

INFLUENCES OF PLACE-BASED MEMORIES ON PARENTS WHO ENROL THEIR  
CHILDREN IN OUTDOOR PRESCHOOLS

By

KIM URBANIAK

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We accept this thesis as conforming  
to the required standard

.....  
Dr. Enid Elliot  
Thesis Supervisor

.....  
Liza Ireland, PhD  
School of Environment and Sustainability

.....  
Dr. Matthew Heinz  
Dean, Faculty of Social and Applied Sciences

ROYAL ROADS UNIVERSITY

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### **Abstract**

Developing positive relationships with nature through outdoor play and education may lead to increased environmental consciousness in adults. Building on past research showing the influence of early memories on adult decision making, this study strives to understand how childhood play outdoors relates to adult values of nature and their potential desire to share similar outdoor experiences with others. Utilizing the Nature Relatedness Scale and semi-structured qualitative interviews, I have explored a deeper understanding of the relationship between parents' memories of play outdoors and their subsequent decisions for their children. Reflecting on many of my own meaningful outdoor experiences alongside those of my parent participants, I have discovered that nature experiences are valued across different perspectives. Due to memorable outdoor experiences, these adults have taken action to offer their children similar meaningful opportunities in nature.

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## Chapter 1: A Walking Journey

Life is a series of journeys. This is my thesis journey, in which I explored the influence of childhood time outdoors on adult values and decisions. In the wake of the current environmental crisis, having a sense of belonging within our natural landscape is important if we are to care deeply enough to take responsible environmental actions. This idea of connection to place, of knowing your role in your environment, is important to me both professionally and personally, and I have explored my own attachment to place while researching the meaning of place for others.

Knowing first-hand this connection to place can start at a young age, I was drawn to the idea of nature preschools, which offer children opportunities to begin building a sense of belonging early in life. Familiarity and comfort in one's place outdoors can encourage the development of fulfilling relationships with nature, and I sought to investigate the influence of spending time outdoors as a child on adult's values later in life. I focused on the relationship between parents of children enrolled in nature preschool, their upbringing and their values, and their subsequent choices for their children. Specifically, I asked *how does childhood play outdoors relate to adult values towards nature and desire to share outdoor experiences with their children?*

Reflecting on my own childhood play added another layer of interest to this inquiry, and I chose to include my outdoor experiences as relevant to my research question. In discussing the value of researchers as storytellers, Vickers asks why we might acknowledge the experiences of another, but not our own (Vickers, 2002). I feel there is value in sharing my stories, as my experiences as a researcher are no less relevant than those of my participants.

There have been many influences in my life leading me to my research question. The stories included here provide insight into my lens, into how I have collected and interpreted my data, and allow you the reader, to reflect critically upon it (van Manen, 1990). In discussing pedagogy, van Manen (1990) argues that the use of traditional text might not be the most appropriate way when trying to open up and explore new pedagogical ideas; it may be appropriate to break away from rigid academic writing structure and explore how we write, alongside what we write. Without including the personal voice, research is often under-read, inaccessible and boring (Vickers, 2002). I was feeling disinterested in my own work, wondering how others would feel about it, and questioning my true motives, until I realized that I could organize my writing in a manner that reflects the content itself.

*When I was five years old, my family lived in Europe. Every long weekend for three years, we traveled outside of the country in which we lived. It was incredible. Having the opportunity to explore new places and cultures, and to learn about camping and sleeping outdoors at such a young age was inspiring. We always camped, and I remember setting up the pop-top camper van or the tent and getting all zipped into my sleeping bag. Europe is so full of history and culture, yet most of what I remember are the natural sites; the Alps, forests in rural France, beaches along the Mediterranean and northern Belgium, the fields of tulips in the Netherlands.*

*Even with all these wonderful and fortunate experiences what I remember most are the day to day play spots around my house in Belgium. I remember making snowmen the first time it snowed in two years. I remember how mild the temperature was compared to Canadian winters. I recall laughter, fresh air, my running nose, and showing off my expert snowball making skills.*

*I remember playing tag and cops and robbers in the conjoined backyards. But mostly, I remember playing in the forest behind the houses across the street.*

*There was a small path beside my friend's house where we would enter the forest. The path went on for what seemed an eternity, towards the edge of the military base we lived on. I can still clearly picture how the tall medium brown trees stood ominously above our heads, branches drooping in all directions, casting shadows all around. There wasn't much underbrush, mostly just fallen leaves and saplings. This allowed for our imaginations to constantly re-invent our games and redefine our own play boundaries. Even so, we never strayed far off the brown mulch path, but we rarely stayed on it. It was a wonderful private play place and left me in love with the forest.*

As I begin this research journey, I am lacking the sense of connection to my current place that I once had. This has ultimately led me to this study and, therefore, the framework around which I have undertaken research. "To do research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings" (van Manen, 1990, p. 5). This thesis journey not only served to answer my research question, but also in guiding me closer to my own connection to place. While connection to place is not the primary focus of my paper, it is the lens through which I formed questions, the contextualizing argument in the background (Vickers, 2002).

*Perhaps it was the mindset of my recycling conscious middle class suburban community, perhaps it was my forested play places, perhaps it was my understanding and comfort of camping, or even the outdoor survival skills I learned through Guiding. Regardless, by the time*

*I was nine years old I recall already having a great understanding of interconnections between species, and my place on the planet among them.*

I present pieces of my story as a means of bridging the gap between what studies have discovered about environmental professionals, and what my personal experience tells me may be the experience of many others. Research shows that environmentally minded adults relate their environmental values to one or a few significant experiences either of time spent in nature or in the presence of an adult teaching respect for nature (Chawla, 1998, 2007; Palmer, Suggate, Robottom, & Hart, 1999; Tanner, 1980). I have no such formative moment. Instead, I have a series of events, likely insignificant on their own, but which together have created enough of an impact to change or develop my value system and worldview into what they are today.

*My parents' decisions have definitely affected my lifestyle. It was my Mother's enjoyment of Girl Guides that spurred my enrollment. After she explained what guiding is, and how much fun it can be I was very interested and excited to join. My parents have always let kids be kids, and run around, sometimes despite what others may think. On one occasion while visiting Paris we were relaxing in a public park and my brother and I started running around on the grass playing tag. It was clearly posted that grass here was for aesthetic purposes only and not to be stepped on. Yet despite the rules and stares from other parents, we were allowed to run free. Rarely did my parents say "don't do this or don't do that" when I was outdoors. I wasn't necessarily encouraged to roll around in the mud and get dirty, but I was not discouraged either.*

I also have tension in my research. My scientific background was drawn to the rigours of quantitative methodologies, yet my artistic side yearned for a more phenomenological work. As a compromise with myself, I have undertaken mixed methods research with data analysis

influenced by multiple academic sources, and as can already be seen, have used a more narrative approach to my presentation. Keeping in mind *how* I write, I have deviated from the norm by continuing to include many of my own stories throughout the chapters, and also in my use of text. My principal academic voice is represented in Times New Roman 12 point font, and my personal stories in *Times New Roman 12 point italics*. Later in *Chapter 4: Sharing of Stories*, I have differentiated my research participants' voices from my own, representing their stories in Eras Light ITC 12 point font. This research has been a journey, and I will tell it as such.

*Back in Canada, I recall a different kind of play in the Ontarian forests. This time I was old enough to have something in common with my older brother and we ventured further from home. We would spend hours at a time riding our bikes through the trees and by the river. We would ride along the gravel pathways, up and down the hills, searching for jumps or puddles. We would even make a point of searching for and catching frogs and snakes.*

*As my teenage years approached, my family moved houses once again, but remained in the same suburb and I could occasionally return to my previous play places. In my search for a new, closer place to reflect and wash away my teenage angst, I explored yet another treed area. The bike path here was well established, paved with a yellow line down the middle, and often quite busy. I took to one particular rest stop with a viewpoint and a bench, where a tributary creek met the river. I would leave my bike by the bench and climb down the slope to sit as near the water as I could. Staring at the repetitive motions of the flowing river and listening to the soft constant bird song would calm my mind. The creek was notorious for being full of wildlife; a favorite spot for beavers. Rarely alone, almost every visit to my reprieve was shared with the sights or sounds of another creature.*

Forests have always played a large part in my life and are very comforting to me; they are a place of relaxation, retreat, and understanding. The variety and plethora of trees with tall imposing trunks and leaves swaying in the wind suggest a sort of majesty and mysticism that I find incredibly inviting. It is, therefore, fitting that I will present this research journey through the metaphor of a walk in the forest. All the components of a traditional research paper (literature review, methods, results, and discussion) are included as they relate to my personal search for answers and connection to my place.

My outdoor-focused childhood and strong family values led me to pursue an education in environmental science and now education and communication. I am aware of my biases towards outdoor play and environmentally conscious worldviews, as they are what ultimately led me to this research topic. I will not attempt to put them aside, as that would be futile, and I hope my awareness of them will allow me to reflect carefully and authentically represent data from other research participants.

### **Choosing a Direction**

*Nearing the end of high school, my family moved again, this time to the land of the relatively tree-less prairies. For years I have struggled to find my place in that community and in that environment. It wasn't until four years later when I was introduced to hiking in the Rocky Mountains that my world began to open up again.*

*My first hiking trip wasn't particularly special; a few good friends, a cold spring day, a difficult trek through some trees to a lake. I returned home feeling refreshed after another nice experience in my new home, but that was all I felt. Yet something stuck with me. Days and*

*months later I found myself yearning for more, once again drawn to the majesty of the trees, the majesty of the Rocky Mountains.*

My decision to walk through this particular research forest stems back to a class discussion surrounding the Earth Charter. The Earth Charter states that our modern anthropocentric and technological society is altering the planet in ways never before seen, stating, “the dominant patterns of production and consumption are causing environmental devastation, the depletion of resources, and a massive extinction of species” (Earth Charter Initiative, 2000, p. 1). Discussing in class this document of internationally accepted soft laws highlighted the lack of progress our western society has made towards alleviating the environmental crisis. Even after outlining a set of principles relevant across different worldviews and acknowledging some of the major causes and concerns around our anthropocentric thinking, the twelve year old charter has spurred little lasting change. Perhaps, because in order to foster a healthy and sustainable partnership with the Earth, our values, institutions, and ways of living must undergo difficult dramatic changes (Earth Charter Initiative, 2000).

What must we change from and what must we change towards? It has been argued that many humans are losing touch with our natural roots and becoming alarmingly attached to built environments and technology (Chawla, 1998; Jordan, 2009; Louv, 2006; Maller, Townsend, Pryor, Brown, & St Leger, 2006; Weston, 2004). Western society is increasingly disconnected from nature, and we are acting as though we have forgotten our interdependencies with other beings (Chawla, 1998; Jordan, 2009; Louv, 2006; Maller et al., 2006; Weston, 2004).

Exactly what is this nature we are becoming disconnected from? Before I continue, I must share my understanding of the word *nature*. There are many ways to define nature, but as Louv (2006) and Snyder (2004) state, most people refer to one of two meanings. The first, is to mean everything outdoors, the physical world including all living things (Louv, 2006, p. 8; Snyder, 2004, p. 8). The second is a much broader meaning, including “the material world or its collective objects and phenomena” (Louv, 2006, p. 8; Snyder, 2004, p. 9). In this second meaning, everything is considered natural as all was ultimately derived from the planet. I find this notion somewhat troubling as it includes city-scapes, toxic wastes, and atomic energy (Snyder, 2004, p. 9). While it is true that everything is ultimately “natural” in this sense, there is an obvious distinction I feel is necessary. I agree with Louv (2006, p. 8), in preferring the first meaning, which separates man-made objects. Therefore, in using the term *nature*, I refer to the outdoors, all the living and non-living things and systems that encompass our planet.

Considering nature in this way illuminates the growing separation between nature and man by differentiating man-made objects from non-man-made objects. E.O. Wilson’s *biophilia hypothesis* makes this notion less troubling for me (Wilson, 1993). Wilson hypothesizes that our attraction to nature might be genetically based and fundamental to human development (Wilson, 1993). If this is true, then deep in our psyche, every human has a biological need to connect to nature, and we can encourage support for sustainable societies by promoting early relationships with nature. My childhood was diverse and fortunate with much time spent in free play outdoors, yet I do not recall a specific event that spurred my love of nature. I have always had an inexplicable yearning for the outdoors, perhaps this is a lived biophilic experience.

The Earth Charter suggests that educational institutions are one area where creative adaptation can lead to building sustainable societies (Earth Charter Initiative, 2000). Therefore, if humans are innately drawn to nature, environmental education can help to foster relationships with nature (Earth Charter Initiative, 2000; Metz, McMillan, Maxwell, & Tetrault, 2010; Weston, 2004)? Research has shown that outdoor play has positive impacts on children's health and development (Chawla, 1988, 2007; Jordan, 2009; Kuo & Taylor, 2004; Louv, 2006; Maller et al., 2006; Shepard, 1995; A. F. Taylor, Kuo, & Sullivan, 2001). Outdoor play offers an opportunity to learn about, for, and in the environment, providing a foundation for fostering environmentally conscious children and adults. Through my own experiences, I have come to believe that living and learning early in life can instill strong values and good habits. Therefore, understanding how childhood experiences affected others' values and their subsequent decisions for their children, would aid in developing more outdoor programs and offering more similar opportunities for young children.

*Nearing the end of eighth grade, all the elementary school kids got to tour the high school for an introduction to the next several years of our lives. This is the day that I discovered environmental and outdoor education. My local high school had three courses: environmental education, outdoor education, and environmental studies. I clearly remember entering the classroom and meeting the teacher tasked with the huge job of instilling some kind of nature knowledge into these middle class suburban kids. The classroom was large, with round tables instead of desks at one end, and at the other a carpeted area with pillows and a TV. Even in the design it was inviting. I don't recall what was said, but I clearly remember sitting at one of the*

*tables thinking “I am taking these classes, they sound amazing! I don’t care what my parents think, this is what I’m doing.”*

*It was obvious to me as soon as I heard environmental education existed that I had to get involved. Somehow, at just 13 years old, I knew this was the direction my life was headed, I just knew I would devote my life to protecting and conserving our planet.*

*I loved those environmental education classes. I always enjoyed school and learning anyway, but learning about nature and how our planet works and what we can do to sustain it was even more enjoyable. The classes themselves were easy for me too. Often I thought, “This is common sense to me, how come everyone else doesn’t get it”? Helping pass along this knowledge and understand would become a life-long personal initiative for me.*

## Chapter 2: Understanding Previous Experiences

My experiences and worldview have led me here to the edge of the forest. My research journey began with many questions: *Where was I going? Who would I go with? How would I travel?* Most importantly, *what is the purpose of my trek?* Like any journey, my thesis journey required a lot of preparation, and I began by answering some of these questions.

I am not the first to walk this particular forest trail, in fact, many others have previously delved into discussions and experiences pertaining to my journey. I have already shared some of my most memorable outdoor experiences from which I developed strong feelings towards spending time outdoors and place-based education. As I prepared to embark on my walk in search of understanding *how does childhood play outdoors relate to adult values towards nature and desire to share outdoor experiences with their children*, I reviewed the literature for the stories and experiences of others.

Throughout the years and throughout my travels, my interests have evolved into my search for understanding connection to place. Therefore, I began my research by investigating connection to place and how this connection is built through relationships. I have also explored the health benefits of nature and the role of education in bridging the gap between young children and nature.

### Connection to Place

What is “connection to place”? Still a relatively new concept, there is no clearly accepted definition. Taking my cue from Gruenewald (2003a), I herein refer to connection to place as being aware of and comfortable in one’s location, setting, and role. This encompasses both one’s

physical location as well as recognizing one's role within nature. It means appreciating the historical, social and cultural value of a place. Or, as Van Matre (1979) puts it, feeling "life's wondrous mysteries – the awesome, yet joyous, systems in which [you] are bound up with every other living thing on earth" (p. xvi).

It has been argued that such a connection to place is a human need, even part of our self-identity (Fleury-Bahi, Felonneau, & Marchand, 2008; Orr, 2004). Place-identity, as Fleury-Bahi et al. (2008) refer to it, includes both a social and a physical component. Connecting place to self-identity through memory, ideas, feelings, and preferences, the resulting positive relationships with nature can be influential in developing values, attitudes, and beliefs around the environment (Ballantyne & Packer, 2009; Fleury-Bahi et al., 2008; Gruenewald, 2003a; Jordan, 2009; Louv, 2006; Smith, 2002). Connection to place and self-identity simultaneously lead to and come from positive relationships with nature.

Values, attitudes, and beliefs affect and are affected by, our actions. Insight into perspectives and worldviews helps to understand someone's self-identity and their potential connection to place. Worldviews are diverse and can range from human centered to earth centered, often varying depending on each situation (Verhagen, 2008). The current dominant Western paradigm is often anthropocentric, placing humans as the central focus, separate from nature (Dale, 2001; Verhagen, 2008). With a focus on humans and their needs, this perspective frequently sees nature as a machine designed for human betterment (Verhagen, 2008). Keeping in mind the variety of value systems and perspectives in our society, not just the dominant paradigm, can give us extra insight into parents' influences and decisions. The way we perceive

the world, our perspectives, directly affect the decisions we make regarding family, lifestyle, and even our connection to place.

### **Finding Connection through Relationships**

Connection to place is so crucial in my mind in part because of the growing disconnect from nature in today's Western societies. As I discussed in *Ch. 1: A Walking Journey*, our increasing attachment to built environments and technology often means we are increasingly disconnected from the natural world (Chawla, 1998; Jordan, 2009; Louv, 2006; Maller et al., 2006; Weston, 2004). In embracing this technological lifestyle, many of us have forgotten or chosen to ignore our innate needs for the natural world (Wilson, 1993). Some say we are headed on a path of irreversible environmental destruction (Earth Charter Initiative, 2000), and in order to avoid it, we need to become environmentally conscious citizens living sustainable lifestyles which preserve the environment for future generations of all species.

Developing respectful and understanding relationships may be the first step to changing the way we view our planet and use its resources. It seems clear to me that these relationships and a sense of connection to place can be built through time in nature. Spending time outdoors and integrating nature into our everyday lives can promote our connection to the natural environment, removing fears and encouraging positive accepting, appreciative, and empathic relationships (Chawla, 1988; Jordan, 2009; Louv, 2006; Orr, 2004; Van Matre, 1979; Weston, 2004). As Jordan (2009) states, "to acknowledge our dependency on nature is central in solving aspects of the environmental crisis in which we find ourselves" (p. 26).

Relationships with the natural world build over time; therefore, more time spent outside may result in stronger positive interactions with nature (Chawla, 1988; Louv, 2006; Weston,

2004). This in turn, can inspire caring, nurturing people who strive to maintain and protect the earth (Ballantyne & Packer, 2009; Gruenewald, 2003a; Jordan, 2009; Louv, 2006; Smith, 2002). Since relationships develop over time, starting early and allowing for more time may allow for deeper, more meaningful relationships. Developing such relationships in early childhood provides many opportunities to strengthen bonds with nature and can even lead to making responsible ecological decisions in adulthood (Robertson, 2008; Shepard, 1995).

### **Significant life experiences.**

Some experiences can be moving enough to affect, directly or indirectly, the way we live the rest of our lives. A significant life experience (SLE) of exploration of the natural world and recognition of our place within it can provide guidance for life (Chawla, 1988, 1998; Tanner, 1980). However, not everyone travels the same path of one formative experience leading to positive environmental tendencies. As I have already shared in my story, and as Payne discusses less formative experiences combined together can also become significant (Payne, 1999). Perhaps this is due to the breadth of experiences as Payne (1999) goes on to discuss, sharing how space and time also play important roles in developing SLE.

Deep connections to the natural environment can provide strong formative influences in developing values and worldviews (Chawla, 1998; Gruenewald, 2003a; Tanner, 1980). As Palmer et al. (1999) state, “It is those 'in' and 'with' the environment experiences that appear to be fundamental to the development of long-term environmental awareness and concern” (p. 199). Other research supports this, showing that many environmentally minded adults have attributed their values to either spending time in nature and/or the presence of others teaching respect for the environment (Chawla, 1988; Palmer et al., 1999; Tanner, 1980).

It has also been shown that some formative experiences can be so moving that individuals seek to carry them forward by offering similar experiences to others, including their children (Chawla, 1988). Even parents who may be unaware of the role their childhood memories play in their decisions may seek to offer their children similar opportunities. Parents with such formative experiences wishing to pass these opportunities along to their children have many options, including nature preschools which offer the time and space to develop meaningful outdoor experiences at a young age.

### **Barriers.**

In the hopes of creating positive experiences potentially leading to SLE, we must acknowledge and work through barriers that might impede a connection with nature. Barriers are numerous and complex, including anxiety, discomfort, peer pressure, and societal norms. In particular, societal and cultural fears - of loss, injury, the unknown, often dominate our interactions with society and with our environment (Jordan, 2009; Shepard, 1995). Jordan (2009) supports the need for Western society as a whole to work on relationships and attachment in order to move away from our dominant patterns of avoidance and ambivalence. In his article *Nature and Madness*, Shepard (1995) also discusses the psychology behind fear, pointing out that in some cases, fear of nature is linked with poor mental health. He argues that developing proper bonds in childhood is crucial to overcoming fear and making sound ecological decisions in adulthood, thereby helping to prevent such cases and increase mental health (Shepard, 1995).

Terms such as *ecophobia* (Sobel, 1996) and *biophobia* (Kahn, 1997) have described this strong fear of the natural world, and the negative emotions towards it. A deep lack of connection to the natural world may be harmful; it has been shown that in cases where connection to nature

is so lost, that mental and physical health are affected, and learning and attention difficulties develop (Kahn, 1997; Louv, 2006; Wilson, 1993).

However, if there is an innate connection to nature, then biophilia (Wilson, 1993) may prevail. Wilson (1993) describes biophilia as “the innately emotional affiliation of human beings to other living organisms” (p. 32), hypothesizing that deep relationships with nature are innate. “Nature is not a mere cultural convention or artifact-as some cultural theorists may suggest-but part of a physical and biological reality that bounds children’s cognition” (Kahn, 1997, p. 54). If I, as many others (Louv, 2006; Orr, 2004; Sobel, 1996; A. Taylor, Kuo, & Sullivan, 2002), support this idea there is hope of reconnecting people to the planet. It is possible that we can connect to our innate love of the natural world and move beyond our fears to create positive relationships. This innate characteristic has simply been forgotten, not lost or replaced, and we are yearning for its return (Shepard, 1995).

Like any form of love, biophilia is complex. Not all forms of love are equal, and biophilia requires true appreciative relationships that go beyond possessive forms of love (Orr, 2004). Creating such a deep loving relationship with the earth requires different abilities at different ages (Orr, 2004; Sobel, 1996; A. Taylor et al., 2002). Therefore, at the early childhood level, age-appropriate exploration and relationship development are priorities (Kahn, 1997; Sobel, 1996). As Sobel (1996) states, “What’s important is that children have an opportunity to bond with the natural world, to learn to love it, before being asked to heal its wounds” (p. 9).

### **Benefits of Contact with Nature**

There are many benefits of nature, and without being outdoors, a plethora of problems may occur. Contact with nature has been shown to support improved mental health (Kahn, 1997;

Maller et al., 2006) and allow appropriate childhood development leading to mature adults with good mental health (Shepard, 1995). Lower blood pressure and cholesterol as well as better post-surgery recovery rates can also be linked to a positive contact with nature (Kahn, 1997; Maller et al., 2006). Other physical health benefits include lower levels of perceived job stress, better outlook on life, decreased stress levels, and improvements in overall health (Kahn, 1997; Maller et al., 2006). Also noteworthy is nature's ability to improve attention levels. It has been shown that inattention and impulsivity in adults are reduced after contact with nature (Kaplan, 1995; Kuo & Taylor, 2004). Children with ADD/ADHD have been shown to display significantly reduced attention deficit symptoms after playing in natural settings (Kuo & Taylor, 2004; A. F. Taylor & Kuo, 2006; A. F. Taylor et al., 2001). If this relationship has been shown in adults and children with attention deficit disorders, then it is reasonable to extend these findings to all children, especially those of preschool age, where mental fatigue can be common (A. F. Taylor & Kuo, 2006; A. F. Taylor et al., 2001).

Many academic benefits have also been shown associated with place-based and outdoor education. Greater knowledge gain and transfer resulting in higher scores on standardized academic achievement tests in reading, writing, math, science, and social studies have been reported (Chawla, Escalanet, & Duffin, 2007; A. F. Taylor & Kuo, 2006). Also, more advanced critical thinking, cooperation, and conflict resolution skills have been found (Chawla et al., 2007). Combined, these benefits have resulted in higher grade point averages and more scholarships for children involved in place-based and/or outdoor education programs (Chawla et al., 2007; A. F. Taylor & Kuo, 2006). Furthermore, teachers have reported increased pride in

accomplishments, greater engagement and enthusiasm for learning, as well as improved classroom behaviour in participant children (Chawla et al., 2007).

The plethora of benefits associated with nature and the problems that could occur from a lack of contact are too significant to be overlooked. We should be striving to provide as much outdoor time for our children as possible, allowing them to develop supportive relationships with the natural environment (Sobel, 1996; Wilson, 1993). By doing so, it may be possible to guide the next generation into respectful relationships with the earth, and mitigate future environmentally destructive behaviours.

### **The Role of Education**

The Earth Charter Initiative (2000) calls on many facets of society, including educational institutions, for creative leadership to build sustainable societies. Yet the possibilities for educational reform are endless, and judging by the lack of progress towards reform, apparently difficult to decide upon. Environmental education and outdoor education have much to offer in this regard (Earth Charter Initiative, 2000; Metz et al., 2010; Weston, 2004). As I discussed above in *Benefits of Contact with Nature*, research has shown that outdoor play has positive impacts on children's health and development (Chawla, 1988, 2007; Chawla et al., 2007; Jordan, 2009; Kahn, 1997; Kaplan, 1995; Kuo & Taylor, 2004; Louv, 2006; Maller et al., 2006; Shepard, 1995; A. F. Taylor & Kuo, 2006; A. F. Taylor et al., 2001), therefore, learning *about, for, and in* the environment could provide a good foundation for raising environmentally conscious children (Ballantyne & Packer, 2009). I believe that living and learning early in life instils strong values and good habits, therefore, parents who share outdoor experiences with their young children,

including enrolling them in nature preschool, are taking positive steps to building sustainable societies.

### **Problems with mainstream education.**

With the shift from rural to urban life, educational needs have been changing. Historically, focusing on spending time outside and connecting to nature was not a priority of education, as so many children grew up on farms where they received these types of experiences. Mainstream education, founded on industrial models aimed at creating good factory workers, still function on out-dated principles that do not emphasize earth-centered values, relationships, and critical thinking (Orr, 1991). Our societies have changed significantly and public concerns are rising that our education system has not kept up.

Highly structured and often stifling creativity, today's "traditional education differentiates conceptual learning and generalizes sensory awareness," (Van Matre, 1979, p. 8) thereby encouraging disconnect from our natural surroundings. Orr (2004) agrees by saying, Education has become a great homogenizing force undermining local knowledge, indigenous languages, and the self-confidence of placed people. It has become an adjunct to the commercial economy. It had hired itself out to the forces of growth and development, which as far as I can tell, is the effort to make the world safe for big capital. Taken as a whole, education has lacked the courage to ask itself what kind of world its graduates will inherit and what kind of world they will be prepared to build (p. 129). We need, Orr argues, more innovative, courageous, and caring people, not necessarily more successful ones. With children playing outside less and less often, there is a great opportunity

for formal education to be a valuable tool in reinstating the benefits of nature into our lives (Earth Charter Initiative, 2000; Orr, 1991).

### **What is nature preschool?**

Nature preschools are programs for children aged 3-5 where all activities have a nature focus (Davis, 2009; Knight, 2009). Most European nature preschools, also known as forest schools, occur entirely outdoors, while many North American programs are a hybrid of indoor and outdoor time. In defining UK forest schools, Knight (2009) describes learning to be “play-based, and as far as possible, child-initiated and child-led” (p. 17). This is particularly poignant, as nature preschools for the most part, aim to put the children in control of what they learn by offering child-led, and child-focused, and integrated play-based pedagogy (Davis, 2009; Knight, 2009; O’Brien & Murray, 2007). The goal of nature preschool is to “foster a love of nature and to expose kids to a wide range of outdoor, nature-based topics and experiences” (Waskasoo Environmental Education Society, n.d., p. 1).

Nature education is not a new idea. The European concept of early childhood education (ECE) is strongly rooted in Froebel’s (1782-1852) philosophies of free play, creativity, socialization and emotional stability (Knight, 2009, p. 5). In Scandinavia and Northern Europe, forest schools developed as an accepted part of their education systems, focusing on social and emotional development of young children. Applicable to many other Westernized countries, Knight explains how at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this was not the case in Britain. She states, “mainstream education in this country seemed to lose sight of the importance of regular outdoor opportunities” (Knight, 2009, p. 3), resulting in degradation of outdoor sports facilities and play structures, less time allocated to sport and play, and increased health and safety concerns.

Rooted in early childhood education traditions and philosophies, forest schools spread into Denmark in the 1980s, and in the 1990s to the UK and the rest of mainland Europe (Davis, 2009; Knight, 2009). Now also found in Australia, United Kingdom, United States of America, and New Zealand, nature preschools have numerous benefits that are spurring their growth in Canada as well (Davis, 2009; Knight, 2009).

Although forest schools have been in operation for several decades, there are few published studies evaluating outcomes. O'Brien and Murray (2007) have discussed the effects of forest schools from the perspective of the educators and parents involved. They highlighted how practitioners often gain a sense of ownership over their work, and parents gain a better understanding of the impacts of nature on children. Knight (2009) also shares how forest schools have spread in popularity across Europe, and can now be found throughout many countries. The spread of forest schools and their lengthy existence speaks to some success. There is also some data showing the long term success of the Kerry Wood Nature Centre in Red Deer, Alberta, the school I partnered with, in increasing environmental attitudes (Robertson, 2008).

Wanting to explore this area of education further, I recruited my research participants from a group of parents with children in nature preschool. Having already embarked on at least one positive environmental action (of enrolling their children in nature preschool), I felt these parents would be able to offer some of the insights I was seeking. Even if they did not choose this program because of its environmental benefits, by simply enrolling their children these parents have shown an interest in the principles of childhood play outdoors.

### **Nature preschool as place-based pedagogy.**

Through research, readings, discussions with others, and personal experience I am discovering how little environmental education is currently offered in mainstream education. A focus on education *in* nature, which has been deemed the most effective form of environmental education, does not appear to be common (Ballantyne & Packer, 2009; Metz et al., 2010; Weston, 2004). Outdoor schools can play a large role in connecting children to nature by getting them outside and appreciating their surroundings. Taking a variety of forms, they all include a focus on nature, outdoor learning time, and a different type of teaching, things most mainstream schools do not. “The worry, to put it generally, is that importing the usual modes of teaching into environmental education risks reproducing the very disconnection from the larger world that was the problem in the first place” (Weston, 2004, p. 35).

In incorporating nature into education, careful consideration must be taken. Orr (1991) suggests principles to guide the restructuring of education systems stating, “it is not the education that will save us, but education of a certain kind” (p. 53). Among other principles, he advocates for integrating environmental learning into all education, recalling the responsibility associated with knowledge, acknowledging the power of examples, and understanding that *how* learning occurs is equally important to *what* is learnt (Orr, 1991). What is taught should not take precedence over where learning occurs (Metz et al., 2010; Orr, 1991; Weston, 2004).

Focusing on the *how* of learning through place-based pedagogy can also aid in overcoming the traditional separation between school and ‘real life’ (Smith, 2002). All environmental education aims to connect students to real world environmental problems and potential solutions (Ballantyne & Packer, 2009). More specifically, place-based pedagogy seeks to teach about a place while in that place, increasing practical experiences and grounding

learning in everyday lives, yet not necessarily referring to the outdoors (Smith, 2002).

Ballantyne and Packer (2009) agree, stating, “learning in natural environments is particularly conducive to establishing ‘connectedness’” (p. 250).

Changing foci within public education is a challenging long term project and society could benefit from immediate interim ways to increase environmental consciousness (Metz et al., 2010; Weston, 2004). Nature preschool is a good example of place-based pedagogy that strives to build relationships between people and places. As a program that happens prior to the formal educational system, and often seen as a continuum preparing children for elementary school, nature preschools can more easily shift their foci outdoors and begin rebuilding connections to nature. They offer the space and time for a plethora of dynamic, multi-sensory, first hand learning opportunities (Chawla, 2007), and propose ideas and examples for further amendments at other levels of the school system. Through outdoor play, children are afforded freedom to make their own discoveries at their own level, with immediate, reinforcing effects of their actions (Chawla, 2007).

## **Moving Forward**

*Guiding was a big influence on my life. Aside from social development and confidence, I gained many outdoor skills and experience camping. Over years of developing these skills, I became comfortable in nature, not bound by fear but instead, filled with joy when outdoors. Since I began Guiding because of my Mother’s positive experiences, I can attest to the value of passing along your passions to your children. My parent’s interests, values, and experiences influenced what I was exposed to as a child, and I have every intention to pass along my passions to others as well.*

Reflecting on my experiences, I understand that our own personal experiences affect how we wish to raise our children. Outdoor play was prominent in my childhood, and I would have thrived in nature focused schooling. I have every intention of providing my own future children with similar experiences, just as I often share outdoor time with the young people in my life today.

Being aware of and comfortable in your physical location as well as your role within nature has been argued critically important in developing place-identity and self-identity (Fleury-Bahi et al., 2008; Gruenewald, 2003a; Orr, 2004; Van Matre, 1979). Such identities result in and from worldviews, which may in turn, lead towards or away from valuing nature. Greater connection to place results in deeper relationships with nature, combatting the ever increasing disconnect of Western societies; increased time outdoors and space to explore throughout childhood and later life can even result in greater environmental concern (Ballantyne & Packer, 2009; Chawla, 1988; Fleury-Bahi et al., 2008; Gruenewald, 2003a; Jordan, 2009; Louv, 2006; Orr, 2004; Smith, 2002; Van Matre, 1979; Weston, 2004).

Significant life experiences can lead to deep, meaningful, and lasting relationships with the earth which in turn can lead to a desire to provide meaningful experiences for others (Chawla, 1998; Gruenewald, 2003a; Tanner, 1980). Yet in order to do so, fears must be faced and our innate biophilia embraced (Jordan, 2009; Kahn, 1997; Shepard, 1995; Wilson, 1993). We can then reap the plethora of physical, mental, and academic benefits offered by contact with nature.

### **Chapter 3: Approaching the Pathway**

My walk through the research forest was by no means direct. Sometimes the foliage was so dense I could not see where I was headed. Even so, like most journeys, I could easily look behind me and see what would have been the simple and direct route. The research path I expected to take appeared simple and direct, but it was not to be so easy. There were times I knew what needed to be done, and other times I was very confused and frustrated with my research, especially during data collection. My walk went uphill and downhill as planned, yet crisscrossed and intersected the intended route. However, like all journeys, I did find the end of my research path and was offered many insights.

#### **Searching for the Way**

Since outdoor education and connection to place have been my primary influences in my Master's studies I looked towards nature preschools to bridge these interests and as a suitable platform for my research. Having decided to travel in the direction of nature preschools early on, I focused on finding which particular trail I would take. Full of choices and open to options for specific research questions, I could have gone any number of ways. As I neared the possible trailheads, I made some preparations and searched for any type of map I could find that might prove useful. I connected with the few nature preschools I could track down to see where their research needs were and chose to focus my study on parents, eventually asking *how does childhood play outdoors relate to adult values towards nature and desire to share outdoor experiences with their children?*

As I planed the details for my upcoming forest walk, including my research question and design, I became fully aware of how my biases and background have clearly been influencing

my decisions. Feeling pulled in separate directions by my scientific interests and artistic tendencies, I investigated several possible directions. With my focus on unravelling meaning from experiences, I settled on what I believed to be a good fit: my methodology would be primarily phenomenological.

Phenomenology uses thick description to analyse lived experience and to understand how meaning is created from such experiences (Starks & Trinidad, 2007; Tufford & Newman, 2010; van Manen, 1990). Seeking to understand the experiences of others while seeking meaning for myself, I became embodied within my research (van Manen, 1990). As van Manen (1990) explains, phenomenology is the act of attaching ourselves to a topic, questioning the ways of the world in which we are a part (p. 5). As I progressed within this thesis journey, I exemplified the traits of phenomenology even more than intended. “Hermeneutic phenomenological research is fundamentally a writing activity” (van Manen, 1990, p. 7), and I connected more deeply with my data once I began sharing my own memories on paper.

Initially drawn to mixed methods research design I followed my instincts and designed my study to include quantitative and qualitative methods. Both methods were deemed appropriate means to address my inquiries, resulting in both a quantitative survey and qualitative interviews within my study design. Qualitative analysis is a method often used when seeking to explore or describe a phenomenon, since it provides the opportunity to familiarize oneself with the topic at hand through detailed information (Trochim, 2006). Careful qualitative interviews of selected individuals can allow for deep probing, any necessary follow-up, and the flexibility to follow early leads. Utilizing additional quantitative data can facilitate the outward generalization of findings and focus the qualitative results (Charmaz, 2006; Chawla, 1998).

Yet, following my planned mixed methods design left me disinterested and yearning for more. Contemplating what was lacking in my work, I realized it was my own voice. Exploring a diversity of writing styles, I was inspired once again and I chose to integrate my own perspective, both in content and prose. Incorporating my perspective as a third stream of data means I have not followed the steps of any particular research structure, rather, I have been influenced by many authors.

I was supported in this decision particularly by Vickers (2002) and van Manen (1990). Vickers (2002) questions the diminished value often placed upon the author's experiences, and deems work which includes a personal voice to be more accessible and interesting for the reader. Similarly, van Manen (1990) feels it is appropriate to use non-conventional means of writing when exploring non-conventional pedagogical ideas. He also argues the inclusion of personal experience provides insight into the author's lens which lets the reader reflect critically upon any conclusions (van Manen, 1990).

As noted in *Chapter 1: A Walking Journey*, my worldview and beliefs have led me to this research topic; I cannot attempt to separate myself from my preconceptions and biases (Charmaz, 2006). In investigating the idea of bracketing (Tufford & Newman, 2010; van Manen, 1990), I realized I can never truly be objective, and by including my own voice and experiences I have shared my perspective with the reader. I agree with van Manen (1990) when he questions the feasibility of placing one's knowledge of a phenomenon outside of the phenomenon itself (p.47). Therefore, I take this opportunity to acknowledge that my biases and preconceptions may be influencing data analysis and subsequent conclusions. I have taken steps to consciously work around my presuppositions and premonitions, including memoing and journaling throughout this

process (Tufford & Newman, 2010), yet, I encourage you, the reader to continue with a critical eye, as it is up to you to interpret my conclusions.

### **Travel Companions**

Realizing this was not a solo walk, I connected with others who would later join me as companions for part of the way. Finding research participants to join in my journey was imperative, as I am not a parent and I do not have this firsthand knowledge. My own experiences playing outdoors as a child led me to this inquiry and the belief that our experiences and values guide our choices. My stories are intended to complement and enrich the stories of my participants.

Having clarified my methodology and research question, I thought about where I might locate my companions. Since nature preschools are a relatively new educational movement in Canada, I was unable to find a program in my own city, so I chose to affiliate with the Kerry Wood Nature Centre (KWNC) in Red Deer, Alberta. It is the closest nature preschool to me and with a Royal Roads University Alumni as executive director they were more than willing to partner together. As a part of the Waskasoo Environmental Education Society, the KWNC offers a nature-focused preschool called *Nature Nursery*. In this program, children ages 3-5 years old spend one or two half days per week in a nature-based preschool setting located on a 300 acre sanctuary (Waskasoo Environmental Education Society, n.d.). During May and September, the children are outdoors for the entire duration of the program, and during the other months of the school year, they spend up to one and a half hours outdoors. When outdoors, the children are offered both structured and unstructured play and exploration, and when indoors, all activities are nature focused (Waskasoo Environmental Education Society, n.d.).

All data was collected through the KWNC from parents with children currently enrolled in the *Nature Nursery* program. To invite parents to participate in my study, an invitation letter was drafted and distributed including information about my project, my credentials and contact information, and an invitation for parents to contact me. I also included the electronic link for the initial quantitative survey.

### **Compiling the Trail Map**

Once I had recruited company for my forest walk, I was required to work out details for uncovering their stories and environmental attitudes. When exploring the options of using both quantitative and qualitative methods, I chose quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews for gathering similar, related data while acting as a form of triangulation increasing the validity of results. With this in mind, I chose to circulate the survey first, allowing it to influence the structure of the qualitative questions, sampling and data collection (Creswell & Clark, 2011, p. 69).

It wasn't long before the trail got steep and difficult. Having completed my preparations I continued along uphill thinking about where I might be heading. Only when I was well into my research did I realize there was no complete map for this journey, and I would have to find my way using whatever resources I could. Fortunately, I was able to find some guidance in an existing survey which, along with my own ideas, came together to guide my way.

### **Mapping the survey.**

Acting as an overview map, the electronic survey (*Appendix B*) sought to examine parental environmental attitudes and values, using the existing Nature Relatedness Scale (NR Scale) (Nisbet, Zelenski, & Murphy, 2008). I employed the NR Scale with consistent questions

and categories of analysis to increase the transferability of results, and to provide the benefit of checking the reliability of my results with past tests (Chawla, 1998; Creswell & Clark, 2011, p. 211).

The quantitative survey involved a set of 21 questions, where one parent from each family could choose answers ranging from “*1 Strongly Disagree*” to “*5 Strongly Agree*”. After reverse scoring eight questions, all 21 questions could be averaged to determine each individual’s Nature Relatedness score (Nisbet et al., 2008). Additionally, I included a few questions to collect demographic information, and any other thoughts the parents wished to add. The final section of the survey asked parents if they would be willing to participate in an in-depth interview, and if so, to include their contact information. Inviting the parents to offer their personal information initially in this manner, I was able to respect any legal and privacy concerns KWNC might have.

### **Mapping the interviews.**

To allow a flexible yet guided conversational approach, I chose to use semi-structured interviews (McClaren & Morton, 2003). Since my goal was to address several topics at once and elicit stories of time spent in nature, structured interviews would have been too rigid, while unstructured interviews would have restricted the topics covered (McClaren & Morton, 2003). Semi-structured interviews provided the necessary balance between guided questions, on the spot clarification, and leaving time for respondents to discuss other potentially significant related memories.

After conducting a pilot interview to verify flow and comprehension, I adapted my questions to address the themes of childhood play, schooling experiences, as well as thoughts on

early childhood education/preschools. The following is a sample of interview questions (for full interview matrix, see *Appendix C*):

- Tell me about where you played as a child?
- What was the focus of your play? What types of games/activities did you do most often?
- Think back to when you were in preschool/kindergarten. What did you enjoy most about your early years in school?
- How often did you learn outside? Did you embark on field trips?
- In your opinion, what is the most important aspect of education for children aged 3-5, and why?

### **Mapping my research journey.**

I journeyed into this research primarily for intellectual gain, but also in part to find what was missing with my relationship to nature. Choosing to frame my work around connection to place was a subconscious call out for the need to find my own place. As the process unfolded, I realized how close yet how far I was to feeling truly connected with my place. I felt comfortable in and knowledgeable about my environment, but I was lacking a deep sense of attachment. Having known this feeling before, I realized what I was missing, and sought to find it again. By journaling and reflecting on my own stories, then relating them to those of my research participants, I hoped to find the deep connection to place I was longing for.

Outlining my biases immediately highlighted the extent at which I was already invested in this research. Reflecting upon my past and journaling about my most memorable outdoor experiences throughout this research journey allowed me to connect with my participants' and

their stories on a deeper level. Unveiling similarities and contrasts amongst our stories, I relived my own outdoor experiences and recalled how much love and understanding I found in each of my own memories. Using a separate notebook for memoing allowed me to separate any data related reflections from my personal experiences. My personal reflections have shed light and perspective onto my qualitative and quantitative data, as well as guiding me on a personal journey of self-reflection and growth.

During my research process, I was offered an opportunity for short-term work abroad. Happily taking this chance to step away to a dramatically different place, I gained a new perspective on my journey, and was offered many insights. Through this time away, I was able to see my data and interpret the experiences of others more clearly.

Determining how to present the stories and experiences I have gathered along the way, I decided to include my own stories. The growing support in qualitative research design for including the voice of the researcher (van Manen, 1990; Vickers, 2002) made this an easier decision. I have already, and will continue to share stories of my own outdoor experiences throughout the chapters. I also chose to share my research journey through the metaphor of a forest walk to help convey the sense of this experience.

### **Stumbling onto the Side Path**

Shortly after piecing together my map, I was knocked off course. Having been told I could connect to the parents by a direct route, I had compiled my map with that in mind. However, this was not to be the case, and I walked down a side path instead. In initial discussions with the KWNC, I was told email addresses were available and my invitation letter and survey link could be distributed electronically. However, come time to circulate my letter, I

was informed email addresses were not available. Flustered and frustrated to be off the main trail so soon, I paused to catch my breath and explore my options. I opted to enlist the help of the KWNC preschool teacher to circulate hard copies of the invitation letter to parents upon dropping off or picking up their children from *Nature Nursery*, and thus, I was unable to connect with former parents who might have been interested in participating. Most letters were distributed by the preschool teacher, and some by myself when onsite for the first interviews. I ensured that all participants were distributed an identical invitation letter linking to the same electronic survey. The survey remained open for almost two months; the first month receiving only 13 responses, and the second as an unsuccessful effort to increase response rate.

While on this side path I suspected my low response rate may be problematic and began the first steps of data analysis. I calculated each individual's Nature Relatedness score, the mean score of the all participants, as well as the standard deviation, in order to determine the normality of the results distribution and to see if my sample had environmental attitudes representative of the general population (Trochim, 2006). My results yielded an unlikely low mean score, which taken at face value, translated into my population being considerably less environmentally minded than the general population (Nisbet et al., 2008). These results were puzzling, and I contacted Nisbet personally to investigate further. Nisbet confirmed that my results were unusually low, especially considering her general population samples were not necessarily involved in an environmentally conscious action, such as enrolling their children in nature preschool (E.K. Nisbet, personal communication, May 28 – June 19, 2012). After discussing first-hand the shortcomings of my survey results, Nisbet and I concluded that my low mean score

was a result of inaccurate math resulting from so few inputs. Therefore, I cannot interpret the nature relatedness of my sample population.

Subsequently unable to use the Nature Relatedness Scale in its intended form, I was overcome by fearful thoughts about redesigning my research. After taking a deeper look at the questions themselves, I was able to find descriptive value in my survey responses, even though they would no longer significantly influence the development of interview questions. I reviewed responses to the additional short answer question, “*Why did you enroll your child in Nature Nursery?*” and allowed them to influence the remainder of my interviews. Reassessing my direction, I postponed further analysis of these responses, and coded them alongside the interviews. Looking back, I found I had returned to what looked like a main route. Once there, I could see clearly I had taken a small detour, but was back on my initial trail. I would have been at this place either way. I found my way back just in time to meet up with my travel companions.

### **Listening for Stories**

Back on track I meet up with my travel companions, and together we walked for some time as they told stories of their childhoods as well as their hopes, goals, and expectations for their children. My low survey response translated into a low number of interview volunteers. I had hoped to interview an equal number of mothers and fathers in an effort to minimize gender differences. However, as only seven parents left their contact information, I chose all of them as interview participants, and was left with five mothers and two fathers.

After each parent provided consent, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the meaning parents make of their outdoor childhood experiences. I conducted the

interviews myself during March 2012 in a private room at the KWNC, with one exception, which was conducted over the telephone. In some cases, parents brought their children who sometimes interrupted the interview, but never to a point of concern. Field notes and recordings were taken during all interviews, to provide a more complete picture including non-verbal cues, and for ease of analysis.

Influenced by many authors, most notably Charmaz's (2006) method of data analysis, I began memoing in addition to journaling. Journaling served as a means to record my own personal thoughts, emotions, and stories, while I used memos to document thoughts and ideas about my data, including recording my initial comparisons to help develop codes. In an attempt to employ constant comparison and fully analyze one interview before undertaking the next (Charmaz, 2006), I began data analysis prior to completing data collection. However, I quickly realized my time restrictions would interfere with true constant comparison, as I undertook multiple interviews in the same day. Early analysis and memoing did not influence any significant changes to subsequent interviews. Primarily, they helped me hone my interview skills so I was able to follow up and ask more clarifying questions on the spot.

### **Rest and Reflection**

Walking can be exhausting, especially on difficult uphill terrain, and with all of these stories filling my head after an already lengthy uphill walk, I felt drained. Wanting to ensure I could hear all the songs, stories, and meanings in the forest, I took an opportunity to gain another perspective. I was fortunate to pause from my journey and travel overseas. Slowing down, even putting data analysis aside for a time allowed me to catch my breath, reconnect with my place, explore some new terrain and re-asses my direction.

*It is so nice to rest and get away, to travel to another country, another culture, another ecosystem, and experience the beauty that abounds here. Taking a short term work placement overseas in Egypt, I have an opportunity to explore a beautiful yet very unfamiliar culture and ecosystem. With my research journey still on my mind, I find myself reflecting often on the differences between my “home” in the Canadian forests, and the place I am currently living. I was captivated by the seemingly endless sand and the life-giving Nile River, and I can see great potential for outdoor education in this North-African country. At first glance it seemed like the locals don’t place much value on their natural environment and don’t fully appreciate their surroundings. But how true is this observation? How much of the picture was I truly able to see, as an outsider there for only a few months? It is quite possible Egyptians have a vastly different way of connecting to nature, or even a different understanding of connection itself. After all, our two cultures have many contrasts.*

*In trying to understand my current local environment, I am reflecting more about my environment in Canada, and how I connect with my place. Connecting with my place at home in the forests I so dearly care for is not the same as the immediate fascination and deep engagement I feel with the sand and water in this new place. Pondering yet another difference highlights just how much my place, my forests mean to me.*

Exploring relationships between strange and familiar places greatly increased my understanding of the place in which I live (Gruenewald, 2003b). This reprieve allowed me the time and space to consider the interdependencies between places near and far. Slowing down my journey, and listening beyond the birdsong, my data analysis needed careful observation. I continued by transcribing and analysing all interview recordings. Following Charmaz’s (2006,

p. 92) method of in-vivo coding, I took cues directly from my participants own words. I employed line-by-line coding initially, to discern major themes and search out repetitions, similarities, and differences. Next, to sort through and distinguish significant and frequent initial codes, focused coding occurred where I categorized codes into either “About Parents”, “About Children”, or “Both” to further compare and narrow thematic ideas (Charmaz, 2006).

### **The Fork in the Road**

Through memoing, journaling, and initial analysis I came to discover gaps in my data. I felt something was missing, something I recall so clearly from my own stories. I wanted to further investigate the environmental attitudes and practices of my participants and their families growing up. Left with some unanswered questions, I faced a major fork in the road. Which way is most direct? Which way offers opportunities for deeper reflections? Which way is best for me in this journey? After great deliberation and uncertainty, I chose the seemingly longer but more fruitful direction. I returned to meet some of my research participants, hear more stories and to answer some of my new questions. Those who agreed to talk with me again were good company and validated my decision to take the longer way.

In September 2012, I was able to contact and follow up with five participants, four of which agreed to a second in-person interview at the KWNC, and one who could not find further time to commit, despite good intentions. The primary focus of second interviews was to draw out stories about significant life experiences. I also took this opportunity to employ member checking to validate my understanding of our previous conversations by reviewing the initial interviews verbally (Creswell & Clark, 2011, p. 211). Each interview was tailored to the

participant's initial responses, including follow up questions interspersed among the review summary. The following new questions were asked in all four second interviews:

- Can you share your favourite or most vivid childhood memories of spending time in nature?
- How have these experiences or events impacted your feelings about, and connection to nature?
- Clearly these experiences have left impressions on you. What are the impressions you hope to cultivate and leave for your children?
- Now, think about the education you want your child to have. Which people or events in your life remind you of why that type of education is important to you?

Finally the trail began to ease, levelling off briefly before dropping. Downhill always appears to be the easiest part, until you actually begin the decline. Difficult in different ways, the final leg of the journey offered its own set of challenges. This was the time to pull together all my companions' stories with my own and begin the process of writing my thesis, in preparation of sharing my experience with the greater community.

### **A Change of Course**

As a keen new advocate for nature preschools, I was interested in supporting their development and expansion across Canada. I had begun my journey and undertaken my research asking what motivates parents to enrol their children in nature preschools. However, after taking my reprieve, stepping away from my data, and finally analyzing it with a fresh mindset, I realized I was asking something different. Sharing my childhood stories and my focus on connection to place had in fact resulted in my research focussing more on unveiling meaningful

experiences than on motivations. Therefore, in light of my findings, I stepped off the original trail and found a new, more appropriate direction. This difficult change of course led to asking what I had been seeking to answer all along: *How does childhood play outdoors relate to adult values towards nature and desire to share outdoor experiences with their children?*

### **Clarifying the Boundaries**

As enticing as it may be to explore every inch of a forest, it is simply not possible in one short walk. Boundaries are important for achieving focussed observations, meaningful experiences and results. In order to narrow the scope of this study to a manageable size, several limitations and delimitations were identified. The most predominant limitation was the sample size. While I did achieve my desired number of 7 parents willing to take part in interviews, I did not receive any additional volunteers and therefore, did not have the ability to selectively choose participants. Therefore, I received more mothers than fathers and could not control for gender differences. Also, it is likely that those who offered to participate are part of a subpopulation fond of their decision to enroll their child in *Nature Nursery*, and/or who enjoy discussing their thoughts. I had no way to distinguish if and how this might affect my results.

The very nature of interviews also limits the data results, as memory is known to be incomplete or unclear at times (Chawla, 1998). As Chawla (1998) discusses, details are not often recalled accurately, but the general course of events or the gist of the scenario usually is. In this study, verity (how closely memory aligns with reality) was less important than utility (how the past is interpreted and used for current and future events, and/or the resulting meanings) (Chawla, 1998). Interviews don't always uncover the truth, but the truth is not necessarily relevant as I seek the meaning parents have made of their experiences. In my case, the parts of

the stories and how they are remembered are more fruitful than exact happenings, and therefore, memory failings were noteworthy, yet not of major concern.

Finally, this study was delimited to parents living in the Red Deer, Alberta area, with at least one child who attended the KWNC *Nature Nursery* at the time of the first interview. All participants were therefore, recruited from the same community.

## **Chapter 4: Sharing of Stories**

Finding results from qualitative research requires opening all your senses to the forest. Seeing the trees and hearing the birds, and also smelling the flowers, touching the soft mosses, and even tasting the sweet berries and mushrooms. Being aware of and engaged with all of the interconnecting components in an ecosystem is paramount to understanding their true relationships and meaning.

It is common knowledge that our surroundings influence our actions and beliefs, therefore, uncovering clues into my travel companions' backgrounds and significant life experiences has allowed me to decipher their stories. The results presented below provided such insights. Some stories showed glimpses into childhoods, family lives and value systems, while others discussed desire to share outdoor experiences, and reasons for being attracted to outdoor preschools.

I will present quantitative survey results first, as they provided me with an initial broad overview of where my participants were coming from. Qualitative results are presented next, showing the majority of story pieces, and how they connect to my stories as well as existing literature. The third data stream, sharing of my own experiences outdoors, will continue to be interspersed throughout the chapters, as it has been up to this point.

### **Presenting the Components 1: Quantitative Survey**

The trail map I had compiled to help guide my forest walk first led me to the Nature Relatedness (NR) Scale. This existing scale helped me to gain an overview of my sample populations' environmental attitudes (Nisbet et al., 2008). The NR Scale results in a set of scores, which can be used to assess "the affective, cognitive, and experiential aspects of

individuals' connection to nature" (Nisbet et al., 2008, p. 715); higher scores represent a greater connection to nature. However, with a sample size of only 13 respondents, I was not able to gain this insight as hoped. The mean score was calculated to be 2.60, with a standard deviation of 0.15. In comparison to previous studies undertaken by Nisbet (E.K. Nisbet, personal communication, June 14, 2012), these results are very low, most likely due to small sample size. As these results were outside of the range found in other studies using the NR Scale, as well as inconsistent with my interview findings, they were unusable in their intended form. However, they are still valuable for descriptive purposes.

### **Descriptive survey results.**

Looking closer at individual questions revealed some interesting results. Presented on a five point Likert Scale, each of the 21 questions consisted of a possible answer ranging from "*1 Strongly Disagree*" to "*5 Strongly Agree*" (Nisbet et al., 2008, p. 721). Some revealed findings consistent with environmentally conscious thinkers, while others revealed alternative perspectives.

When asked about their interconnections to nature, 76.92% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed they are part of nature and not separate from it. Similarly, 76.92% always think about how their actions affect the environment. Yet, only approximately half of participants, 53.83%, admitted they feel connected to all living things and the earth.

While only 15.38% claimed they were not very aware of environmental issues, 76.92% believe that nothing they do will change problems in other places on the planet. This shows most participants are environmentally aware but discouraged about their ability to help solve environmental issues.

It was very clear that participants differentiated between biotic and abiotic aspects of nature, and also separated humans from nature. All participants (100%) agreed or strongly agreed that they notice nature around them, even in the middle of the city, but disagreed or strongly disagreed that they notice wildlife wherever they are. Consistent with this line of thinking, 92.31% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that humans have the right to use natural resources any way we want, and that conservation is unnecessary because nature is strong enough to recover from any human impact. Participants have shown an awareness of environmental issues but still feel they have a right to use natural resources unabatedly. This suggests preference towards an anthropocentric view of the world, with humans above other species, and above natural forces. However, only 61.54% admitted to agreeing that animals, birds, and plants have fewer rights than humans.

When asked if they enjoy being outside, even in unpleasant weather, only 7.69% of participants agreed. Additionally, 69.23% said they don't often go out in nature anymore. Supporting this further, most participants, 84.62%, are frightened of being deep in the woods, away from civilization. Only 15.38% have an ideal vacation spot in a remote wilderness area.

As an addition to the NR Scale, I included an additional short answer question, asking the parents directly, "*why did you enroll your child in Nature Nursery?*" Some responses here **focused on spending time outdoors including**, "the fact the children are in a school setting yet have dedicated outdoor time as part of their time at Nature Nursery", "the outdoor nursery offers a unique experience that I didn't want my son to miss", **and** "my son is an active little boy who loves to be outside. Both myself and my husband grew up in the country and feel it is important to give him as much exposure to nature as possible." **Others listed appreciation of**

the natural world as a primary motivation. These responses included, “I feel that the Nature Nursery program offers a unique and interesting approach which no other operation in Red Deer does. Nature Nursery carries on values, instills respect for the natural world”, “I wanted her to learn about nature so when we are camping or hiking and enjoying the great outdoors she won't be afraid of the animals/trees of nature”, and

Wanted my children to learn about and experience nature. I grew up on a farm, and find it harder to teach them the everyday, being a part of nature lessons that I learned as a child. I want my children to respect nature and to think about the environment.

The ideas of spending time outdoors and nature awareness were shown as important very early on in my research process. Both of these were elaborated on further in the qualitative interviews.

These results, while not conclusive by themselves, provided a good foundational understanding of my sample population. Participants appeared to have an incomplete understanding of the interconnections of the natural world, of which humans are a part. Even though the survey was not successful enough to be evaluated as intended, the results indicated the parents here do not hold the same strong eco-centric worldview that I have. This shows that nature is valued in a different manner across different perspectives.

## **Presenting the Components 2: Qualitative Interviews**

The sights and sounds of this forest are captivating, and I want to explore and learn more about them. I have never travelled this exact path before, yet I feel at ease and ready to begin building relationships with all that is around me: my travel companions, the forest inhabitants, and the forest itself. Many people prefer to wander alone, but are we ever actually alone? Even in the absence of other humans, there is so much else around us, so why should we seek to connect

only with that one aspect? With this in mind, I proceed down the path, looking forward to connecting with whatever is around the corner, listening for the stories that will transpire.

As I continued, I pondered the interconnections of all the different ecological components. In order to uncover these interconnections and themes within the data, my initial codes were focused and divided into three categories: *About Parents*, *About Children*, and *About Both*. Focused codes then fell into one of seven sub-categories including *sentiments*, *childhood experiences*, *adult experiences*, *about play*, *lifestyle/values*, *current experiences*, and *future experiences*. After contemplating the meaning of the interviews and codes, and incorporating my memos and anecdotal observations, the whole picture of the parents' stories became clearer. Findings could then be classified into four major themes addressing my research question: *childhood play outdoors is valuable*, *adult values*, *desire to share similar experiences*, and *benefits of nature preschools*.

Before I share with you these findings, I must highlight the mindset of my interview participants. Prior to answering any questions, parents were invited to share their thoughts on nature preschools and why they were interested in the KWNC *Nature Nursery* program for their children. They were asked directly in the initial survey why they had enrolled their child, before being invited to participate in an interview. With this in mind, parents were expecting to discuss their children and their educational decisions. No indication was given suggesting questions of their own childhood experiences would be asked, therefore, any stories of this nature revealed were deemed to be memorable enough to recall on the spot.

### **Theme 1: Childhood play outdoors is valuable.**

Walking through the forest, I see trees and rocks that remind me of my childhood play places, and I find great joy in reminiscing. Through their stories, my parent participants also shared some of their most enjoyable times playing outdoors as children. When prompted, each happily reminisced about their memorable outdoor play places and shared stories of their children's current outdoor play. These anecdotes were mostly pleasant, some were wishful and some hopeful, but all meaningful. Each parent had spent time outdoors as a child, learning and being exposed to new things, developing relationships to places and/or animals, and even developing a personal connection to nature. I came to the conclusion that my participants all valued childhood play outdoors, both for themselves and for their children.

Participants relayed many stories of enjoyable and memorable outdoor play places. They shared how they, "always used our imaginations...exploring, we'd make mudpies, and make forts in the trees, and just use the things around us to have fun with". Weather conditions did not affect their ability to have fun, whether it was at the beach on a hot day, in provincial parks in spring, or, "making a lot of snow forts in our yard".

In discussing their childhoods, several parents commented how they would play outside "Even in the rain, as long as it wasn't miserable." During the large amounts of outdoor play that occurred, parents often "made (y)our fun". They talked about how they played in the streets or went to the forest and, "played in streams and got soakers and thorns in [their] shoe," or "pick[ed] leaves and twigs and...make little forts and stuff like that and mudpies and get dirty." These stories of outdoor play were often quite vivid. One parent told several stories of playing in their large yard with her siblings, including how they once built an intricate snow igloo:

...we built a whole circle but around the outside of the circle we made a little slide. So it started really high, like as high as the walls on one side and it kinda wrapped around. And it had this whole slide right to the front door. And I remember making like a little mail slot, and you know so you'd pretend we had little mail and things and made like inside benches and stuff for us to sit on all out of snow...That took us weeks...to get it exactly how we wanted...But that's a very vivid memory I have of us being outside and typically I didn't like being cold, I still don't like being cold, I prefer summer activities to winter activities. So that's something too that sticks out in my head, 'cause I never really liked playing out in the snow. But that was, easily one of my most favourite things. Like I can totally see my igloo. Right, like it was fun, it was totally fun...

**Five out of seven participants discussed freedom as a child, some of whom mentioned they were able to run free without boundaries saying, “since it was a small town, I could go pretty much anywhere I wanted, and it was all within walking distance,” and, “we had two sections and I was free to roam...Yeah, right since I was old enough to walk, as long as they could see me through binoculars or the scope of a gun, then I was considered good, yeah”.** **They all played outside at least as much as they were inside, some every day, and as one participant shared, did not often argue or question being sent out: “I just remember always being told ‘kay it’s time to go outside and play’”.** **Spending time outdoors was once the norm for these parents, however, as revealed through the survey results, the majority no longer often spend time in nature.**

According to one participant, spending time outdoors in the city is very different than spending time outdoors on a farm, an idea that was prominent throughout her interview. She clearly noted a difference between her urban play as a young child, and her play in later years

after moving to a farm; “things *very* much just changed...We were out on the farm all the time.” Reporting that many things changed after leaving the city when she was eight or nine years old, this woman spoke fondly of her farm memories, including the relationships she developed with the animals:

...We grew up on a dairy farm, so my dad was a hired hand and he was always out with the cows and the calves and I was in 4H...Then we had, we had cats and we had dogs and stuff and, I think at one point we had a bunny, if I remember right.

Relating their own experiences to their children’s opportunities led me to understand the value my participants placed on childhood outdoor experiences. For example, after describing the lack of natural spaces in China, where her husband is from and her daughter was born, one mother explained how they moved across the world to provide outdoor play opportunities:

We brought her back here so she can go outside and play. We don’t have to worry really about her playing outside...So we wanted that for her. We want – we’re also thinking about her future. I want her to grow up to be a well-rounded individual.

Outdoor play can offer many learning and growth opportunities not as common to indoor play places. Five parents discussed wanting to expose their children to different opportunities and giving them the chance to make their own choices in life. One father stated: “...expose him to all those kind of things where at some point in time he can make up his mind how-where nature...come into play for his life...”. Another parent was amazed at her daughter’s chance to see a moose up close at Nature Preschool, noting that was not a typical experience she could offer.

Exposing their children to many different opportunities and experiences in life provides children with opportunities to make their own choices in life. One participant kept returning to

this point, holding that while outdoors and sports were big parts of his life, they may not become large parts of his son's adult life:

...Again I'm just going to fall back on the that he gets to see and decide for himself at some point in time when he's an adult that whether these experiences are impactful enough that he will continue them on or look at them a different way...Make, you know camping and all the other things part of his life...and he'll pass those on to his kids...I think that's what you hope to instill on them, or at least expose him to. And that you hope they're as positive as you think they are on him. In the sense of the fun that he has, and the way he sees it.

One mother mentioned repeatedly how she wanted her daughter to have more choices than her and more comfort in the outdoors. She expressed her own wavering level of comfort outdoors, then shared gratification for her daughter's lack of fear of nature: "I like that she's not afraid of going out [anymore]...She's still afraid of bugs a little bit, but, so am I." Staying inside more than going outside as an adult, her biophobia appears to be affecting the way she interacts with her environment (Jordan, 2009; Kahn, 1997; Sobel, 1996). Fortunately her fear does not seem to be so great that she is blind to her daughter's biophilia (Kahn, 1997; Wilson, 1993) and innate need to connect to the natural world.

Five out of seven parents also made some type of reference to independent free thinking, desiring their children to have a sense of who they are. This father was explicitly endorsing independence and character building when he stated:

I just want them to be their own people, lead their own path, make their own agenda and I'll help them out no matter what their agenda is, as long as they stick to it and don't get tied up into the 'I'm a follower not a leader' stuff. 'Cause that, honestly that's

not going to get you anywhere, then you're always pretty much living your life in...essentially a limbo right, 'cause you're always waiting for someone else to make the next move instead of actually making the initiative to say 'I'm going to make the next move'. And the boys they love the farm as it is, so. I think they're headed in the right track so far.

Spending time outdoors can certainly aid in fostering independence (Gruenewald, 2003a; Orr, 2004) as well as overcoming fear of and discomfort in nature (Jordan, 2009; Kahn, 1997). Developing relationships with natural places and the beings that inhabit them can also bring comfort and understanding. Developing relationships with other beings is something most children do naturally (Louv, 2006; Sobel, 1996), and has been shown to promote physical health and mental well-being (Kahn, 1997). As fostering empathy in early childhood is an important developmental stage, cultivating relationships with animals should be encouraged (Sobel, 1996). Approximately half of survey respondents reported feeling connected to all living things and the earth, an idea that resurfaced during interviews. For example, this family is encouraging their son to further develop relationships with deer and elk on their property:

*My son and my husband go down [to the beaver pond] and set up the trail cam so they can watch the elk and the deer come through, 'cause they found a good spot. And then he comes back and he can hardly wait to show me, you know the pictures that they've got on the, on the trail cam.*

This was a familiar idea for me. Over the years, I have often sought out a sense of belonging with the forest. By developing strong relationships with trees, I have been able to find some continuity and sense of place wherever I have lived or travelled. Walking deeper through the forest on my journey, I heard the wind passing through the leaves high above my

head. I paused to take in the moment, and reflected on my first memorable non-human relationship.

*The first tree I recall truly connecting with was in our backyard overseas. I was young and the weeping willow was huge. I can recall playing in its shade, tugging on its leaves, even swinging on its homemade swing. Fascinated by its long drooping branches, this tree has remained clear in my mind's eye ever since.*

Relationship building wasn't reserved solely for living beings. Four of seven parents spoke at length about a place they frequented as a child, unveiling their own relationships with the fishing pond or the farm they grew up on. One mother lovingly recalled playing in her schoolyard at recess, a place she later discussed returning to with her husband as an adult:

There was actually like an old slough that was in a part of the field with a big huge hill, and it was all treed and I vividly remember every recess...especially lunch recess when you had that hour to play, going and we made little forts in the trees.

Through such relationship building, these four parents showed a personal connection to nature and to place. Continuing to build connections into adulthood, one participant expressed awe and excitement for the vast Rocky Mountains, even after having lived in Alberta for almost 40 years:

...It's so vast and it's so, like the mountains...just blow me away still to this day, and I've been here since 1975 and I'm just still ga-ga face over it. And I think that's sort of brought it, the nature aspect, to how wonderful it is, and how much fun you can have in it.

Solidified either as a child or as an adult, these personal relationships with nature are something I relate with well. My own connection with the forest is so strong, this is where I go for rejuvenation.

*As I compile my thoughts and write this thesis, I find myself longing for a mountainous escape. Needing a break to regain my focus, I grab my cross-country skis and head for my favourite spot. On the final stretch I notice a series of canine footprints on the tracks, and wonder out loud, “who brought their dogs up this pet-free trail, and let them run up in the wrong direction?” Then, as if on cue, I heard them howl. Wolves! Never before had I heard a wolf howling. The pack was close too, most likely where I had been but an hour earlier. Now that’s a refreshing escape for sure!*

Not only was this an opportunity for me to exercise my legs and lungs, but it was vital in maintaining my mental health. I had just stumbled through a particularly difficult spot on my journey and needed to refresh and refocus my mind. As a child I learned that in getting outdoors and enjoying nature I am able to decrease my stress level and increase my attention span, benefits also reported by many others in previous studies (Kahn, 1997; Kaplan, 1995; Kuo & Taylor, 2004; Maller et al., 2006). Learning from my own childhood experiences outdoors and tapping into the personal relationships I’ve built with nature, I was then able to give this journey even more attention.

With a fresh mind, I was able to relate more closely to my participants’ stories and see the value they offer outdoor childhood play. As described above, each of my participants had memorable outdoor experiences as children, and through their own free play and exploration of nature, they have come to value the independence and new learning opportunities offered by

spending time outdoors as a child. They have also recognized the importance for children to build positive relationships with the places and animals, as they did when making personal connections with nature and place.

**Theme 2: Adult values.**

Throughout the interviews, each participant told stories indicating they have carried forth this value for nature and outdoor play into adulthood. Insights into their current lifestyles and desires for their children have highlighted the importance still placed on spending time outdoors.

This value placed on outdoor play that began in childhood was perhaps for some, connected to positive experiences with their families. Four participants specifically mentioned family when talking about being outdoors as a child, often playing with siblings or cousins on a daily basis. One participant spoke at length about her annual family vacations to the Okanagan where she, “spent the whole two weeks with your family...playing in the lake, going fishing, going for boat rides”. While away, her forest ranger father would often, “tell [us] little things and tidbits about [nature]. About, you know, just the surroundings and trees and animals and things like that”. Another parent was often working with his grandparents when outside on the farm as a child:

I was always out helping Gramps and Gram in the field and the farm and the cows. They raised dairy cows, they sold eggs to the egg companies, the whole nine yards. Did an awful lot of that and just chose to spend the remainder of my day out doing fun stuff...

He later mentioned taking a lot of advice from them, influencing his outlook on life, “they had this little happy medium between work and pleasure...so I took a lot of advice from my

Grandfather.” A third parent described the deep engagement she found in everyday play, often with her siblings:

...Picking up blades of grass and you know, making them whistle between your thumbs...seeing if we could find any frogs and...we found salamanders and things like that...again with my brother and sister. Which was good memories, you know, typically we would fight. So that was always a ton of fun...

Sharing these and other similar experiences with family members may have served to strengthen their memories, perhaps bringing them more meaning. Now, as adults, these experiences appear to be influencing their family values, goals and desires. Speaking of her family now, one participant recalled how she lost touch with nature as an adult, and then was reintroduced after meeting her husband, which has solidified her family values:

And as soon as I met him again, it's almost like he reminded me of those things like camping...We were doing all these outdoor things together and I think maybe that has helped kind of shaped my feelings and my ideas about nature, and how I want that to be in my kid's life...'Cause before he kind of came along, um, that was never, we-I never did that. I did-I kinda lost that I guess, that part of myself for many years...As soon as he came into my life it was like 'oh yeah, I remember doing this as a kid, and I remember enjoying and I remember why we did this as a family growing up'. And he helped remind me of all those good memories I had with my family camping too, so.

In discussing current lifestyles, some parents conferred their desire for their children to continue their preferred outdoor activities. Chawla (2007) has shown similar results, noting that childhood experiences such as family vacations in natural areas have proved memorable, and perhaps influential in the lives of many environmentally conscious adults. Over three quarters of

survey respondents always think of the environmental effects of their actions, including this participant, who shared her family's practices at home and her efforts to pass these on to her children:

We're fairly conscious of recycling and water usage...we have our own garden and things like that for sure...My kids know to recycle, what goes in the garbage, what goes in the recycling bin...We've taught them things like that because it's important that they learn it early on. And it just gives you a bigger appreciation when you do go to these beautiful places outside and they're not...covered in litter and you realize...they're precious, you need to take care of them. Yeah, we're trying to bestow that on them, it's not something we kind of drill into their head everyday but, yeah.

Others also mentioned passing along their habits and hobbies to their children, saying, "it's what became my lifestyle so I wanted that for theirs...And my kids have always been outdoorsy people because we've always been outdoorsy people," and, "I know she already enjoys being outside, but just to keep promoting that I guess...Just that understanding that the outdoors are important to us and that we need to take care of it".

**One participant directly linked benefits of being comfortable in nature with spending time outdoors as a family. Touting the opportunities and options this may offer her children, she offered insight into her family's lifestyle:**

I want our kids to be comfortable outside 'cause there's so many things to do especially where we live. Like through the entire year, whether it's going skating at a pond or...fishing or going for a hike or going for a walk...I want them to be able to feel comfortable doing kind of all those things, and I think if we do it together as a family, then you know, their enjoyment of it will hopefully will grow.

The idea of being comfortable in nature was also mentioned indirectly through the NR Scale survey. All survey respondents reported noticing nature but not necessarily wildlife wherever they are. This shows an inconsistency between what they consider *nature* and what they consider *wildlife*. Perhaps this can be attributed to the fact that most (69.23%) do not go outdoors often anymore. Regardless, many participants clearly reported being comfortable in nature. It is unclear if this comfort in nature can be attributed to separating nature from wildlife, or if this ease with the environment was new or carried forward from childhood. One participant attributes his affection for nature to the comfort he feels outdoors on his farm: “It’s comfy, feels like home so. That probably has a big thing with my nature aspect and tree-hugging feelings...”

This line of thinking does not appear to consider the repercussions if nature cannot recover, nor does it take into account our interdependence on nature. However, perhaps parents hold a value system that does not see this as a concern. They may understand our dependence on nature while at the same time believing it can recover on its own, without help from humans. As the survey results highlighted, the parent participants share different perspectives than I do, and likely than each other, highlighting that nature is valuable enough to transcend different value sets.

These stories show that childhood experiences, including those with other family members have been reported as valuable and influential to adult thinking. In contrast to results found by Chawla (2007), my participants value outdoor activity more than environmental awareness.

### **Theme 3: Desire to share similar experiences.**

Recognizing the value of their own childhood play outdoors, my participants demonstrated a link to their values now as parents. Wanting the best for their children, each parent relayed how they are seeking to provide similar memorable outdoor experiences, both at home and through education. Their efforts to offer their children opportunities to build relationships to place, through more and more time exploring outdoors, have been demonstrated by other studies researching significant life experiences (Chawla, 1998; Wells & Lekies, 2006; Williams, Patterson, & Roggenbuck, 1992).

After sharing her own experiences of playing outside almost every day, saying: “Mom and Dad just kicked us out. We’d get home from school and outside we went to play for the rest of the day,” **this mother shared how her children are doing the same now:** “they spend a lot of time outside, they get to go snowshoeing and build forts in the trees and just explore...”

**Another mother discussed how as a young child living in the city she was not allowed to venture far by herself, but when she moved to the farm, she had more independence:** “when we were outside on the farm it was, it was just more free”. **She now offers her son a similar freedom:**

...Now with my son, we can just open the door and out he goes. I don’t have to worry about him, and he just, he’s free to explore on his own terms and you don’t have to worry about traffic or people...he’s just his own little independent thinker out there.

**Another participant fondly recalled exploring with her siblings, as they would often,** “wander out to the slough and my younger brother and sister and I, we would go and just venture out there and see what we could find”. **Now, she allows her children the same opportunities:**

...My son and my twins, they go outside now, the three of them, and it’s so neat to watch them...I can hear them gibbering and jabbering to one another. And again they’re happy, you can tell, they’re just having the best time. The grass is up to their

waist and they can barely walk and the dog's there bouncing between them, and they're picking up sticks and checking things out and picking rocks and putting them in their pockets. I mean they're only two and four. So their experiences when I see them at that age, I can only imagine what it's going to be like when they are you know, twelve and ten even, when they're allowed to explore even further.

**It is clear from my survey results that most parents do not feel comfortable being in the forest, yet these stories show an appreciation for having nature nearby. This shows insight into a complex understanding of the value of nature.**

Wanting the best for their children, two parents also discussed treatment of others. Even with survey results indicating some respondents held an anthropocentric view of nature, with humans having more rights than other living beings, one father led me to believe he has a healthy respect for all beings. Again here, we see the complex relationships people have with the natural world, something my survey alone did not represent well. Showing an understanding of the interconnections between all species, he focuses his efforts on teaching his children respect for all beings, saying, "treat everybody the way you want to be treated, and respect everything. Everything has a place and respect that, appreciate that and don't take it for granted. When you start taking it for granted, that's when it disappears." **This leads me to believe he himself has a healthy respect for all beings. He continued discussing this important characteristic he hoped to instill in his children:**

...treat everything the way you want to be treated. That includes animals etc. etc. right. When it all boils down to it, 90% of whom were here before we were anyway, so we're technically invaders on their turf. Respect what they have, they'll respect what you have for the most part...

**Making a similar link, another participant spoke of teaching her son ethical behaviour towards other living beings:**

I want them to respect nature for one...We talk about that all the time, like my son came home the other day and told me about this story that there's a boy in playschool told me that his dad had shot a grizzly bear. And you know, you never know how true that is, so we kind of turned it around and said 'well is it always right to shoot an animal...why do you think they would have shot a grizzly bear, and do you think that was the right thing to do?' and you know trying to get them to think about nature and animals and things in a respectful way. And same thing...even teaching them about not throwing their garbage outside...we clean up after ourselves, and just make sure we bring our garbage in and recycle.

**It is clear the parents wanted similar positive experiences for their children as they had growing up. One parent even discussed how her childhood directly impacted her hopes and desires for her children. When asked about outdoor play, vacations and camping, she responded:** "I guess, I totally think of like playing when you're at home different than going camping with your family. But you're right...both my husband and I, we both grew up camping." **She then went on to say how these experiences impacted her:** "I don't know if it's necessarily impacted me personally...wanting to go out and be out in nature, but it's definitely wanted me to have those same experiences for my children...Maybe just instilled it in me subconsciously in a way, for me to pass that onto my kids. " **In an effort to offer similar opportunities to her children including the chance to connect with nature, she and her husband moved to an acreage bordering a ravine:**

When we first moved there, that's what we envisioned for our kids. Is them being able to explore in those trees and you can see the tracks that the deer have made in the winter and you can see the paths that they take, and we've found porcupines down there, and we actually just saw a ruffed grouse there yesterday...deer come right up to where the tree line meets our yard.

**While most parents clearly wanted their children to continue with their preferred lifestyle, one participant wanted something different for her children. Building on her experiences, this mother would like her daughter to have more natural history knowledge than she does: "I don't know what kind of trees those are, I don't know what kind of flowers those are...I would like her to grow knowing 'oh yes, I can touch this but I can't touch that one', that kind of stuff". She continued discussing some shortcomings of her childhood before sharing desires for her daughter's lifestyle opportunities:**

I want her to grow up to be a well-rounded individual. I want her to grow up thinking about the environment, and taking better care of it than what we're doing...I want her to have as many choices open to her as possible...I want to give her more than what I had.

**For some, sharing similar experiences with their children was less about nature, natural history, or intentionally building connection to places, and more about being active. This idea of using outdoors as an avenue for being active was prominent for three of my participants. Many of one mother's favourable outdoor memories were times she was active, for example taking long walks around her family's farmland:**

We would go for walks and we would sometimes test ourselves to see how long it would take us to walk around the slough. And we never, ever, ever made it around

the whole slough, 'cause it was huge. But of course in your own little mind, you think oh we can do this. It never looks as big until you get out there.

**She also spoke fondly of cycling along what she called her “pussy willow road”. Enjoying this so much, she has called the road *hers*, indicating a sense of connection to this place.**

**For one participant, sports were often the excuse to get his son outdoors. As a guiding force in his life growing up, he is instilling the same active lifestyle in his son:**

...sports tends to be the excuse to go outside...Even in the winter we take the hockey stick and a ball and go out on the street...We have a couple of places where we can go sliding that are really quick...So, we really focus a lot on going outside...you know indoor play is important but it's better to be out – we just feel, we wanna be outdoors. That's just our thing. There's not a day goes by where we don't go out for whatever reason. Even if it's in the rain, who cares you know.

**He spoke extensively to this, continuing with such things as, “one time I think this summer...we did seven and a half kilometers. And he did it on the push bike...the ones without the pedals;” and:**

Then just going for walks or going down to...the big parks...We actually just go out, grab a coffee and then just hang out at the big park just down here at the end of Spruce Drive...Play for a while and then he goes off and playing with the kids and he comes back and we usually take a soccer ball, or whatever...

**Listening to the stories above, I have come to believe that my participant's childhood experiences have influenced their goals for their own children. Being outdoors and being active as children has left these parents with a desire to provide similar experiences for their children. Each parent had positive outdoor experiences, and wants their children to have the same, or**

better. One parent who had mixed childhood experiences, was left wanting a greater taste of nature, and is now striving to offer her children everything she desired.

#### **Theme 4: Benefits of Nature Preschool.**

As shown above, parental values have guided lifestyle choices, and we will now see that parental values have also guided educational choices. Research investigating motivations for homeschooling as an alternative to public schools have found family lifestyle to be a primary influence in education decision making (Collom, 2005; Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007). Chawla (2007) also discusses family lives in her SLE research, stating family role models are often influential in developing the values and attitudes of environmental professionals. In my interviews it was clear that family values guided decisions about children's education. All seven parents found something in nature preschool which connected their family lives to their educational goals.

Regardless of what these parents are trying to share with their children, they all discussed the benefits of *Nature Nursery* by exposing children to unique experiences they might not encounter in other early childhood education settings. When asked why they enrolled their children into the KWNC program, parents noted a variety of reasons, including health benefits of spending time outdoors, alternative program structures and transitioning to mainstream education, as well opportunity for knowledge gain.

Exposure to many different experiences and uncovering the children's interests was perhaps the most commonly stated and anticipated benefit of nature preschool. Many parents, including the three quoted here, expressed desires for their children to experience many different aspects of life in early childhood:

“...not just one thing is important...If they’re exposed to many things then they get a little bit of everything.” “My philosophy basically is you expose them to as many things as you can at a relatively young age and let them make their decisions at some point on what they want to focus in on”;

I think they’re very curious little beings at that age and they’re like little sponges and that you can expose them to different topics and areas then you know, it might be something that they show an interest in, and then it might be something that they continue with for the rest of their lives...

**Spending time outdoors is key in a nature preschool, and my parent participants valued this aspect. This idea was woven into most of the stories, but twice was clearly mentioned on its own. One parent said her family liked the uniqueness, “that they’re outside every day and that’s important to get that exposure and experience,” and another parent said, “our daughter loves to be outside so the fact that there’s and emphasis on it was really attractive to us”.**

**This outdoor aspect of *Nature Nursery* has allowed some families to capitalize on their already active children:** “I know that he needed a more active outlet, and the fact that they’re able to be outside every time they’re here...them being outside for an hour a day I think is fantastic.”

My kids have always been outdoorsy people because we’ve always been outdoorsy people. So when I heard about this program, it’s sort of perfect because he loves to play, he loves learn about things in nature and he loves to get out and do the physical activity. So this is just sort of a perfect fit for them.

One parent expressed her appreciation for the amount of time outdoors, and mentioned the health benefits of being outdoors (Chawla, 1988, 2007; Jordan, 2009; Kuo & Taylor, 2004; Louv, 2006; Maller et al., 2006; Shepard, 1995; A. F. Taylor et al., 2001):

...honestly it's the outdoor component, the fact that they would come in, they have the stations in Kerry Wood like you would in typical preschool, but the stations were nature based...I think their cut-off is -21 in the winter so for them to go outside rain, sun, snow, regardless. I mean, I think it's just great instead of being in a school all day, or you know for the whole morning...That she'd just be getting fresh air and exercise and seeing different things and not just in a classroom. 'Cause she'll be in a classroom 'till she's in grade 12 now, so we just kind of thought it would be...a great experience for her.

Six of the seven participants went on to connect their desires for their children with non-traditional learning, all having something to say about outdoor or nature schools. Benefits of outdoor schools like Kerry Wood Nature Centre were discussed, focussing on the differences between them and mainstream public schools, including what is taught, how the learning is directed, and where learning occurs. As a precursor to elementary school, and not a part of the mainstream education system, preschools have the opportunity to more easily adopt non-traditional teaching techniques. Relaxed and experiential education techniques including letting the children direct learning and focussing on wildlife and outdoors were noted by three participants: "...probably just that experiential learning. You know like not always teacher directed, letting the kids experience things on their own, and I mean outdoors is huge."

...stuff that they won't really learn in school, like in regular schools...that's one of the reasons I brought [her] here is the environment part. And learning about wildlife and

being outdoors and doing all that kinda stuff. She won't really learn that in school as much. She'll do her alphabet, her writing, and her numbers and her colours – she'll do all that kinda stuff as the years go on, that's continuing. But that kinda stuff, she won't really learn...So I want her exposed to that now, at a younger age –just things that are different, that she won't get in a regular school type setting.

It's connection to the outdoor world, to nature, to the environment, and um, just the whole other realm. Because I have girlfriends who take their kids into a regular, normal playschool, and you know they learn about the stars or...about a penguin...This is so much more in depth and it's...just a totally different way of thinking about how to teach kids about stuff that's around us every day. Whereas in your regular playschool program it's so structured, and I feel that this is a little bit more free because it is related to nature...I don't know there's just something about it I really liked. Especially for my son...because it's very relaxed, it's not necessarily forced...kind of freedom to explore, right.

**Developing life skills through place-based learning was also discussed several times as a benefit of *Nature Nursery*. Learning about the things, “around us everyday” was noted as important for this age group: “...the bugs and all the birds...that's part of life and might as well learn that early.” One parent, echoed the sentiments of Gruenewald (2003a) and Sobel (1996) acknowledging the importance of learning, but discussed how preschool aged children don't need to focus yet on math and spelling when they can be learning about, “everything else in the world before they get corrupted with stuff that I don't necessarily think is on the top of the list of importance.”**

Other parents showed appreciation for outdoor learning specifically at the early childhood level. One father spoke of the difficult time he had adjusting to public school with many rules and expectations after playing freely until that point in his life:

It's just a big change...You had rules and regulations...When you're used to running 99% of your time outside and having fun and doing what you wanted to do and then you get into a scenario where you have to sit there and listen and pay attention, it's a big change.

Non-traditional schools were also touted as beneficial for transitioning into kindergarten:

We thought it would be a good bridge...because she'll be going to kindergarten in next fall. And the outdoor aspect was the main key, right. For her to spend that much time outside, and in the more of the school setting than what she would have at day-home.

I mean this young I don't really think we need to be filling their brains with you know math and proper spelling...when you can really teach them about everything else in the world before they get corrupted with stuff that I don't necessarily think is on the top of the list of importance...getting out there and being physical and experiencing the world is I think more important for kids.

Other parents also liked that *Nature Nursery* is more than a play school, including a learning component that can be transferred to other aspects of their lives. One mother relayed how her daughter brings information from preschool home, and vice-versa, and is able to relate her learning to everyday life. She shared how after learning about bats at *Nature Nursery*, her daughter was very excited about bats they found living in their front door and the new bat house they got. Recalling information about when bats sleep and what they eat, she kept asking when

the bats would come to their new house. Another parent echoed that sentiment: "...I like the fact that they spend a lot of time outside, and learning about you know, animals and just everyday things outside."

Even at a young age, opportunities to learn including farm life and camping skills, from someone other than a parent was noted by two participants: "I want him to gain and learn about different things that he wouldn't normally learn from me," "so if they can learn more than I can teach...I know a lot, but I'm a horrible teacher".

As parents of children currently enrolled in the *Nature Nursery* program at the KWNC, my participants were able to provide insight into why they chose a nature preschool program for their children. A number of motivations were discussed, including spending time outdoors and the related health benefits, alternative program structures, transitioning into mainstream education, and learning opportunities.

## **Summary**

Spending time outside is so embedded in my lifestyle that I didn't think twice about embarking on this journey through the forest. The relationships I am building as I walk and the rejuvenation the forest offers me are unparalleled. These benefits of nature are such a part of who I am, that I also search for this depth of understanding and connection to nature in those people I chose to surround myself with.

My travel companions are no exception. It is apparent that the stories I heard from my participants have much in common with my own nature stories, and show that nature is indeed valuable to different people for different reasons. We all have had experiences of free play and exploration outdoors in which we were deeply engaged. Like myself, my participants all had

valuable childhood play experiences outdoors, some of which appear to have transpired into personal connections to nature and to place. These experiences were valuable enough to lead parents into seeking similar opportunities for their children, including enrollment in nature preschool.

My participants are more focused on being outdoors than on environmental awareness and actions. Being outdoors and building connections to place is an important step towards environmental awareness. Spending time outdoors as a child does not lead everyone to wanting a connection to place, nor does it lead everyone wanting to protect nature. Even if it does lead to such desires, feelings of it being too late for yourself but not too late for your children can arise. My results show that having memorable outdoor experiences when young can lead to wanting to provide similar experiences for your children. It can even perhaps be said the parents involved in this research are trying to aid their children in developing a connection to nature, to grow a more aware next generation:

*I think we're both hoping that she'll gain a love of the outdoors and nature. I mean, my husband and I both grew up camping and doing a lot of things outside and we kinda wanted to pass that on to our kids...We just think it's a great age for them to start learning and experiencing these kinda things.*

## Chapter 5: Emerging From the Forest

*The forest is my home, and it always will be. Here I am now, completely comfortable in my place. I know where I belong in the world, on the planet. Still, I could not have arrived at such comfort here without visiting and understanding other places. Only twice before have I also felt a similarly deep connection to a place. Once, while visiting a sacred Aboriginal place with an incredible geologic history, and again as I stood in the fog where mountains meet ocean. In both of these places I felt a deep sense of awe and wonder, and I was humbled. An immediate connection to both of these places left me with a true appreciation for the intricacies of nature and my place within it. Having felt such connections before, I have been searching to find that feeling again. Now, as I complete this thesis journey, I have found that in my own home, my own forest as well.*

As I emerge from the forest, my mind is ablaze. With so many thoughts running through my head I begin connecting them to their real world implications. I have walked a long way, sometimes alone, sometimes with others, and I have gained some wonderful insights. I began this journey lacking any deep sense of connection to the place I live. Through much discovery, both academic and personal, I can now say I understand my place within my environment. When I began, I could sense I was near. I had some connection, some relationships to the nature nearby, and as I walked this journey and these relationships deepened. I now feel the forest has fully become a part of who I am. This connection did not arrive quickly or easily, but as a result I have grown immensely, both as a researcher and as a person.

In this section, I begin by summarizing my findings, speaking to their importance in the world of outdoor/nature education, as well as what this journey has come to mean for me. Like

most travels, my thesis journey was not without flaw, and I will also highlight what I might do differently given the opportunity. The final piece here will outline opportunities for future research showing how others might build on my journey to further the research and support for connecting children to nature.

## **Findings**

Combining descriptive survey results and qualitative interviews with stories of my own personal experiences, I have unravelled some valuable conclusions. Just as I did, each interview participant had valuable outdoor play experiences as a child. The descriptive results uncovered from the Nature Relatedness Scale show a variety of value systems are present among the parents of KWNC's *Nature Nursery* program. These valuable outdoor experiences, therefore, are seen in a variety of parents with different perspectives.

The value placed on childhood play outdoors by everyone involved in this study is evident, as parents desired to share their positive outdoor play experiences with their children. One conclusion is clear: childhood experiences outdoors are valuable and do appear to contribute to a sense of connection to place. As perspectives and values fall across a spectrum and can change situationally, this is not unexpected.

My data also shows that people build connections in different ways. For example, one parent focused on outdoor sports, biked around town with a gun on his handlebars, while another parent stayed closer to home, building snow forts on her farm with her siblings. Now, as adults, they both spoke passionately about the places where they live. Experiences influence values and desires, which in turn influence subsequent experiences and memories (Dale, 2001), therefore, it is also not unexpected to see this range of ways to build connections with nature. The

commonality among my participants of being outdoors with the freedom to explore is certainly at least part of the foundation for the valuing of nature or place.

These connections and experiences may have different meanings to different people, but among my sample population, they were valuable enough that these parents wanted to share them with their children. Participants shared how they have deliberately chosen farms and acreages to live on, how they highlight getting outdoors daily, and even the small sustainable actions they take within the home, such as recycling. They also spoke to passing along opportunities for exploration and respecting all beings. Enrolling their children in nature preschool is another way in which these parents have sought to provide their children similarly meaningful opportunities.

Nature preschools provide age appropriate programs (Kahn, 1997; Sobel, 1996) and have a good rapport with parents involved. Their long standing status in Europe and the UK (Knight, 2009; O'Brien & Murray, 2007), and their gaining popularity in North America and elsewhere suggests this is true. In accordance with the findings of both Knight (2009) and Robertson (2008), my participants all made unprompted comments regarding their satisfaction with KWNC's *Nature Nursery* program. Through these stories about lifestyle and educational choices, my participants showed an understanding of childhood development stages (Kahn, 1997; Sobel, 1996). Each participant showed understanding of the value of exploration and relationship building as the foundation for the other stages, as well as the inherent value of being outdoors as a young child, which are crucial to raising well-rounded, sustainable citizens.

Providing opportunities for children to play and explore the outdoors will not solve the environmental crisis alone, but it will hopefully move society in the appropriate direction.

Creating more nature preschool programs will increase opportunities for more children to have experiences that connect them to their place. By encouraging development of an early sense of place and deep relationships with nature, children may grow into environmentally minded citizens, who will seek further similar opportunities for their children.

### **My Search for Connection to Place**

Throughout my research I gained a deeper understanding of nature preschools from my participants, their views of nature preschools, and my own readings. With the means to only investigate and spend time at one program, I am looking forward to continuing my exploration of the world of nature schools and expanding my understanding of their goals and daily programming. I now have a better appreciation for their possibilities in connecting children to nature, and developing a sense of place. Through providing both structured and unstructured time outdoors, with a guiding adult, over an extended time span, nature preschools can offer children a place to explore, become familiar with, and learn about nature. As a possible step for educational improvement, nature preschools offer a great starting point to get children outside and raise well-rounded, engaged, and creative environmentally aware citizens.

As my use of metaphor and personal stories have shown, this academic journey has become much more to me than I anticipated. As a local scale thinker, I have always been more in tune with the needs of individuals than focused on large scale projects. Working within my strengths, my research here has helped me fully understand the need for small scale thinking and the depth at which it is valuable; more than ever I am now able to see just how my 'small-scale' thinking fits into the 'large-scale' problems of today's environmental concerns. Through reflecting on and telling my own stories, I have also been able to more clearly understand my

own worldview and biases, which will in turn allow me to open up more and build deeper connections to others. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this journey has allowed me great reflection on my life's direction. Helping others connect to nature has always been a leading passion of mine, and now I have direction and understanding towards how I might go about this.

### **For the Next Forest Walk**

When reflecting on my journey, I realized just how trying and stressful it has been. Much of that can be attributed to the trials of any graduate study, and some more attributed to the depth at which I chose to become personally involved through intertwining my own story. However, there have been times where unnecessary anxiety has worked its way into my process.

Much of this extraneous anxiety could have been avoided by taking more time at the beginning to truly focus on my goals and desired outcomes for this journey. Given the chance to walk this trail again, I would offer myself more time to sort through the literature and discuss with other knowledgeable individuals to more clearly understand my underlying needs; in essence, realizing much earlier that connection to place was such an important piece of this journey for me. More preparation time would also have allowed me to set more realistic timelines and become more familiar with my study before embarking on data collection, rather than familiarizing myself on an as-needed basis.

This leads to my methodology. As I have noted throughout, the implementation of my quantitative survey was flawed. It is possible that in beginning this project again, I would remove the survey entirely, however, there are certainly ways to include it more effectively. Refocusing the survey and more clearly defining terms such as *nature* and *environmental issues* could have removed some ambiguity surrounding the true meanings of the questions, potentially

leading to stronger results. Finding a larger sample size would no doubt have benefitted my study, as would having had greater initial contact with my study school to clarify the miscommunication that led to poor distribution. In better understanding the school's needs, I could have worked around this design, by either more effectively distributing the survey at KWNC, or by including other nature preschools. Also, being prepared to take a less formal approach if needed, such as direct observation or unstructured interviewing (Trochim, 2006), I could have gathered additional data as parents waited to pick up their children.

Perhaps because of the survey setback, perhaps in spite of it, I found qualitative interviews a more useful form of data collection. This is not surprising after reading Chawla (2006) recommendations for SLE research and considering the extent to which others employ qualitative research designs when studying SLEs or education. Even so, I have learned a lot about conducting interviews and would change some things here as well. As with the survey, I would be more careful to define my terms, including the differences between values and reasons, which often became intertwined in responses and were difficult to distinguish upon analysis. I would also have liked to spend more time on writing the interview questions. Not being so concerned about overall timelines would have allowed me time to sit and think in greater depth about what I really wanted to ask. I would be sure to include more specific questions about the parent's childhoods which may have resulted in deeper, more meaningful responses.

My journey has not been flawless. As most routes are, my forest walk was set off course multiple times, but I always managed to find my way back. Here I am now, at the other edge of the trees, and even with all the changes I could have made, this was a rewarding learning experience.

## **Future Opportunities**

From the beginning of my investigations into nature preschools I knew I wanted to be involved in creating more of these opportunities for children in Canada. While not directly focused on nature preschools, my work here is important in helping set the stage for understanding why parents might be interested in providing such positive outdoor experiences for their children.

Just as my thesis journey encompassed the past work of others, it would be futile to assume my work will not be encompassed into future works. Although my research only provides insight into a small sub-section of the population with preschool aged children, it opens the door for future research. Providing children with memories to cherish is a valuable goal, and knowing what types of experiences their parents found memorable is helpful. If we wish to pass along similarly motivating and notable memories, we must first understand which memories and outdoor experiences were formative for adults.

Conducting similar studies to this in other geographic areas and other schools would provide a more complete picture on the values, goals and motivations of Canadian parents. Also of interest would be comparing the motivations of parents in urban versus rural areas as well across different social statuses. My study provides valuable information and a good foundation for future works, but is limited in scope.

## **Finding Our Place**

My lens of connection to place has led me in search of answers and has confirmed for me the value of being connected to a place. Through my research surrounding childhood play outdoors, I have found such experiences are valuable to different parents within different

contexts. In the case of my sample population, parents of *Nature Nursery* students are seeking out opportunities for their children to be active, outside, and environmentally aware, as they were or wished they were. Sharing their own childhood memories, which have influenced their adult values, my participants' desires to share similar experiences with others are not unlike my own. Through reflecting on my childhood memories and desire to share positive outdoor experiences with others, I have inadvertently discovered new understandings about my own place and role in nature. Sharing these stories has resulted in feeling more connected to my environment than ever before, something I also hope to guide others in doing.

While it may be unrealistic to expect a short-to-medium term experience such as nature preschool to become a significant life experience, by offering time and space in nature, nature preschools may likely “provided a scaffold upon which later experiences [are] hung” (Robertson, 2008, p. 68). We can only hope that by offering such outdoor educational experiences as a foundation for future learning, we offering lasting and meaningful experiences.

*“Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature -- the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter.”*

— [\*Rachel Carson, Silent Spring\*](#)

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## Appendix A: Invitation Letter

### *Invitation to Participate in Research Study*

#### **Inheriting Nature: Parental Motivations for Enrolling Children in Outdoor Preschools Kim Urbaniak, MA Candidate, Royal Roads University**

As a parent with a child currently or previously enrolled in the Kerry Wood Nature Centre's *Nature Nursery* program, you are invited to participate in a research study I am conducting for partial fulfillment for my Masters of Arts degree in Environmental Education and Communications at Royal Roads University. The purpose of my research is to gain a deeper understanding into why some parents enroll their children in nature/environment focused early childhood education programs. My credentials with RRU can be verified by contacting my project supervisor, Dr. Enid Elliot.

I would greatly appreciate your participation in my research. In the next two weeks, please take approximately 15 minutes to complete an online survey asking questions about how you feel, sense, and experience the natural world. The final survey question will invite you participate in an interview with me regarding your experiences as a child and your motivations for choosing *Nature Nursery* for your children. You are not required to participate in an interview if you choose to complete the survey.

Your participation in this research is voluntary and will not affect in any way your relationship with the Kerry Wood Nature Centre. You are free to withdrawal at any time throughout the study.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me.

Please follow the link below to complete the online survey:

<https://www.insertsurveylinkhere>

Thank you for your time,

Kim Urbaniak  
MA candidate, Environmental Education and Communications  
Royal Roads University

## Appendix B: Quantitative Survey

### *Consent to Participate: Online Survey*

#### **Parental Motivations for Enrolling Children in Outdoor Preschools Kim Urbaniak, MA Candidate, Royal Roads University**

As a parent with a child currently or previously enrolled in the Kerry Wood Nature Centre's *Nature Nursery* program, you are invited to participate in an online survey I am conducting for partial fulfillment for my Masters of Arts degree in Environmental Education and Communications at Royal Roads University. The purpose of my research is to gain a deeper understanding into why some parents enroll their children in nature/environment focused early childhood education programs. My credentials with RRU can be verified by contacting my project supervisor, Dr. Enid Elliot.

The following online survey will ask questions about how you feel, sense, and experience the natural world. The survey will take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

The final question will invite you to participate in an interview with me regarding your childhood experiences with nature and your motivations for choosing *Nature Nursery* for your children. If you volunteer to participate in an interview, which may take up to one hour to complete, please provide me with your name and phone number and/or email address so I may contact you and arrange a time and day to meet. You are not required to participate in an interview.

Your anonymity is assured, and any information gathered will not be linked to contact information provided for the purpose of arranging an interview. I will keep all documentation confidential and secured on a password-protected computer.

Your participation in this research is voluntary and will not, in any way, affect your relationship with the Kerry Wood Nature Centre. You are free to withdraw at any time throughout the study. Survey data already collected will be included in the final data analysis, but no further data will be used. Please contact me if you wish to withdraw. My final report will be published in the Royal Roads University library, and will be available to you upon request.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me.

By checking the box below and proceeding, you give free and informed consent to participate in this research.

Check to accept and continue

**Check the box which is most applicable to you.**

	<b>1 Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>2 Disagree</b>	<b>3 Neither Agree nor Disagree</b>	<b>4 Agree</b>	<b>5 Strongly Agree</b>
My connection to nature and the environment is a part of my spirituality					
My relationship to nature is an important part of who I am					
I feel very connected to all living things and the earth					
I am not separate from nature, but a part of nature					
I always think about how my actions affect the environment					
I am very aware of environmental issues					
I think a lot about the suffering of animals					
Even in the middle of the city, I notice nature around me					
My feelings about nature do not affect how I live my life					
Humans have the right to use natural resources any way we want					
Conservation is unnecessary because nature is strong enough to recover from any human impact					
Animals, birds and plants have fewer rights than humans					
Some species are just meant to die out or become extinct					

Nothing I do will change problems in other places on the planet					
The state of nonhuman species is an indicator of the future for humans					
The thought of being deep in the woods, away from civilization, is frightening					
My ideal vacation spot would be a remote, wilderness area					
I enjoy being outdoors, even in unpleasant weather					
I don't often go out in nature					
I enjoy digging in the earth and getting dirt on my hands					
I take notice of wildlife wherever I am					

What age are you?

- under 20  
 20-29  
 30- 39  
 40-49  
 50-59  
 60+

What is your gender?

- Female  
 Male

Where do you live?

- City of Red Deer  
 Rural area surrounding City of Red Deer

Was the Kerry Wood Nature Centre's *Nature Nursery* Program your first choice for your child's preschool education?

- Yes  
 No

If No, why did you enroll your child in *Nature Nursery*?

\_\_\_\_\_ Closest program to my house

\_\_\_\_\_ Other programs were full

\_\_\_\_\_ The most affordable option

\_\_\_\_\_ Other (please describe) \_\_\_\_\_

If Yes, why did you enroll your child in *Nature Nursery*?

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Is there anything else you would like to tell me about why you chose to send your child to the *Nature Nursery* program?

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To gain a deeper understanding into why parents have enrolled their children in nature preschools, I would like to interview parents. Please indicate below if you would like to volunteer to participate in an interview regarding your experiences as a child and your educational choices for your children. The interview may take up to one hour to complete and will be audio recorded. You may choose to withdrawal at any time throughout the process.

Yes, I am interested in participating in an interview

No, I do not want to be interviewed

If *Yes*, please provide your name and phone number and/or email address where I can contact you to set up a day and time.

## Appendix C: Qualitative Interviews

### *Consent to Participate: Interview*

#### **Inheriting Nature: Parental Motivations for Enrolling Children in Outdoor Preschools Kim Urbaniak, MA Candidate, Royal Roads University**

As a parent with a child currently or previously enrolled in the Kerry Wood Nature Centre's *Nature Nursery* program, you are invited to participate in an online survey I am conducting for partial fulfillment of my Masters of Arts degree in Environmental Education and Communications at Royal Roads University. The purpose of my research is to gain a deeper understanding into why some parents enroll their children in nature/environment focused early childhood education programs. My credentials with Royal Roads University can be verified by contacting my project supervisor, Dr. Enid Elliot.

Following the online survey regarding environmental inclinations of parents, you volunteered for an interview me regarding your experiences as a child and your motivations for choosing *Nature Nursery* for your children. The subsequent interview may take up to one hour to complete, and may involve the disclosure of sensitive information. Interviews will be audio recorded to aid in analysing results. At no time during this study will you be asked to put yourself in physical, mental, or emotional danger. By signing below, you give free and informed consent to participate in this research.

Your anonymity is assured, and any information gathered, including the contact information you have provided in order to arrange this interview, will not in any way be linked to any information gathered. I will keep all documentation confidential and secured on a password-protected computer. Contact information will be deleted once my thesis is accepted, and all other information, including audio recordings of interviews will be disposed of appropriately after 5 years. Only I and Dr. Elliot will have access to data.

Your participation in this research is voluntary and will not affect in any way your relationship with the Kerry Wood Nature Centre. You are free to withdrawal at any time throughout the study. Survey data already collected will be included in the final data analysis, but no further data will be used. Please contact me if you wish to withdrawal. My final report will be published in the Royal Roads University library, and will be available to you upon request.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me.

By signing below, you give free and informed consent to participate in this research.

Name (Please Print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## First Interview Template

*Thank you for coming in today, I really appreciate you taking time out to talk to me about your experiences as a child and your motivations for choosing Nature Nursery for your child(ren).*

- How old is your daughter or son?
- How long have they been in the program at KWNC?

*Now, I'd like to hear about your experiences, both positive and negative, as young as you can remember.*

- Tell me about where you played as a child?
  - Who did you play with?
  - If any, describe the differences between where you played, and where you wanted, but weren't able to play?
- What was the focus of your play? What types of games/activities did you do most often?
- How often did you play outside?
  - Was this because of boundaries set by adults?
- Think back to when you were in preschool/kindergarten. What did you enjoy most about your early years in school?
- What did you enjoy least?
  - How often did these experiences occur?
  - Could you describe a typical day in your school?
- Tell me about where you played at recess?
- How often did you learn outside? Did you embark on field trips?
  - Describe your most memorable outdoor learning experience.

- In your opinion, what is the most important aspect of education for children aged 3-5, and why?
- How prominent was that in your experiences?
- Does this affect your decisions about finding a preschool for your child(ren)?
- As you understand it, what makes the Kerry Wood Nature Center's *Nature Nursery* program different or unusual?
- Why did you prefer this option for your child?
- What do you hope they gain from this experience?
- Are you noticing any changes in your child? (Behaviour and/or attitude)
  - Was this something you expected to see?

### **Second Interview Template**

- Now I would like to change the focus. Just a reminder I'm looking for stories, anything that comes to mind. I would like to hear about everything that was and is important to you. Please take as much time as you need, and start wherever you like. Can you share your favourite or most vivid childhood memories of spending time in nature? How do you feel these experiences or events have led you to connecting and caring for nature?
- What stories, experiences or events have led you to connecting and caring for nature?
- Sounds like you had some significant experiences that have left impressions on you. What are the impressions you hope to cultivate and leave for your children?
- Now, think about the education you want your child to have. Which people or events in your life remind you of why that type of education is important to you?