

Nature Disconnect ... Environmentally



By Lizzi Larbalestier

My previous NLP + Coaching series gently emphasised Nature Connectedness. In this new series we will dive a little deeper into how we as NLP professionals can work more closely with the natural environment in order to:

- 1 act as advocates for a healthy ecosystem – promoting and facilitating eco-conscious lifestyles and eco-wise decision making;
- 2 share the wealth of health benefits nature connectedness brings.

A great place to start is exploring nature connection and nature disconnect in order to truly recognise a range of perspectives.

So why bother? The **benefits** of nature connectedness are broad and varied. It helps to think of these in terms of:

- **Social** – connection with others
 - *reflect upon what you go out into nature to do. It is likely recreational and possibly involves others, perhaps playing or learning, in some way stretching your boundaries.*

A great place to start is exploring nature connection and nature disconnect in order to truly recognise a range of perspectives

- **Cognitive** – the mind awakened
 - *remember the last time you were connecting with the natural world – how was your mental state and where was your attention? The chances are time distorted and your internal chatter was quieter. Even if you chose solitude you may have been captivated by a view or wildlife, your awareness expanded.*
- **Psychological** – improved mood
 - *notice how your motivation and mood shifts when breathing in fresh air or taking a swim. The natural world offers profound lessons and a sense of perspective.*
- **Physiological** – the body engaged
 - *reconnect with how it feels to be out in nature. What is the embodied*

experience for you? How alive do you feel and how aware of the forces of nature are you – such as gravity and temperature, for example.

- **Spiritual** – the heart inspired
 - *think back to a special time in nature and how it impacted your wider life. A big sky or a golden sunset have the potential to lift our spirits and provide hope.*

Nature takes many shapes and forms. My preference is coastal landscape and marine wildlife... but perhaps your nature fix comes from one of the following:

- **Home** – indoor plants, home aquarium, your pets
- **Urban** – parks, ponds and fountains, roadside trees and public gardens
- **Agriculture** – fields, paddocks, countryside
- **Wild** – coast and ocean, forest, mountains, rivers and moorland
- **Wildlife** – marine life, birds, insects, flora and fauna

But what exactly IS nature connectedness?



We can actively bring nature into our work spaces



Regardless of our inclinations, our experiences of the natural world can be **intentional, instinctive** and **incidental**.

Think about your day:

- How much of your time are you actively pursuing interactions with nature?
- What are the moments where you find yourself less consciously drawn to or captivated by nature?
- When and where does your path cross with nature that happens to be in your vicinity?

Nature is within our general field of awareness all the time – yet it featured less in popular culture throughout the latter part of the last decade, according to a study of millions of popular fiction titles, art, music and film storylines.

It is estimated that the majority of workers spend 86% of their time indoors, unless of course you actively choose, like I do, to take the majority of your work outdoors.

Happily, the past 15 years has seen a wave of environmental psychology research an antidote to our urbanised lives. Scientists are now seeking to quantify the value of blue and green space and their academic insights can inform our coaching practices.

Intuitively we know that nature provides mental and emotional health benefits and yet we can fail to prioritise the kind of immersive/lived/first hand experiences that promote curiosity.

We learn about global trends relating to climate change and biodiversity, which are hugely important to address. Yet without the fascination and curiosity

facilitated by **immediate sensory experiences**, our 'eco literacy' (a topic I will dive further into in another issue) can be created purely through conceptual generalisations.

We 'know' all yet 'understand' nothing.

As with all things balance is key, and in this case neither global nor specific is ideal – both are required and we, as coaches, have a fundamental role to play.

A disconnect with nature carries risks. Around 90% of the UK population live in towns and cities – there is even such a thing as 'nature deficit disorder' and whilst this is primarily attributed to children, in adults it can be characterised by:

- Diminished use of senses – a 'dialed out' approach to the world
- Attention difficulties such as irritability and distractedness

Perhaps you recognise these within yourself or those around you – maybe your clients are demonstrating symptoms like these?

Much of our down time is spent screen-side and the internet in particular claims a large proportion of our energy which would otherwise be directed to more embodied leisure activities. Let's face it, we have all ended up down rabbit holes, having started on one thread of an idea and been taken into multiple web-based tangents.

It is funny then that we call it 'the web' because on one hand there is the positive frame that a web interlinks many things... but a web is also designed to capture... and it does just that. A simple but powerful reframe.

So how can we untangle ourselves?

We can actively bring nature into our work spaces. Take a look at the indoor spaces you work within. How much life is there? Plants, water, art ... what is the view from the window? How can you utilise prints – on soft furnishings, for example? Even shifting a screen saver on a background PC to an aquarium or forest scene can add a touch of the natural world (if virtually). Taking a biophilic view of your office design also includes considering your soundscape; ambient nature sounds can actively aid concentration.

As we begin to master technology, we can channel its use appropriately towards allowing different work practices and routines to allow more time to step outdoors. Post COVID-19 there is a rising recognition that nature deficit is detrimental to wellness, resulting in a desire for many to connect with the natural world and this will result in a wave of remote working practices.

Perhaps the nature value equation is shifting? Well, maybe... and maybe not. When it comes to valuing nature, we have some real lessons to learn and share. As professional communicators our influence can be powerful and if we choose to value nature the following insights could be useful:

1: Avoid convenience, it is often unhealthy

As NLPers we love language, right? Look up the definition of the word 'convenient' and you will see terms like 'allowing unhindered progress' and

▶ 'well-suited', when in fact we tend to choose convenience due to things being 'at hand' and 'easily accessible'. All these descriptors are indeed listed and yet our intention matters. If we emphasise the latter only, our decisions **will** in fact hinder us and our choices **will not** be well suited in terms of sustaining life on this planet.

An example at hand: we have seen a big step backwards in the progress that had been made into reducing single use plastics. Cause and effect often experience a mental disconnect when it comes to making eco-wise choices. The ripple effect of a drop in the price of oil, for instance, and fear of coronavirus contamination are fuel to a single use economy. And yet, if we are truly nature-connected we might make different and informed choices in order to facilitate longer-term 'health' without adding short-term risk.

2: Climate change is not 'a short-term issue'

Research shows that polluted areas are less restorative than those that appear unpolluted.

The issue attention cycle is a term that was coined by Anthony Downs in 1973 (the year I was born), and it is so relevant in today's turbulent times of social unrest. If the term is unfamiliar, it states in essence that the public gain and lose interest in societal problems/issues over time. I like to think of it like a wave; in

this context, we are looking at the 'eco-attention cycle'.

I have witnessed public peaks of outrage (something I fondly label POO) followed by depths of despair over the increase in littering recently. We cannot afford to gain and lose interest, however, when it comes to addressing the pollution of our natural environment; it is our early warning system for climate change. The level of anger testifies to the fact that it took a stark contrast from lockdown for many to notice that, systemically, nature is **not** truly valued. Of course, if we follow the wave the level of interest will wane unless we actively foster a deeper ongoing relationship with nature.

Whilst championing a circular economy will help, the scale of cultural change required relies on a dramatic increase in nature connectedness. If people grow to know, love and value nature they will take better care of it.

Negligence and ignorance are not the same thing

Ignorance is often defined as negligence and yet they are not the same thing. As professionals who facilitate change, it is our role to promote wise decisions. Many people do not know how to protect nature.

Let's imagine Family A visit the beach. They might imagine they are doing the right thing as they place their single use plastic items securely in a carrier bag on top of an over-full bin. They might imagine it will be sorted and recycled; they might

Whilst championing a circular economy will help, the scale of cultural change required relies on a dramatic increase in nature connectedness

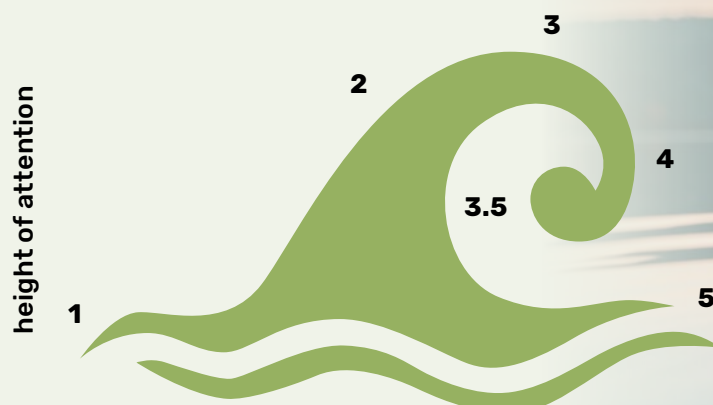
be unaware that coastal wildlife such as gulls will tear apart their bags and destroy the local environment after they leave. They might be unaware that the bins are not emptied immediately by a clean-up crew. They could be unaware that even had their item been recyclable, they are very unlikely to actually be recycled... and the list goes on.

Of course, there will also be those who have given less thought to their actions. Family B might simply leave their litter where they sat, for the sea to wash it away.

My point – and there is one – is that we can only instigate change and advocate for nature when we come from a place of curiosity. Managing our own state comes first; looking at our own actions first is essential and provides insight. Our role is to enthuse and encourage if we are to be promoters of health and advocates for life. As we become collectively more informed, we can act as role models. Are you with me? ■

Eco Attention Wave

adapted by going coastal blue from Down's Issue Attention Cycle



- 1 blissfully unaware
- 2 attention is sparked rising to a peak of outrage
- 3 costs and sustained effort required becomes clear
- 3.5 depths of despair, eco anxiety/depression (for some)
- 4 small short term wins, yet enthusiasm and interest declines
- 5 attention drifts creating space for a new societal issue

Lizzi Larbalestier is an ICF professional blue health coach and coach trainer specialising in marine-based change work in Cornwall and California. Disarming humour supports a highly provocative coaching style and she uses the coast as a landscape for trajectory-led philosophical debate grounded in neuroscience. Lizzi is the founder of Going Coastal Blue and Director of Coaching for Blue Mind Works. For more information go to www.goingcoastal.blue