

Natural Environments

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For most of my teaching years in the Adventist school system, I have had the privilege of working in country settings. Away from the hustle and bustle of the busy city life, a school situated in a natural setting provides a wonderful opportunity for students to see nature at work.



Sandy Lake Academy is situated on 50+ acres of land bordering on Sandy Lake. When I arrived at the school this morning, three of the elementary students were sitting on the floor in the entrance with a couple of caterpillars on some leaves. They were fascinated with the little creatures and were watching over them very carefully. They are now in the classroom with leaves, sticks, etc. for student learning and observation. During Grade 12 math class later in the morning, a ruffed grouse sat about 6 – 7 meters from my classroom window. Since coming to Sandy Lake Academy this year, my students have laughed at me a couple of times for my sudden change of conversation. In the middle of a math lesson, “Oh, look at the deer by the swings!” One day it was a pheasant walking across the field. A couple of foxes appeared one day during the winter, and stayed in the field for some time playing in the snow. Few school settings afford the natural surroundings of SLA. Our students have the opportunity to observe nature first-hand—one of the greatest blessings that an Adventist school can experience.

A University of Berkeley experiment placed rats into four categories of experience. Group One rats were placed in solitary confinement. Group Two rats experienced social enrichment with three rats in each cage. Group Three experienced environmental enrichment with three other rats plus a new toy given to them every day. Group 4 had a natural environment in which they had to meet their own needs and make sure they were safe from predators, etc. The Group Three rats had a 7% – 8% increase in brain weight. The rats in Group Four had an average brain weight increase of 12% - 13%. Learning in a natural environment obviously has an advantage over learning in superficial environments. Also it is not all the toys that make a child intelligent. It is the experience in their natural environment that can make all the difference in the world.

How often do we take our children into nature, and reveal to them the hand of God at work in everything around them? How much of their learning experience at home or in school is based upon a natural environment? Our children don't need all the new toys they are given. They do need, however, exposure to nature and to nature's God. We need children with strong minds to reason and to think in ways that are productive of good. They need to learn to care for their environment, to learn that it is their environment which provides them with the necessities of life.

Since nature is God's second book, let's try to be creative in bringing our students into the natural environments that are around us. If that is too difficult in your location, then let's bring nature into the classroom.

Note: The research was given in the book “Energized!”, a devotional book compiled by Jan Kuzma, Kay Kuzma and DeWitt S. Williams.