?" "You know that's the reason I keep coming back," "Let's combine week of prayer with outdoor education," and "I think outdoor school is the perfect way to

begin a new year; we seem to get to know everyone so much quicker." Of course, students are eager to escape the confines of the classroom, but maybe those walls do need to be breached in order for them to see the "big picture."

Our Mission

The Adventist Edge initiative of the Southern Union Conference supports a classroom "that is God centered, results oriented, in an environment that nurtures, aligned with Journey to Excellence, and" [represents] "a team effort."⁵ Outdoor school makes God and His creation its central focus. Few environments can nurture a group of students like the restoring calm of natural settings. The memory of my father showing me the snake he had caught in an overgrown field in Brazil has relational, educational, and emotional value. Growing up in Brazil and Florida certainly gave my father a year-round, outdoor educational advantage, but the core benefit came from the Seventh-day Adventist emphasis on nature. Our very name draws attention to Creation week and to the Creator.

Every object in nature carries a lesson that can be studied and absorbed. Nearly every academic subject can be found in God's design of the natural world. Outdoor school is the perfect platform for cross-curricular studies. But the greatest advantage can be found when teaching biblical concepts through the lens of nature. Jim Tucker, an Adventist professor at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, writes: "It has been said that the Book of Nature contains the pictures of God's word, while the Bible contains the captions. What a beautiful illustration of the way in which these two books go hand in hand. Children, and youth especially, need the motivating force of God's word as revealed in nature."⁶ Ellen White sums it up: "In the natural world God has placed in the hands of the children of men the key to unlock the treasure house of His



Word. The unseen is illustrated by the seen; divine wisdom, eternal truth, infinite grace, are understood by the things that God has made.”⁷

The Implementation Process

Finding time in the school calendar should be the first step in planning an outdoor school program. Ideally, it should be a full five-day program that runs from Monday through Friday. Some schools choose to include a weekend, while others schedule it for three or fewer weekdays. Depending on the facilities available, students may stay overnight or commute to the location each day.

Choosing which grades to include is another consideration. Outdoor schools that include overnight stays are best suited for grades 5-8 and secondary students (grades 9-12). Teachers can plan single- or multi-day nature outings for younger students, with parents and volunteers as chaperones.

Administrators should identify available programs, gather input from teachers, students, and constituents, ensure that the program supports the school’s mission, and implement an annual program that includes varied activities. Many outdoor education facilities must be reserved nearly a year in advance. Once a date has been set, pricing can be negotiated. The four

Planning Ahead for Outdoor School

- Decide which grade(s) will participate in outdoor school, and how many days you want to devote to this project.
- Check to see if the children (or teachers or chaperones!) have any special needs that will affect the choice of a site or the duration of the program (physical handicaps, food allergies, medication schedule or storage, financial challenges). Discuss these challenges with the organization offering the program to see whether they can be accommodated. If the school is planning the schedule and renting a site, you will need to make provision for these special requirements.
- Contact presenters many months in advance. Investigate their philosophical orientation and whether their program is suitable for the maturity level and knowledge base of your students. Create a contract that spells out the details of the agreement.
- Recruit enough adults to provide adequate supervision, and sufficient vehicles to carry the participants and supplies. Create a daily schedule for each chaperone.
- Ensure that volunteers have undergone a background check and verification of their auto insurance, and that several of them have up-to-date first-aid and CPR certification.
- Create or adapt parental consent forms, and make sure that they are signed well in advance of the date when outdoor school begins.
- Bring to the outdoor school site the consent for medical treatment form for every student that has been signed by the parent or legal guardian.

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basic expenses are food, transportation, housing, and programming.

When researching where to go and what to do, remember to vary the program from year to year. Students need new experiences and new settings to inspire their curiosity. Simply creating a tradition or pattern for an outdoor school program can lead to apathy.

Work with zoos, nature centers, and environmental education facilities to develop new ideas. Classes in an outdoor setting should take advantage of the local surroundings. If there are nearby caves, try spelunking; if on the coast or near a river, include aquatic activities. Native American history programs and natural or state parks may be available nearby, as well. In the U.S., you can visit the 4-H Website (<http://www.4husa.org>) to find a nearby center.⁸ International programs can be located by going to <http://www.evirolink.org>,⁹ and clicking on the Environmental Education link.

Call the forestry division or the parks and recreation department for your city or county to identify available programs. Contact local summer camps to see if they offer any programs during the school year that are different from their summer repertoire. Most programs offer complete itineraries, prices, and program descriptions online. Investigate whether your teachers can organize and run their own program on site.

Once a suitable location has been identified, create a schedule that includes mealtimes, worships, and recreation time in addition to the academic program. Volunteer assignments should also be worked out ahead of time. The class possibilities are



limitless. Social studies, science, math language, Bible—almost any class can be showcased in God’s creation.

Integrating the outdoor school experience into the curriculum can be as simple as giving all of the teachers an outline of objectives and goals for each activity. The individual teacher may then choose the best method of linking the experience to a new concept. A more detailed approach might be to identify the standards and benchmarks a given activity might address for each subject in the curriculum. Often, the curriculum is easy to adapt and unfolds as teachers or students recall relevant experiences, look online for ideas, or communicate with other teachers.

Outdoor school may be the most expensive component of a nature-based curriculum. However, it will be money well spent, as the programs can serve as important reference points for the rest of the school year, as teachers continue to take their classes outdoors to introduce or expand a concept.

Fundraising for an outdoor program can enhance parental awareness and support. Perhaps your home and school director could lead the students in a school-wide fundraiser. Donated items could be placed in a schoolyard sale or simply auctioned.

Outdoor school should be an integral part of the Adventist curriculum. The Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario (COEO) found correlations between outdoor school activities and improvements in both character development and personal interaction



skills,¹⁰ two key components of Christian growth. The work and planning may take some time, but the rewards can be eternal. ✍



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. _____, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1956), p. 9.
3. *Hooked on Nature. Research Summary: Benefits of Nature*: <http://www.hookedonnature.org/research.html>. Accessed July 18, 2007.
4. Melissa Harley, "Survey of Perceived Reactions Involving Nature and God (SPRING)." Unpublished study performed at Southern Adventist University, Collegedale, Tennessee, June 2007 for Dr. Ruth Williams Morris, EDUC 592.
5. See <http://www.adventistedge.org/ABOUTUS/MissionVission/tabid/139/Default.aspx>. Retrieved July 18, 2007.
6. See <http://circle.adventist.org/browse/resource.phtml?leaf=2105>.
7. White, *Child Guidance*, p. 46.
8. See <http://www.4husa.org/modules.php?op=modload&name=Sections&file=index&req=viewarticle&artid=34>.
9. See <http://www.envirolink.org/topics.html?topic=Outdoor%20Education&topicsku=2002116191656&topictype=subtopic&do=catsearch&catid=1>.
10. Grant Linney, "COEO's Landmark Research Summary: Reconnecting Children Through Outdoor Education," *Pathways* 19:2 (2007), pp. 33, 34.

Sample Outdoor School Schedule

Monday

9:00 Depart for state park
 11:30 Eat lunch
 12:30 Continue driving to park
 2:30 Arrive at park and move in
 3:30 Meet in cafeteria for orientation
 4:30 Recreation
 5:00 Supper
 6:00 Recreation on field
 7:00 Night hike with ranger
 8:00 Worship by campfire
 9:00 Bedtime
 9:30 Lights out

Tuesday

7:00 Breakfast
 8:00 Devotional in lodge room
 8:30 Group 1 = Forest Ecology
 Group 2 = Native Americans
 Group 3 = Caving
 Group 4 = Stream Survey
 12:00 Lunch
 1:00 Group 1 = Native Americans
 Group 2 = Caving
 Group 3 = Stream Survey
 Group 4 = Forest Ecology
 5:00 Supper
 6:00 Recreation on the field
 7:00 Worship by campfire
 8:00 Astronomy
 9:00 Bedtime
 9:30 Lights out

Wednesday

7:00 Breakfast
 8:00 Devotional in lodge room

8:30 Group 1 = Caving
 Group 2 = Stream Survey
 Group 3 = Forest Ecology
 Group 4 = Native Americans
 12:00 Lunch
 1:00 Group 1 = Stream Survey
 Group 2 = Forest Ecology
 Group 3 = Native Americans
 Group 4 = Caving
 5:00 Supper
 6:00 Recreation on Field
 7:00 Campfire program with ranger
 8:00 Spider hunting
 8:30 Worship by campfire
 9:00 Bedtime
 9:30 Lights out

Thursday

7:00 Breakfast
 8:00 Devotional in lodge room
 8:30 All groups = Team Building
 (low ropes course)
 12:00 Lunch
 1:00 All groups = Orienteering
 5:00 Supper
 6:00 Recreation on field
 7:00 Worship by the campfire
 8:00 Waterfalls at night...
 9:00 Bedtime
 9:30 Lights out

Friday

7:00 Breakfast
 8:00 Devotional
 8:30 Load up and return to school