Becoming Conscious of One's Own Limits Within Nature to Live Sustainably

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This outdoor nature immersion experience and inquiry was part of our Outdoor Environment class and took place in the Thompson-Okanagan region, including Penticton, West Kelowna, Vernon, and Kamloops in the spring of 2025. As a group, we explored how our sensory, embodied encounters with more-than-human beings can reshape how we understand ourselves and become more conscious of our own limits within nature to live sustainably. Initially drawing on the practice of Shinrin-Yoku (forest bathing), we examined how slowing down and engaging deeply through our sense of touch could create space for relational and pedagogical transformation. Our experiences, often marked by discomfort, became generative moments that invited us into connection with the more-than-human beings. Through our processes and encounters, we noticed how the sensations could disrupt our ways of thinking and call us to be more responsive with(in) nature. Stepping in with no pre-determined outcomes, we connected our experiences to Gert Biesta's (2020) concept of subjectification, where we were active participants in our own education and outdoor immersions. Our work highlights the pedagogical possibility of uncertainty, emergence and relational encounters. Through curiosity, agency, discomfort, and attunement, we gained true knowledge, relationships, and learning with(in) our outdoor environments.

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Land Acknowledgment

We respectfully acknowledge that we live, work, and learn on the ancestral, and unceded territories of the Syilx and Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc peoples, who have cared for these lands, waters, and all living beings through generations grounded in relationship, reciprocity, and responsibility. We recognize the deep knowledge systems, cultural practices, and sovereignty of these nations, and we are grateful for their ongoing stewardship of the land.

As guests on this land, we commit to:

- **Listening deeply** to the voices of the Syilx and Secwépemc Peoples and learning from Indigenous worldviews, teachings, and ecological knowledge.
- **Honouring the land** through sustainable and respectful practices that acknowledge our interconnectedness with all living things.
- **Upholding truth and reconciliation** by engaging in continuous education, acknowledging colonial harms, and working toward decolonizing our practices.
- **Building relationships** rooted in respect, humility, and care with Indigenous communities and the land itself.

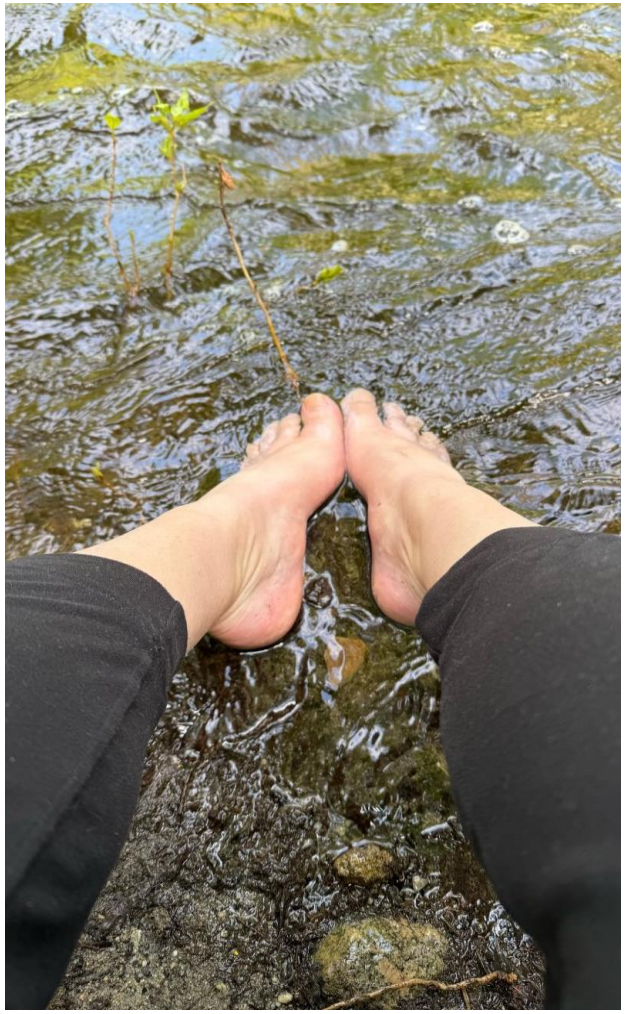
With open hearts and minds, we strive to walk gently and intentionally, remembering that land is not a resource but a relative. May our actions reflect our gratitude and responsibility as we live in relation with this land and its First Peoples.

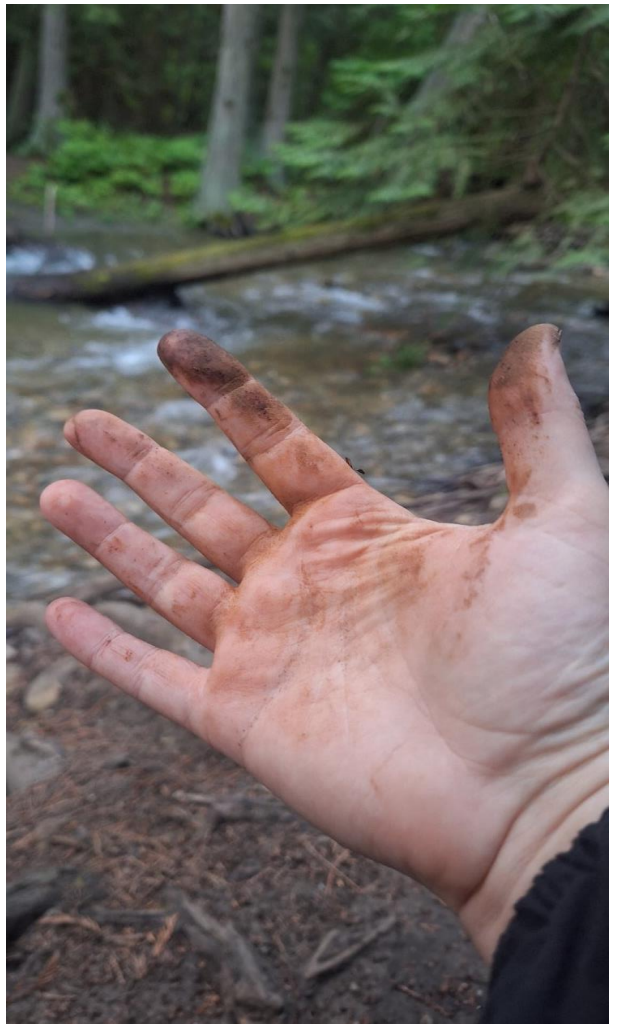
Introduction

When our group decided to explore the outdoors together, we were drawn to Forest Bathing also known as Shinrin-yoku developed and coined in the 1980s in Japan. It invites people to slow down and build a deep presence and connection with more-than-human others through intentional, sensory-rich time in forested environments.

The specific skill we focused on within the concept of forest bathing was the **sense of touch** using our own bodies to engage with nature by walking barefoot, feeling cold water, touching tree sap, sensing stinging nettles, observing tree ashes, and climbing trees. These experiences and encounters with more-than-human others were not always comfortable and that was part of their power**.** They pushed us past our own discomforts physically, psychologically, and spiritually. These moments became meaningful, building our relationships with nature and how we meet the world as individuals. Leaning into these uncomfortable sensations helped us build a deeper connection to nature and allowed us to learn more about ourselves and how we relate to the world around us. This connects with Biesta's (2020) idea of subjectification, which means children are active participants in their own education rather than being an object of manipulation or intervention in education. He describes it as an education that "brings the subject-ness of the child or young person into play," bringing out a person's ability to think, choose, and act for themselves (Biesta, 2020, p. 95). In leaning into discomfort, we found space to become more responsive, aware, and grounded, not just *in* nature, but *with* it, by letting go of pre-set plans or preconceived ideas and instead allowed the encounter to shape us.

As Thomashow (1998) writes in his article, *The Ecopsychology of Global Environmental Change*, “Ecopsychology aspires to integrate the ecological and existential, psyche and ecosystem, individual and community, local and global” (p. 281). This guides our documentation practice not just to observe nature, but to observe ourselves within nature, building a relationship that is mutual, embodied, and meaningful.



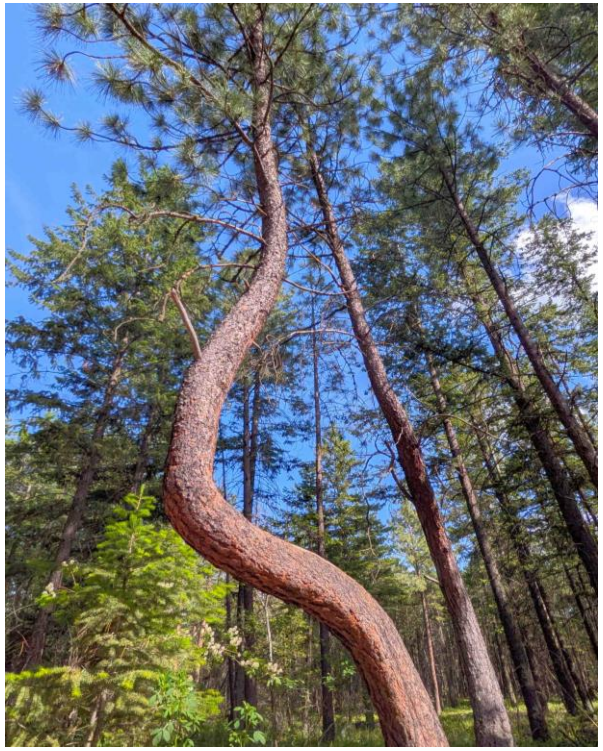
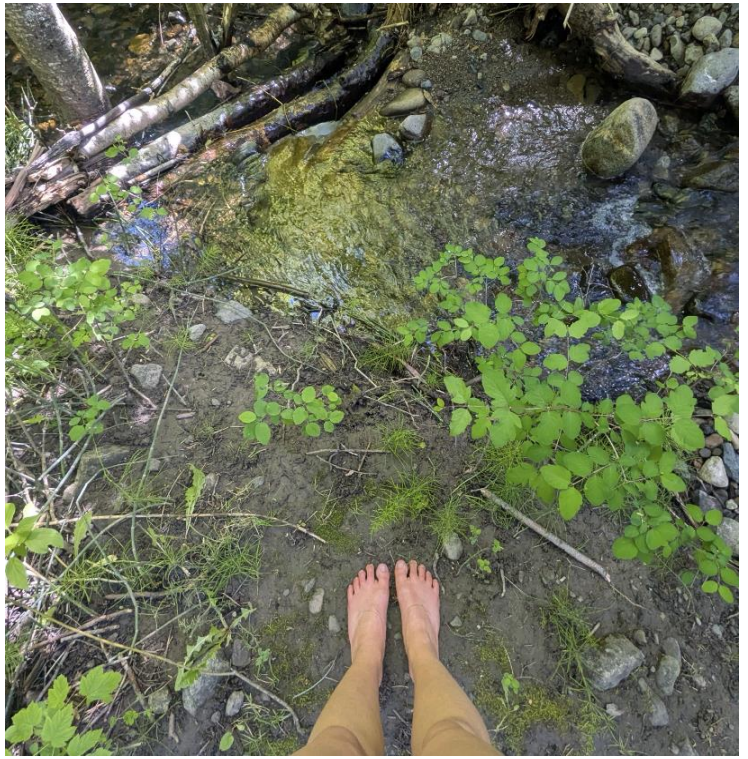



Forest Bathing (Shinrin-yoku)

The specific skill we focused on within the concept of forest bathing was the **sense of touch** using our own bodies to engage with nature by walking barefoot, feeling cold water, touching tree sap, sensing stinging nettles, observing tree ashes, and climbing trees.

Ways our knowledge, limits, and relationships with nature/outdoors/ecosystems were challenged

Immersing ourselves in nature with a focus on connection using our sense of touch mainly pushed us into slowing down to notice. We not only slowed down our pace, but also our mind and our breathing, to become aware of the physical and psychological sensations each movements evoked.


Touching nature through our outdoor immersions challenged the knowledge we hold. We were limited in touching certain parts of nature, or in certain ways, due to our understanding and perception of these more-than-human beings, whether they are real or constructed. Some textures felt like pain, signaling to our brain that we need to stay away. These encounters gave us an opportunity to move past the taken-for-granted and ask new questions. Why are we assuming that some plants (like ivy) or insects (like ticks) are nuisances? What are their roles in this ecosystem? It opened the door to more questions about our personal and collective limits. Biesta (2020) states that,

This world is real and puts real limits on our actions, albeit that one important aspect of trying to exist as subject is to figure out what these limits are, which limits should be taken into consideration, which limits are real, and which limits are the effect of arbitrary (ab)use of power. (p. 96)

We learnt about our limitations from experience, from the nature around us by being in it, with it, touching it. The sensations, discomfort and questions that came up could not have been possible if we stuck to what we know.

Our personal limits were also challenged throughout the group experience. Right at the beginning when we collectively decided to focus on our sense of touch to interact with nature, we all had various degrees of willingness and reluctance. Into our outdoor/nature immersions, we were individually faced with many limits in terms of space (where to do it, how to get there) and time to do it. Then came the physical and psychological limits of closely and intentionally touching nature, the prickles, the stickiness, and the emotions that came forth. Some of us cried, while some of us felt anxiety as nature told its stories. Fear of the unknown was often where our limits laid. We were open-minded, willing to step out of our comfort zones, but to a certain point; it was not limitless exploration. When we did experience moments that felt like a limit was imposed, we tried to embrace it, because these moments of ‘middle ground’ (Biesta, 2020) are the moments that pushed us to deepen our explorations and discomforts, we had agency in how we chose to respond to the earth beneath our feet, or the sap between our fingers.

During our immersions, we were reminded of the position we tend to have as humans and what kind of relationships we hold with the outdoors. At times we felt like intruders in the spaces, knowing Bear might be coming back, or that Arrowleaf Balsamroots left no space on the ground to put our feet. Are we welcome here? It was humbling to notice the more-than-humans taking space. These encounters and thoughts caused us to slow down over and over. We noticed what is happening now, but also what happened before and what might happen later. We wondered how humans have become so purposeful in disconnecting from nature by removing the touching aspect from our lives as humans. We invented shoes, windproof and waterproof gear, and all of it to protect, be comfortable, and be effective, but at what cost? When we walked with(in) nature, we could feel it reaching for us, touching us everywhere--the raindrops, the leaves, the ash, the water, the bugs, the sand. There was no escaping it; it was coming for us. By removing gear that normally protects us from these sensations, we became aware and part of, instead of just "spectators," as Abram (2002, p. *x*) puts it.

Touching Sap

After experiencing raindrops on me long enough, I give in and take shelter under an enormous Ponderosa Pine.

Reorienting, I explore the texture of her bark and find a long vertical crack dripping with sap.

Sap is unique to touch, especially since I've 'learned' to stay away from touching sap.

I dive in, fingers prodding a firm pool of sap upon the earth.

The sap gives way, allows my fingers to enter.

Sap surrounds and adheres, releasing more aromatic scent.

The stickiness stays with me as I walk, the sensation pulls my attention over and over.

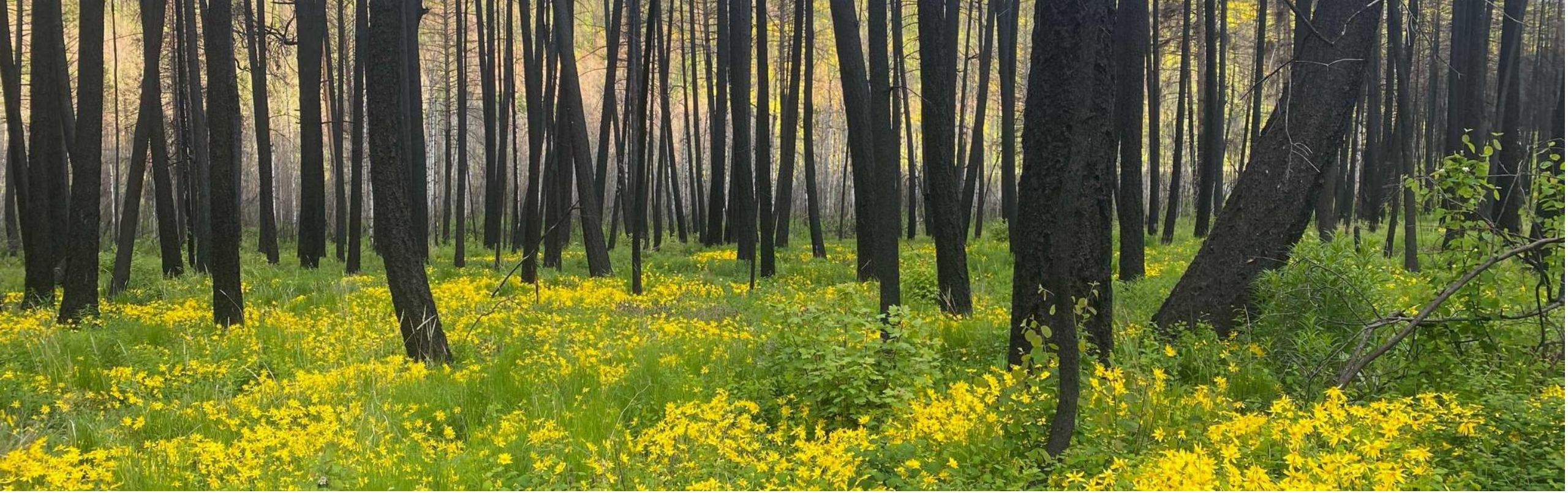
I remember an Indigenous woman from Salmon Arm told me that you can chew sap like gum.

That's where my limit is, as I don't feel I have enough knowledge, and the risk of discomfort was too high for me.

I try wiping it off on the wet grasses.

I try rolling my fingers together to gather it up.

Finally, I rub my hand in the dirt, feeling the stickiness disappear.



What would students aim to become conscious of within nature/outdoors/ecosystems?

To become conscious of our place within nature, ecosystems, and the outdoors, we need to be aware that, “human beings and other living creatures are ‘in’ a physical environment that is not a simple backdrop, a context in which we act, but rather a complex network through which we act; a network, moreover, that sustains and nurtures us” (Biesta, 2020, p. 95-96). Catherine became more aware of the interconnectedness through the stories she heard. Jenny Rae reconnected with Indigenous wisdom and the more-than-human beings, specifically through native plants. Through our forest bathing experiences, we found that being immersed in our ecosystem and being in nature can promote reflection, grounding, and healing.

“This is not becoming *your*self, and particularly not about ‘being yourself’ in the simplistic sense of just doing what you want to do, but about being *a* self, being a subject of your own life” (Biesta, 2020, p. 94).

Elysia described how she became aware of how emotions like stress or feeling overwhelmed from daily life can be released by nature. As Thomashow (1998) states, “…it is to ‘practice the wild,’ to delight in the intricacies of habitat and landscape, and that there is a profound connection between the health of an ecosystem, community life, personal well-being” (p. 285). As we engage with nature, we become more aware of ourselves and our relationship with the natural world, which in turn inspires us to protect it. Lyndsay reminded us that humans need to become more conscious of their impact on nature, moving past human-centric ways that affect the ecosystems they inhabit.

“Practice the wild to balance the civilized” (Thomashow, 1998, p. 298).

Furthermore, “we encounter this reality when our initiatives meet resistance...” (Biesta, 2020, p. 96); it is essential to embrace “slowing down, of giving time, so that students can meet the world, meet themselves in relation to the world, and ‘work through’ all of this” (Biesta, 2020, p. 98). Throughout our outdoor nature immersion experiences, we all strove to become more connected to our surroundings and pay attention to these connections. Amanda experienced the cycle of nature, as death gives rise to new life. By spending time within our environments, we all practiced reflectiveness, grounding, and healing. Remember, nature is not always simple, but it can change the way we perceive things through its rhythms, presence, and peacefulness.

What relationships would the students build within nature/outdoors/ecosystems?

As humans, we are a small percentage of the ecosystem; additionally, we have not been on this planet as long as many species (plants and animals) have been. To be aware of how young of a species we are requires humility and vulnerability and it can be difficult to acknowledge that. To “heal your relationship with the Earth” (Thomashow, 1998, p. 283), we must be able to feel nature with our hands. Compare and contrast the texture of dry older leaves to the velvety smooth leaf that has just fallen from the tree. We must be able to recognize how we as humans are integrated into our ecosystem, but also that we still have much to learn.

There are different types of relationships that we can build with the outdoors, like being able to read weather patterns to know if it’s going to rain and how that will affect the tomatoes you want to grow. There are many different relationalities between the weather and nature as a whole. Too much rain and your crop will rot, too little and the plants won’t survive. Feeling the soil will help educate us as to what support we can provide the earth to thrive.

In building relationships with nature, we can help construct an appreciative relationship with our ecosystem by reminding ourselves that nature needs nothing from us; it will continue regardless of whether we are here, or not. For humans to continue to exist with(in) nature, we need to understand the balance of living with the land. In continuing our education, we can consider the “decline of ecological literacy” (Thomashow, 1998, p. 277), in which the physical connection with the forest creates stories of the natural world and how we are losing that connection. When we think of education and the ecosystem, we think of the knowledge that we, as educators impart. This, however, contradicts nature as the educator… like knowing which plants we can touch without harm, which are toxic. We need to respect nature until we know more about it. There is an entire curriculum that can be implemented if we let ourselves experience nature firsthand. Building a relationship with the outdoors requires that we experience the outdoors. We cannot immerse ourselves in our experiences from inside a classroom.

Understanding the roles we play in maintaining the environment, we can "build connection and respect" (A. Fuller, personal communication, June 2, 2025, group meeting for Outdoor Environments class) with the ecosystem we inhabit. The ways in which we care for nature should be everyone's responsibility and we have a duty to ensure we hold each other accountable. Whenever I walk with nature, I make sure to bring a small bag to pick up anything left behind that shouldn't be there. Without this kind of respect and connection, there can be serious consequences for negligent behaviour. Throughout my time in this valley, I have seen firsthand the devastation that can arise from carelessness.

"Nature becomes not only a place of beauty, but also a teacher, offering healing, resilience" (E. Raimondo, personal communication, June 2, 2025, group meeting for Outdoor Environments class).

What would be new understandings and experiences within nature/outdoors/ ecosystems that the students learned to live sustainably?

Our collective outdoor nature immersion experiences revealed that sustainability is not just a set of actions but a way of being in the world. We learned that the more we have direct encounters with nature, the more deeply we build relationships with more-than-human others. These encounters helped us recognize that we are part of nature, not separate from it. This relationship is the ‘why’ behind sustainability. Why? Because the more-than-human others are our cousins, they live here too. We need each other, we are one.

We can learn that sustainable living is not just about managing what we buy or how we use resources, it’s about building relationships with people, places and more-than-human others. When Catherine and Elysia stepped into their local forest and placed their hands and feet on the charred bark of Ponderosa Pine, it wasn’t just touching a tree, it was meeting a living history, shaped by fire, smoke, and resilience. We felt layers—rough, dry and blackened.

As Catherine held pieces of charcoal in her hand and I was rubbing my feet on the tree's ashy bark, we felt their weight, not just physical, but emotional. The charcoal left marks on the paper and my feet, just as fire leaves marks on the land and as our actions leave marks on the world. We learned that every action leaves a trace, shaping new experiences and stories and ripples through the changing seasons. In that moment, we weren't learning about sustainability as a concept, we were living it. This encounter reminded us that we don't just observe nature, we're part of it. This connects to what Biesta (2020) calls "qualified freedom" (p. 96), which is a kind of freedom that is deeply connected to our existence as subjects. It is never a life lived just for ourselves, but always one lived with the world, within "a network... that sustains and nurtures us" (Biesta, 2020, p. 96). When we recognize this, sustainability turns into a daily practice of attentiveness, respect, and reciprocity with the more-than-human world.

Curriculum/educational opportunities for students to learn about themselves and to relate with other beings within nature/ecosystems

We have two educational opportunities that encourage slowing down and deepening attunement to the outdoor environment and ourselves. These educational opportunities are open ended and should be engaged with in the spirit of finding connections and interdependencies between oneself and one's environment. Biesta (2020) encourages an internal shift towards agency of one's own life, but he always tempers that agency by reminding us that we need to be in respectful relationship to other people, plants, and animals that we live with. By thoughtfully noticing and wondering about our environment, we are supporting the skills that will help us live sustainably on Earth. Students can learn that sustainable living is not just about managing what we buy or how we use resources, it is about building relationships with people, places, and more-than-human others.

Opportunity 1: Relate to other beings within nature/ecosystems

Walking barefoot: Practicing regularly throughout the week on different natural surfaces, such as rocks, water, sand, soil, bark, or moss, builds a deeper relationship with the land. One can create a sensory map that describes not only the physical sensations, but also the emotions that surface during each barefoot experience. Stephen Smith (2007), calls this physical and emotional responsiveness to the environment the mimetic impulse. This practice fosters sensory awareness and invites learners to reflect on the histories held within the landscape; the geography now lives in one's knees, muscles, and in one's proprioceptive senses. By becoming more conscious of the surfaces beneath one's feet, students also become more attuned to environmental shifts, such as changes in weather patterns or the subtle signs of climate change.

Opportunity 2: Relate to other beings within nature/ecosystems

Listen, touch, and wonder: This can be done anywhere but we suggest a natural environment. Close one's eyes and listen. As one identifies sounds, wonder about who/what might be making the sound, or why that sound is happening. Make connections to our co-existence and interdependencies with the sources of these sounds. This invitation increases awareness of unseen elements, like the wind, water, or hidden birds.

Alternatively, sit with eyes closed and hold a piece of bark or other natural element; attune to one's sense of touch. Be curious about the reasons this bark or flower, or rock has formed this way. What adaptations have drawn us towards it, like the beautiful color of flowers and the enticing scent of sap, or why the being has protections against us, like the sting of the nettle. Ponder our relationship with our more-than-human cohabitants of the region.

Conclusion

Through our discussion on our outdoor nature immersion experiences, we noticed the influence of socialization and subjectification in our approaches to Forest Bathing. Most of us are taught not to touch stinging nettles or sap, yet we pushed through that socialization to create a first-hand relationship with these natural elements. We also lived Biesta's (2020) insights on becoming the subject of one's own life; we learned directly from the earth beneath our feet, from the cold water upon our skin, and from challenging our socialized limitations. In our engagement with the tree ash, we took agency in our learning and meaning-making. We worked with the tensions between the impact of the forest fires, the safety of our lands, and our complicity in climate change. We challenged our comfort levels by being alone in nature, taking off our shoes, exposing ourselves to stickiness and stings and were able to decide for ourselves where our limits were. Through curiosity and agency, we have gained true knowledge, relationships, and learning with(in) our outdoor environments.

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All photos (2025) taken by: Elysia Raimondo, Jenny Rae Wilder, Amanda Fuller, Lyndsay Parrott, and Catherine Samson.

Catherine Samson is a practicing Early Childhood Educator that has been in the field and has been continuously learning for the past 20 years. Raised in Québec and privileged to now work on the traditional land of the Syilx Peoples (Okanagan), Catherine brings her love of the outdoors to the children, in all seasons. She is currently a 4th year student at Capilano University completing her Bachelor of Early Childhood Education and Care. As a pedagogical thinker and active member of her francophone community, Catherine brings a deep commitment to relational practices drawn from the re-conceptualist perspectives to challenge dominant narratives in the ECCE field. With a focus on outdoor curriculum, her work centers on rethinking how we live, learn and relate alongside children and the more-than-human world. Catherine works closely with educators, children, and families to cultivate spaces rooted in connection, care, and critical reflection.

Elysia Raimondo is an Early Childhood Educator practicing on the unceded territory of the Syilx Okanagan peoples. With 10 years of experience learning alongside young children, she is in her final semester of a Bachelor of Early Childhood Care and Education at Capilano University. Elysia is inspired by Common Worlds pedagogies, where outdoor education is central to her practice. By recognizing children and educators as entangled with more-than-human life, she focuses on connecting children to the land as a living teacher and cultivating reciprocal relationships with plants, animals, materials, living and non-living beings. Her work is also influenced by the warmth and rhythm of Waldorf education and the project-based approach of Reggio Emilia. These perspectives guide how she creates environments that invite wonder, meaning, and collaborative learning. Outside of her work, you can find her hiking forest trails, exploring different art skills, and she is currently preparing to welcome her first child.

Jenny Rae Wilder is a Pedagogist with the Early Childhood Pedagogy Network, working in the North Okanagan Syilx territory. She is in her final semester of a Bachelor of Early Childhood Care and Education at Capilano University, a journey that has profoundly shaped the way she understands and practices early childhood education. Jenny brings her love of fibre arts, movement, and song into her work with children, and she is deeply committed to place-based pedagogy and social justice. These commitments guide her work alongside educators as they thoughtfully respond to children, materials, and the lands where learning takes place.

Lyndsay Parrott is an early childhood educator with over 15 years of professional experience and more than 25 years working in inclusive care. She brings a deep commitment to supporting children, families, and communities through relationship-based, inclusive, and socially responsive practice. Lyndsay lives in the Okanagan on the unceded territory of the Syilx (Okanagan) Nation, a place that continues to shape her understanding of land, belonging, and interconnectedness. Lyndsay is currently a fourth-year student at Capilano University, where she is studying Early Childhood Education and further developing her pedagogical approach through critical, reflective, and justice-oriented learning. Lyndsay is particularly passionate about inclusion, social justice, and the ways music can foster connection, expression, and community in early learning spaces. Her work is grounded in respect, curiosity, and a belief in the strengths and capabilities of all children and the importance of learning together.

Amanda Fuller is completing her Bachelor of Early Education at Capilano University. She has ten years of experience as an Early Childhood Educator (ECE), an Infant-Toddler Educator (IT, working with infants and toddlers), and a Special Needs Educator (SN, supporting children with special needs). She currently works in a 3-5 program (serving children ages 3 to 5) at a non-profit Early Learning Center. Always eager to deepen her understanding of children's learning and to improve as an educator, she has taken various courses and, in 2023, traveled to Italy to learn from Reggio Emilia International. Previously, Amanda spent six years in South Korea, teaching English to children ages 3 to 12. Outside of work and ongoing learning, she enjoys time with her family and dogs.