



‘Everyone, regardless of race or background, can find solace in our natural world’

Beth Collier set up community organisation Wild in the City to improve diversity by showing that nature is for all of us to enjoy.

Humans are designed to be at home in nature. The circadian rhythms that regulate our sleep/wake cycle have evolved to be attuned to the movement of the sun and the changing seasons. Being in nature calms down our nervous system, lowering our heart rate and the stress hormone, cortisol. On the other hand, our bodies respond to the pollutants and noise of cities as if they're a threat, triggering our fight or flight response so our heart rates and cortisol levels go up. Despite this basic biology, we still often talk about our increased love for nature as though it's a surprise. In fact, our hectic lifestyles shouldn't be the norm – it's the natural world where we feel most at ease.

Being outdoors is central to my life. I grew up on a smallholding, so my childhood was spent among animals and livestock, exploring fens and woodland. When I went to university to study comparative religion and social anthropology, I found myself craving that immersion in nature, and this led me to realise that many people living in cities had never felt that strong connection. After working as a human rights researcher for 15 years, I decided to help people in a more immediate way, so I retrained to become a psychotherapist. I have now been practising for 12 years, and I specialise in Nature Allied Psychotherapy, a therapy that takes place in

a natural setting, such as a woodland. Many people find it much calmer than being in an office. They feel happier, more relaxed and more mindful, their heart rate is slower, blood pressure lower. Nature acts as kind of co-therapist, which gives a sense of freedom and belonging.

However, it is striking to see disparities in the number of Black people spending time in nature. I noticed that, often, people of colour shy away from being in nature. This isn't because they don't want to be there – quite the opposite. Many have a deep yearning for that connection to our natural world, but feel uncomfortable, unsure and anxious. They don't feel that they belong. When I started to research this relationship, I discovered there was an historical legacy. When people migrated, they encountered a lot of racism and hostility, so the idea of going to more remote areas and open spaces can be intimidating if you wonder how you are going to be treated. Also, there was a sense of joining something more progressive; colonialism had stigmatised their lives close to nature as backward and so rejecting nature became part of this feeling of being free from the hardships of having to tend the land that many families carried with them.

Determined to challenge this idea that we don't belong, in 2013 I set up Wild in the City, a London-based organisation that aims to connect people of colour with the natural world through eco therapy sessions, hikes and workshops in wildlife identification, foraging, fire lighting and natural navigation. Our aim is to open up spaces so people feel entitled to be there, and see how relaxing and restorative it is to spend a day in beautiful scenery, exploring and having adventures. We also have a programme training people as nature guides, for anyone who wants to take it to another level.

The feedback has been brilliant. It's amazing to see people transform, their faces lit up by the glow of a fire as they share stories. By providing a safe space to find confidence in the outdoors, I hope we can diversify the field so everyone, regardless of race or background, finds solace in our natural world.

• *Find out more at wildinthecity.org.uk*

Quickfire

The best thing about nature is... belonging.

The outdoor activity I enjoy most is... canoeing and wild camping.

Sunrise or sunset? Sunset.

Flora or fauna? Both!

I like to relax with... time in the woods, crafting by the fire.

My favourite season is... late spring. I love the rising energy of life force and the richness of colours.

To do my bit to help the planet... I gave up my car 18 months ago.

I boost my mental wellbeing with... companionship in and with nature.

G&T or cup of tea? Cup of tea – Earl Grey please.

I am happiest... in an ancient woodland.

