

# Nature Activity Handbook for Counselors

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## Nature Activities for Counselors

**Purpose:** To provide nature activities that counselors can easily do with their cabin groups during cabin activities or other times that need some structure. Most of the activities require little or no equipment or preparation time.

If equipment is needed check for its availability with the Director of Outdoor Learning and follow the check out procedures. The Nature Center also has other resources that may be of use.

Please keep track of the activities you use, what went well, what did not go well, if you revised the activity and how that went, what age groups you used the activity with, and anything else that would be helpful to know. If you used an activity that you think should be included please let the Director of Outdoor Learning know.

The activities are divided into sections: High Energy, Active Observation, Calm Reflection, and Evening/Night.

## ACTIVITIES

# High Energy

### **ANIMAL PARTS**

Age: 7 and up

Equipment: none

Divide into groups of 4-5. Ask each group to select an animal common to the area. Then tell them that each group will have to imitate the body of their animal. They are going to appear before an "animal expert" or "panel of experts" who will try to guess their identity on the basis of the movements and behavior they act out. No noise is allowed, except what they can make with props (optional) such as a tin can with rocks in it to mimic the rattle of a rattlesnake. Give the groups about 5 minutes to work on their acts and have them perform for each other.

-From Sharing Nature With Children

### **HUMAN OBJECT MATCH GAME**

Age: 10 and under

Equipment: various human-related objects (ball, pencil, velcro)

Kids try to find different objects in nature that match the human-related objects in some way. They can match in terms of function, color, shape, etc. The kids tell how they matched the objects. Can then discuss why they matched things in certain ways.

-From Camping Magazine July-Aug. 1992

### **THE LORAX**

Age: any

Equipment: the book, props

Practice and perform the story for yourselves or for the rest of camp. See under Active Observation activities. This is a continuation of that.

-From The Nature Specialist

### **NOAH'S ARK**

Age: 5 and up

Equipment: set of animal cards, or make own

Count out as many cards as there are participants, making sure that there are 2 of each kind of animal (if there is an odd number in the group, make sure the set of 3 animals is included). Shuffle the cards and hand out 1 card per person. Each child reads his/her card and becomes the animal whose name is on the card, keeping his/her identity a secret. Collect the card. On signal, the players begin acting out the sounds, shapes, and typical movements of their animals, with the intention of attracting their mates. They can make all the noise they want, but talking is prohibited.

-From Sharing Nature With Children

### **PHOTO SAFARI**

Age: 10 and up

Equipment: set of photos

Hand out the photo cards and have the group or individuals identify it by either looking for the place photographed or the place where the photographer stood to get the picture. Encourage the group to share something special about each site.

-From The Nature Specialist

## **WILD ANIMAL SCRAMBLE**

Age: 7 and up

Equipment: set of animal index cards, straight pins

Pin one animal card on the back of each player. At your signal, the players ask each other questions to get clues to their own identities. Encourage them to question everyone in the group. They can ask as many questions as they want, but answers are limited to yes, no, and maybe. As soon as players feel certain that they know the name of their animal, have them report the guess to you and write it down. Have an "award ceremony" by calling the players to the front with their backs to the rest of the groups and announce the player's guess. Right answers can be wildly applauded.

-From Sharing Nature With Children

# Active Observation

## **ADOPT-A-TREE**

Age: 7 and up

Equipment: Adoption Certificate(s), paper, crayons, pencils

Choose a tree (individual campers or as a whole cabin group). Learn as much as possible about the tree from observation and from books. Make bark and leaf rubbings. Draw its picture. Write a story or poem about it. Hug it. Listen to it. Love it. Make a booklet about it. This project could be continued throughout the summer with the same tree but with different campers and a copy of the completed booklet could be sent to all involved or individuals could be encouraged to check on their tree in the coming years.

-From The Nature Specialist

## **ENCHANTED FOREST**

Age: 7 and up

Equipment: Blindfolded Hike - 25 meter rope, blindfolds, writing surfaces (plywood sheets), pencils or crayons, paper; What's My Leaf - leaves from 5-6 plants

Blindfolded Hike - Lead a discussion about the senses: what are they, which do you use most, how do you compensate for a loss of sight. Create a mood of excitement - they are going to enter a special place but first need to eliminate one of their senses so their others are increased. Spread the rope out and give them each a place along it about a meter apart. Tell them they should not move up or back from their place and to let the rope pull them. Tell them they will not be led into a tree. Have them put blindfolds on. Tell them this is to be a quiet hike. They should not talk, but listen to the sounds of the forest, smell the odors, feel the ground beneath them as they walk along.

Encourage them to let their minds wander as they perceive the different senses. They can go wherever their minds take them through the Enchanted Forest. Occasionally instruct them to stop and listen focusing on sounds near and far. Let them reach down and touch the ground, pick up a handful of forest litter. Have them smell and feel it, crunch it up in their hands and sense the sound. Then proceed as before. Take items down the line for students to touch, smell, eat, or listen to. Suggestions: sumac berries, dandelions, burrs, acorns, pine needles, insect galls, mud, sand, fur. Have them point to the sun, point to a sound, point to their starting place. When you reach a destination far from others, have them stop, face the direction of your voice and sit down. With blindfolds still on have them dig a hole and use all of their senses to experience the soil - feel it, smell it, rub it on their faces. Have them guess where they are. Pass out paper, pencils, and boards. Let them take off blindfolds and have them describe on paper their different sensory experiences and feelings while being blindfolded or where their imaginations led them through the Enchanted Forest. Let them share what they wrote.

What's My Leaf: Have them sit in a circle and close their eyes. Give each a leaf and tell them to make friends with it. Have them use all of their senses except sight to learn as much about the leaf as possible - explore edges, note texture, shape, touch on back of hand, smell it. After a few minutes have them place their leaves in the center of the circle. Have them open their eyes and find their leaf. Have them explain how they knew which leaf was theirs.

\*\*Make sure in either of these that you are familiar with any poisonous plants in the area and choose your spots and specimens carefully.\*\*

-From CF Manual

## **HUMAN CAMERA**

Age: 3 and up

Equipment: index cards, pencils

One player takes the role of photographer and the other plays the camera. The photographer guides the camera, who keeps his/her eyes closed, on a search for beautiful and interesting pictures. When the photographer sees something he/she likes, he/she points the camera's lens (eyes) at it, framing the object he/she wants to "shoot." The photographer presses the shutter button to open the lens. To open the lens the photographer taps the camera's shoulder. A second tap tells the camera to close his/her eyes. It is important that the camera keeps his/her eyes closed until the photographer signals. Encourage them to be as quiet as possible. Encourage the photographers to be creative - they can take closeups, use unusual angles and perspectives, or pan the horizon. The preferred "exposure time" is 3-5 seconds (don't overexpose the film). Show how to pan the camera horizontally or vertically - move it slowly with the shutter held open, like a movie camera. The photographers can prepare their cameras for the next picture by telling them which lens to use - close-up, wide-angle, telephoto. Trade roles after about 10 minutes of picture taking. Have them plan to take 6-10 pictures. You may need to talk about leading people with their eyes closed safely.

After everyone has played both roles, give each player a 3 x 5 index card and tell them, "Remember one of the pictures you took when you played camera. Develop it by drawing it, and give it to the photographer." If some players groan self-consciously about their lack of artistic talent, tell them they can blame the quality of their pictures on the photographer! The group can write about their pictures if they want to. They may take all their pictures on a certain theme and write a story using all the pictures.

-From Sharing the Joy of Nature

## **THE LORAX**

Age: any

Equipment: the book, paper, magazines for pictures, crayons

Familiarize yourself with the book. Read it aloud dramatically. Each time a certain role is mentioned in the book the group could provide a sound or motion identifying it. Discuss the meaning of the book. Create a mural or collage about its message.

- From The Nature Specialist

## **SILENT STALKING/SLEEPING MISER**

Age: 6 and up

Equipment: Blindfolds, treasures (twigs, rocks, etc.)

Sleeping Miser: Choose 1 person to be the miser. The rest are stalkers. The miser sits blindfolded on the ground, guarding the treasure. The miser can't stay awake forever and has fallen asleep. The stalkers form a ring around the miser, about 30 paces away (less if the ground cover is noisy). At a signal, the stalkers advance as quietly as possible and try to steal the treasure without waking up the miser. If the miser hears an approaching stalker, he/she points in that direction. If he/she is correct, the stalker is frozen in place. When a number of stalkers have been frozen, stop the game and allow the frozen ones to go back and start over. Make sure no one advances under cover of the time-out noises. On signal, everyone again begins sneaking up on the miser. Allow no running or diving for the treasure. The stalker who succeeds in capturing the treasure is miser for

the next game.

Silent Stalking (variation on Sleeping Miser): Divide the group into pairs. One is blindfolded (the prey) and led onto the playing field and left standing with a twig placed between their feet. This is their life. The others (predators) return to home base. On signal, the predators stalk any of the prey and try to steal their life. If the prey hears the predators' movement, they point in the direction and if correct send the predators back to the starting point where they begin again. Play continues until all the lives are taken. People then switch positions. Hunting in packs is allowed.

-From CF Manual and Sharing Nature With Children

# Calm Reflection

## **BIRD CALLING**

Age: 4 and up

Equipment: none

There is a bird call that you can easily do with no more equipment than your own mouth. It attracts many of the smaller species: sparrows, warblers, jays, vireos, chickadees, nuthatches, hummingbirds, flycatchers, bushtits, orioles, kinglets, wrens, and others.

The call consists of a series of rhythmically-repeated "pssh" sounds. Different rhythms work with different birds. Here are a couple of simple rhythms you can start with:

pssh.....pssh.....pssh.....

pssh...pssh...pssh-pssh...pssh...pssh

Each of these series should last about 3 seconds. Experiment to find the rhythms that work best for the birds in our area. For the best results when using the call, wait until you hear birds nearby, then kneel or stand motionless by shrubs or trees that will partially hide you and give the birds something to land on. Begin calling the series, pausing after 3 or 4 rounds to listen for incoming birds. The birds will respond quickly if they are going to respond at all. When the birds have come near, a single series or a couple of notes may be all you'll need to keep them nearby. Some believe that this attracts birds because it resembles many birds' scolding call, or it sounds like a mother bird's feeding call to her young, or that it provokes the birds' curiosity.

-From Sharing Nature With Children

## **GUIDED IMAGERY (TREE)**

Age: 5 and up

Equipment: if done with music - cassette-player and tape

Can be done indoors or outdoors. Outdoors, look for a clear area under a deciduous tree - preferably a large one. Have the group spread out under the tree and stand with their eyes closed, near enough to you that they can easily hear you. Tell them they're about to experience the life of a tree for an entire year - summer, fall, winter and spring. In fact, they're going to become a tree. While you narrate the "trees" can hold their arms up like branches, or just stand still with their eyes closed, visualizing. With younger children, movement helps channel restlessness. If you can't remember or don't have time to read the complete narration, just memorize a few details from each phase of the tree's year-long life cycle and do some ad-libbing. With young children and other groups with short attention spans, shorten your presentation by omitting secondary facts and curtailing some of your mood-setting description.

**NARRATION:** Close your eyes...

Trees are very important to life on Earth. They create half the world's oxygen. They hold the soil and prevent erosion. They provide food and shelter for untold billions of animals. They warm their immediate environment in winter and cool it in the summer with their shade. Trees inspire us with thoughts of beauty, nobility, strength, and serenity.

With your eyes closed, in your mind see yourself walking through a forest of large deciduous trees. (Pause) Now you've entered a clearing in the middle of the forest. Stop, turn toward the sun, and feel that you are becoming a large tree in this forest.

Stand with your feet shoulder-distance apart and feel your huge taproot growing down from your hips. Feel it go down through your thighs...your knees...and down through your ankles...down through the soles of your feet and into the earth. Your taproot is working itself through the soft

topsoil, and working farther down, down, deep into the clay soil. Keep sinking your taproot farther and farther down into the earth until it's over 30 feet deep. (Pause.)

Gently sway back and forth. Feel how firmly you're rooted in the earth. (Pause) Mentally look at your large trunk and see how big and round you are. (Pause) Is your bark smooth or rough? Is it dark or light-colored? (Pause)

Now follow your trunk up higher and higher until you come to your biggest branches. Follow them as they divide up into smaller and smaller branches and spread out into the sky.

It's summertime, and life is easy. The days are long. The sun is warm. A light breeze blows your branches gently back and forth. Feel how your roots hold you firmly anchored to the earth.

What kind of leaves do you have? Are they large and pointed? Or are they small and round?

Absorb energy from the sun's warm rays. Bring it into your leaves and make food, using sunlight, air, and water that you've brought up from the ground. Now send the food you've made in your leaves down through your branches to your trunk. Feel it going down and down, all the way to your roots. Store it there. Summer is the time when you store food. (You stopped growing many months ago, before the end of spring.)

Deep in the earth, gather water from the soil using your tiny root hairs. Your root hairs spread out and touch nearly every particle of soil around you. Bring this moisture up. Feel it rise first in tiny streams, then as vast rivers of moisture. Now it's surging up the trunk, racing higher and higher up the trunk at speeds of up to a hundred miles per hour, and out through the branches and into the leaves. Now it evaporates from your leaves, permeating the atmosphere all around you with moisture. As autumn approaches, the days grow short and the sunlight is less intense. Food production finally comes to a complete halt. It's getting cooler, and the sap in your leaves is starting to descend, down out of your branches and into your trunk, and to your roots below. There, deep in your roots, the sap is stored for next spring.

Watch as your abandoned leaves turn golden, yellow, or red. What is happening is not new - you've dropped your leaves in autumn many times through the years. Cast off your leaves and become dormant now. You are preparing yourself, protecting yourself from the approaching cold of winter. (Pause)

Storm clouds come rolling over the horizon, darkening the sky. The wind begins to push at your upper branches. The rain patters in big drops and then pounds at your naked branches with their few remaining leaves. A fierce wind rips through the forest and tears off many leaves, driving them to the ground. Look down at the forest floor. It's covered with your brightly-colored leaves, and leaves from the trees around you. (Pause) The storm breaks, and your branches are completely soaked. Hear the water drip from limb to limb on its way to the ground. (Pause)

Winter isn't over yet. An even bigger storm blows in from the sea. Listen to the roar of its approach. Powerful gusts rattle your branches and toss them about. Like a ship on an angry sea, you rock back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. Only your big taproot and large lateral roots keep you from crashing to the ground.

The storm is beginning to blow itself out. The wind is slackening. Once more, the forest is quiet. Your branches are almost bare now, and the ground is painted gold, yellow, and red. Your stark silhouette stands out against the somber gray winter sky. One by one, your last leaves fall off and gently roll and tumble to the earth. The temperature drops, and snow begins to fall. Feel the snow as it piles up on your branches.

All animal life has left the forest. Many of the insects have died. Most of the birds have flown south. The mammals are either hibernating or have gone down to the warmer valleys. You, too, have died back to only 1% of your living tissue - to a thin thread of life just inside your bark. (Pause)

But already stored in your tiny buds are next year's leaves and flowers. See them on the tips of

your branches, protected from the cold and wet of winter by a waxy sheath. These buds are your new life for the coming year. Crouch down. Kneel down and become a tiny leaf bud. You're like a baby in its mother's womb, waiting for your time, waiting for spring. (Pause)

The days are becoming longer and warmer. When the temperature and sunlight are just right, the sap deep in the tree's roots awakens and surges up through the trunk, racing higher and higher, emerging into the branches and entering the buds. (Pause) Unfold now as a tiny, tender, bright-green spring leaflet. Open up completely to the spring sun and receive its warming, energy-giving rays. Feel the suns' energy and nourishment, and grow green, grow large.

Send food energy down to the rest of the tree. Now, feel all the leaves in one branch and give to the tree the vitality you feel from the sun.

Become the whole tree again. Feel your roots as they reach deeper into the earth. (Pause) Feel the tips of your branches growing. You are growing from both ends - and a little around the middle! Spring is the time of renewal. Now 99% of your body has come back to life, adding tremendous vitality to yourself and to the forest.

With your renewal, animals and plants return to the forest. Birds land in your branches. Reach out with one of your branches and let a robin land on you. Deer are feeding around your trunk. Wildflowers are pushing up and out from the earth beneath you. All animal life depends on you for food, shelter - and, yes, even a sense of well-being. Spread your branches out to all living things in the forest, in a spirit of protection and love. Feel that you share one life together, in beauty and harmony. (Pause)

Please lie down on our back. I'm going to read a poem about trees. Feel that you're becoming the part of the tree that each line describes. After the first stanza, you can open your eyes and look at the base of a large tree.

Roots going down,  
reaching  
through damp earth deep.  
Down, Down,  
holding me here.

OPEN YOUR EYES  
AND LOOK AT THE TRUNK  
OF A LARGE TREE...

My great round trunk,  
massive and slender,  
solid yet yielding,  
carrier of life.

My long limbs  
stretching out for space,  
tips tickled by the wind,  
touched by the sun.

They invite all life  
to shelter among them,  
beneath them, inside me,  
beneath me.

Life runs through me.  
I invite all life to me.

Roots anchored deep.  
limbs lofty high,  
I abide in both worlds  
of earth and sky.

-From Sharing the Joy of Nature

## **HUMAN SPOKES**

Age: any

Equipment: none

Find a fairly level spot where the entire group can lie down together. They are to lie down with their heads toward the center and their feet out like the spokes of a wheel. Some places to choose might be in tall grass, around the base of a tree, in the middle of a wide trail or other clearing. They should lie down with as little disturbance to the area as possible. They should silently examine their surroundings - the sky, the plants above their heads and to the side. They should close their eyes and listen to any movements caused by the wind or any other sounds they can hear. Have them share what they have observed. This would be a good place to do some guided imagery or sharing about the week or even devotions.

## **MEET A TREE**

Age: 4 and up

Equipment: blindfolds

Pair off and have one of the pair blindfold the other (or blindfold the entire group and you do the leading). Have the sighted person lead the blind partner to any tree that attracts them. Help the blind partner explore his/her tree and to feel its uniqueness. Try to be specific in suggestions - rub your cheek on the bark, not feel the tree. When the blind partner is finished exploring their tree lead him/her back to the starting point, but by an indirect route. Remove the blindfold and have him/her find their tree. Do it so that both partners get a chance to meet a tree.

-From Sharing Nature With Children

## **WILDERNESS TRAIL**

Age: 8 and up

Equipment: binoculars, magnifying glasses

Native Americans would go out into the wilderness alone to seek wisdom from nature, because they felt that if you were quiet and attentive, Nature could teach you a great deal about life and about yourself. If you give the group binoculars and/or magnifying glasses still emphasize that the most important thing is to sit completely still and become sensitively aware of their surroundings.

It's very important that the children be spaced evenly along the trail, out of sight of one another. To help keep the group quiet while choosing spots, use the following method. When you come to a beautiful place on the trail, raise your hand. Those who want that spot silently raise their hands,

and the first one to do so is chosen. This way, they get some say in where they will sit, without disturbing the silent, reflective mood. If a second leader is available have him/her at the beginning of the trail or circle back to the beginning. After 20-30 minutes have him/her walk the trail collecting the group. Encourage the players to remain quiet during the walk back. When the group has regathered, gather at an area where the group can sit comfortably and do some sharing activities.

-From Sharing the Joy of Nature

# Evening/Night

## **WATCHER OF THE ROAD**

Age: 5-13 years

Equipment: flashlight

Need an untraveled section of a service drive or a wide trail. The watcher sits in the middle of the road or trail with his/her eyes closed and a flashlight in hand. The rest of the group lines up at a starting point 15 feet away. Then several of the group try to stalk past the watcher together and reach home base, a line 10 feet beyond. If the watcher hears anything, he/she shines his/her light in that direction. Anyone the light touches must freeze. (No fair sweeping the light around.) After several players have been frozen, call a time out to let them return to the start and try again. The first to pass the watcher and reach home base becomes the new watcher.

-From Sharing Nature With Children

High Energy

IDENTIFICATION GAME  
NATURE BINGO  
PYRAMID OF LIFE  
SCAVENGER HUNTS

Active Observation

CATERPILLAR WALK  
CIRCLE OF LIFE  
COMMERCIALS  
CREATIVE EXPRESSION  
DISCOVERY WALK  
LIVING HISTORY  
MICRO-HIKE  
MYSTERY ANIMAL  
NATURE CRITTERS  
RECON HIKE  
UNNATURE TRAIL  
WEB WATCHING

Evening/Night

SUGARING