

## **Nature as a Classroom**

As an agriculture student majoring in Forest Science, concentrating originally on crop and soil sciences, I devoted my time abroad to expanding my knowledge of several aspects of the global view on nature and its preservation. I chose to study abroad in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, because of the availability of an internship, allowing international experience in the field. I intend to receive an undergraduate degree and continue to graduate school, however, I plan on taking a few years between to explore career opportunities and take a break from school. I have been considering becoming a park ranger or official employee of the department of conservation and natural resources for the government. This involves a role as an officer of the law within the park, as well as administration, and most importantly, education. Because Amsterdam is a large city, and most of the places I had visited were also metropolis, I focused on the nature in an urban setting and the relationship between people and the earth. To do this, I developed a project investigating park systems mostly within the Netherlands, but also throughout Europe, to grasp the importance of nature in an urban setting and the role education plays in maintaining and expanding the physical borders and mental awareness of the parks and their conservation efforts. During my time abroad, I accumulated more than 65 pages of notes, observations, interviews, evaluations, facts and figures, and personal accounts of several important natural preserves. This travelogue will be my opportunity to attempt to sum up the overall lesson learned from the vast sea of knowledge gained in the Netherlands and across the continent.

The experiential learning process involves a great deal of reflection to be valuable. Hands-on learning has many benefits, but has drawbacks as well. In completing a project for the field experience class, I found that experiential learning has proven to be most beneficial. This system encourages a general evaluation of an experience and the lessons learned. Experiential learning provides more than a single opportunity to acquire knowledge. The structure of the class requires a very personal and responsible position for the student, allowing the freedom of developing an individual project with no outside assistance. There were no ready-made projects or activities, and therefore each will be creative and different. The procedure for completing this project involved maximizing the experiences by planning, researching, and reflecting. This system encourages a general evaluation of an experience and the lessons learned. The benefits of the experiential learning process are explained here using my student project.

The project which I have selected provided diverse and extensive availability for experiential learning. I began exploring the park systems and related institutions involved with nature in the Netherlands. In completing this final evaluation of the field placement project, I will explore only a single aspect of the overall information learned. In the process of learning about the park systems of the Netherlands and Europe, it became evident that education plays a vital role and is a goal of nearly all institutions involved. Nature is explored in all activities I participated in, and education about nature is an aspect of the system of nature-related places which is considered of the utmost importance. In examining the connection between education and nature, it is important to see it from an individual context. Therefore, I will explore chronologically the activities participated in and the lessons I learned directly through experience about education and nature. An overall interpretation of the project will be completed as well.

The first of many interviews sparked the initial interest in education which is being explored. This took place at the Amsterdam Bos, a natural area in southern Amsterdam which provides refuge for more than 100 hectares worth of wooded and open land. There are more than 4.5 million visitors to the Bos each year, making it an essential location in the city. Many of these visitors are children and other people curious about the world around them. Besides leaving open space and park land, the Bos developed an educational system designed to use nature as a tool in teaching about the natural world. In the course of visiting the park several times and completing an evaluation of the park, I had the chance to interview a Boswatcher, an employee of the park with both security and educational responsibilities. In the course of the interview, the position of a park ranger as an educator became a topic, and it greatly surprised me to learn the extent to which the Boswatcher becomes a teacher.



Along a canal of the Amsterdam

The interview took place at the visitor's center of the park with Ms. Annemiek Stevenhagen, a Boswatcher for seven years. Annemiek was involved in both aspects of the Bos education system, working with other people in her department as well as the volunteers at the visitor's center, teachers from local schools, parents, clubs and sports, and other organizations visiting the park. After learning about the activities she participated in as an educator, I determined that the Bos has created an interesting and effective system to educate children, and I will take it as model for park education when exploring this career in the future. The other aspect of the Boswatcher's education role takes place outdoors. The students use the process of experiential learning in order to gain important skills and appreciation of nature. After learning about Annemiek's role in outdoor education, I became extremely attracted to the occupation. In visiting the Amsterdam Bos, I learned about the diverse range of responsibilities of park workers and the value of natural education in an urban setting.

Despite having desired to explore many parks and other educational centers concerning nature throughout the Netherlands, the next major interview I conducted took place in Switzerland. I had the opportunity to speak to the Swiss Scouts and also about the area of Interlaken with two Scout Leaders, Etienne and Marie Seton. In learning about the overall value of education and nature from the Swiss Scouts, I received quite a history

lesson of the Scouts themselves and their position in Switzerland. From Etienne and Marie, I learned of the power that someone connected to nature can have to educate others. By implanting ideas of preservation and nature into children through education and knowledge, there is a chance they will make some effort of their own in the future. In the course of the interview, I learned of the various sites and events that the Swiss Scouts participate in. By exploring the personal opinions of the leaders I interviewed, I gained a great deal of knowledge about the specific places and activities conducted but also received an overall look at education in nature.



Etienne and Marie hiking among the waterfalls at the base of the Alps

In our interview, I learned that some Scout leaders are not completely happy with the relationship between education and nature within the organization. Those in Interlaken have developed new plans in which mental ability becomes more important than the physical aspects of Scouting. Etienne told me that the largest Scout meeting area, Kandersteg, an International Scout Center which has been in use for 82 years and is visited by thousands of Scouts there to participate in outdoor activities in the mountains, is used incorrectly. Etienne personally believes that it should be used to start a global Scout movement towards better education and more involved natural learning. This movement is towards more formal education for Swiss Scouts. With less physical activity and more mental stimulation, Etienne believes the Scouts will have accomplished their goal, the overall improvement of children, far more efficiently. Scout Leaders generally educate based on certain principles, then modify their individual teachings from it. Etienne had a book which listed for all employees the basic guidelines and principles of the Scouts, call the “Scout Method Handbook.” I learned also about the necessity to care about the subject and about those who learn. Overall, the interview in Switzerland and guided hike through the Alps provided excellent insight into the connection between nature and education.

Though many other smaller activities have been conducted for the total field placement experience, only a few made a prominent impact on my personal feelings towards education about nature. Another extension of my project which brought me in contact with the issues of education occurred at the Hortus Botanicus. The Hortus Botanicus is the botanical gardens located near the center of Amsterdam. The facility is the setting of one of the oldest botanical gardens in the world, with more than 6000

different types of plants. People of all ages visit the garden to admire the plants and butterflies, explore different climate zones, and meander through the carefully cultivated pathways. The gardens become a living museum because education and research are the most important reasons for its existence. After personal visits to the Hortus Botanicus, I finally received an interview and personal tour of the facilities. The individualized education plans of the Hortus Botanicus are my main focus in their concern for education.



Part of the information system present at the Hortus.

The most interesting aspect about the vast system of education conducted at the Hortus Botanicus is the specific layout used by the guides and gardeners. The herb garden can be used for medical students to learn about the history of medicinal herbs in the Netherlands. From the educational explanation given, I understood the overall plan of the Hortus Botanicus when it comes to connecting education and nature. Continuing with an exploration of the education available at the Hortus Botanicus, I found much more to be discovered regarding the education of higher level students. When initially visiting for an interview, Bernice assumed I was a biology student trying to take classes at the Hortus Botanicus. Bernice explained the cooperation between the University of Amsterdam and the Hortus Botanicus, and it greatly shaped my opinion on combining education and nature. Here, classes of small groups can be conducted under laboratory settings, with plants from the gardens. I learned from my guide Bernice that any biology student at the University is granted free access into the Hortus Botanicus, and since the beginning of the biology programs, hundreds of students have come on their own time to research or begin individual projects. This demonstrates that the educational approach was very effective, encouraging students to choose to learn on their own, which is a goal of mine in educating about nature. The laboratory facilities available to biology students also impressed me. Educating students about nature is important in a classroom setting, but the Hortus takes this a step further by bringing the classroom right into the gardens. By examining the opportunities the Hortus Botanicus offers to University students, I find there is infinite value in an experiential education situation, as the tools offered by the gardens proves. The previously mentioned interviews have provided the largest amount of information to me about the park systems and also about education. This raises the

question about which is more important, education strictly about nature, or also about culture and using nature for events.

I learned via my own experiential learning that it has value as a system of education involving the individual and giving freedom to be creative. Examining recreation in parks, gardens, and other public natural places has always been an interest of mine, examining the human relation to nature and amongst nature. From the Amsterdam Bos I learned about balancing the indoor and outdoor, the classroom with the field trip, and work with play. While interviewing Scouts in Switzerland, I uncovered the rising of a new movement, a revolution in education about nature, the roots of passionate involvement that both excited and scared me. In the course of several trips to the Hortus Botanicus, I learned about the importance of recognizing an audience when educating, about adapting to their interest and abilities. This will prove to be difficult in the future, but with awareness there is the opportunity for preparation. From other interviews and visits, I have gained a wealth of information concerning the basic approaches to educating people about nature. My project became not so much an investigation of the park itself, but the park's place in society, their value to the world, and the value of nature.