

2016 Evolution Weekend

Rewilding Our Hearts

Confused by the title of this service? Let's unpack it.

What is “rewilding”? Not just trying to preserve the remnants of wilderness, but actively returning parts of the world to a condition more like that which existed before humans and their domesticated animals overran the ecology.

Some examples: beavers being released in Britain; wild cattle in Poland; wolves in Yellowstone

While I was reading about this, I ran across Marc Bekoff’s “Rewilding Our Hearts,” which is where the idea for this service came from.

Bekoff’s background and research – and about his life near Boulder and how that led to the idea of rewilding our hearts.

For Bekoff, this means coming into a richer relationship with the rest of the natural world and particularly with the animals we share it with. It means practicing compassion and care toward other life, and it means being in the natural world and experiencing it as much as possible, as often as possible. It also means doing so in an unregimented way.

It means not just acknowledging intellectually that we are part of an “interdependent web of life” but acting on that to the best of our ability.

What modern life has meant for most of us in the developed countries, however, is the opportunity to “unwild” ourselves to a great extent, to separate ourselves from the natural world around us. Most recently, that shows up in our increasing attachment to electronic devices and their use to mediate our relationships with other humans and to look to media for stimulation rather than to our own experiences.

It is generally understood that this is not good for us as adults. What is increasingly obvious is that it is worse, and in some cases much worse, for children.

At this time in the US, almost 10% of children are diagnosed as ADHD, suffering from attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Many of them are given medication that is supposed to help them fit into the environment they are in. Sometimes this works well, sometimes it doesn't.

However, there is an increasing body of research that suggests that exposure to nature and, particularly, to active engagement with nature, which is unquestionably beneficial to all children, is particularly beneficial to children with ADHD.

There is also plenty of historical, anecdotal data that suggests that children have been like this for a long time, but it has only been seen as a real problem in the last 100 years or so, with the rise of universal education that involves a lot of sitting still in a classroom.

John Muir, Fredrick Law Olmsted, Ansel Adams. More recently, many adventurers and extreme sportsmen and women including Sir Richard Branson.

It is currently hypothesized that there may have been an evolutionary reason that the traits of ADHD (which seem to be linked to an unusual allele of one of the genes regulating the production and metabolism of the neurotransmitter dopamine) have been conserved in the human species to the extent that they have.

In a natural environment, high responsiveness to stimuli, curiosity, and high activity levels are much more likely to be adaptive than they are in our built-up and structured environment. Learning how to use those traits to the best advantage is something that happened naturally in the kind of world our ancestors inhabited.

Today, however, we have a responsibility to insure that children have a chance to grow up in a way that does not try to short-circuit the biological history of six

million years of evolution, an attempt that is not, currently, working out well. All children need to interact with the natural world, and ideally to interact with wilderness. All children need unstructured play, without adult supervision, in order to develop the natural traits of fairness, kindness, and sensitivity to others that we share with many other animal species, most of whom, we are learning, also develop those traits through play, especially in adolescence.

And all of us, children and adults, need wildness and wilderness because it is part of our evolved nature to need it. We need to rewild our hearts and reach out to others, human and non-human, because it is essential not only to preserving the earth, but to preserving ourselves.