

The Reader



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Wild in the City

Wild in the City is a London-based organisation seeking to make nature a meaningful part of everyday life. They offer natural history, ecotherapy and woodland living skills to urban residents and people of colour, promoting wellbeing and community. *The Reader* spoke to its founder, Nature Allied Psychotherapist and ethnographer, Beth Collier.

What were you doing before you founded Wild in the City?

I ran a research consultancy in the field of human rights, and I was commissioned by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees as international expert in gender-based persecution. I was researching honour crimes, trafficking, domestic violence – and I got burn-out, really, and I wanted to get back to something more healing.

Were you always someone who got out into nature in search of feeling?

I was lucky – I grew up on a smallholding in rural Suffolk, exploring the woods and the Fens. From the back of our plot of land you could see on to Thetford Forest, stretching as far as the eye could see. It was a lovely way to grow up, with no fences around us and a wonderful sense of freedom and space. Nature has always been my playground and my classroom.

When did you start to think you wanted to bring this relationship to other people?

I had always known, even as a child, what being in nature did for my health and my sense of self and wellbeing, but I hadn't before appreciated the ease of access that I had enjoyed. When I went to university and then began working and living in a city, I saw what disconnection from nature looked like, that many people saw nature as something distant, dirty or boring. I began to wonder whether I had something to offer as someone for whom nature wasn't just normal but essential.

I was working as a psychotherapist with a boy around 11 years old. He presented with a lot of anger and bravado, as if he was much older – this was the mask he needed to wear to survive. I was reminded of a feeling I'd had in childhood, a memory of standing in our apple orchard, looking out over the landscape, when



Beth Collier, founder of Wild in the City

in the background home life wasn't particularly happy, and thinking, At least I have this. I had the natural world as a way of feeling emotionally supported, as a way of feeling like I belonged. I thought then, where is the equivalent safe place for this boy? He was the impetus for my taking other children in similar situations out into nature, and suddenly these young people who had been labelled as naughty or disruptive became observant, creative and adventurous instead. That's when I made the transition to offering all my clients the option for working together in nature. I theorised a modality of practice called Nature Allied Psychotherapy, and a key concept of this is that if we have a secure attachment to nature then we have a secure base. This allows us to feel safe and confident enough to go and explore the world and human relationships, knowing nature will always be there to hold us.

How did Wild in the City come into being?

Wild in the City is underpinned by the same philosophy as Nature

Allied Psychotherapy. But through our work we want to normalise a relationship with nature, rather than label it as a specialised therapy. We want everyone to know that a walk in an open space will soothe and restore them. I think our collective experience in this pandemic has really helped to awaken people to this if they didn't know it already. We took a national survey last year to look at the role of nature during the first lockdown and its impact on wellbeing, and most respondents said it has been central to their way of coping with the uncertainty and confinement they've been experiencing.

Our wider aim is to reinstate the oral tradition of learning about nature and the natural world. This is applicable to everyone in the UK but particularly to people of colour. In countries of heritage, we tend to be very closely connected to nature, learning about it from our elders. But in the west people of colour can be made to feel unwelcome, unsafe or at the least somehow unexpected in natural spaces and as we don't seek out experiences that make us

uncomfortable or vulnerable, it becomes a cycle of divestment. On migration elders often didn't have knowledge about nature in the UK to pass on and so the oral tradition was disrupted. That's why at Wild in the City we focus on training people of colour to be leaders in nature, who can then inspire others, and become elders teaching and passing on an oral tradition within families and communities.

You must have seen huge amount of interest in your organisation after the events of 2020.

Yes, we've seen a new level of interest in our work, particularly in the consultancy we offer on issues of race, health and nature. But that has actually been quite frustrating and undermining, because we haven't been able to secure the funding to broaden our reach or produce the

research we knew was necessary before this point. Both of our specialisms are in demand and we haven't been able to respond as fully as I would have wished.

It's not comfortable for me as director to see failure, but from my perspective we should have far greater capacity as an organisation by now. I suspended writing work and other research for several years in order to find the funding to expand, and while I have to consider what else I could have done, our lack of capacity to deal with the current level of interest exposes a very real wider, systemic problem. 2020 crystalised the disparities of access to third-sector funding – 65% of BAME charity organisations operate with incomes of less than £10,000. There's a huge discrepancy between the level at which are asked to consult by major environmental organisations and our inability to



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attract funds. How can we be good enough to be asked to provide consultancy at that level, yet not good enough to fund appropriately? When it comes to our consultancy, we find our expertise is minimised – instead of being approached with a brief, timeline and a budget to fund a proper piece of consultancy, we're asked for 'a chat and a cup of tea'. It seems if we want to participate in the environmental field, there's an expectation we should do so for free.

I've been speaking about racism in this field for many years, and but not because I've chosen to or wanted to. It is a reality for me. I'd much rather be talking about oak trees or butterflies but before I can do that, I have to face not only overt racism (for instance, being the only Black woman on a bushcraft course with a group of white men, the leadership of an outdoor membership body, who were loudly lamenting political

correctness and expressing a desire to be able to be racist and sexist), but also the entrenched perception that Black people's knowledge has less depth and importance and is worth less. The events of 2020 have at least made the systemic racism within the environmental field less deniable.

What's does a Wild in the City course involve?

We offer a wide mixture of courses. For example, there's our Nature Connectors programme, which is designed to introduce people to local habitats, looking at the wildlife that lives there, the synergy between different ecological systems. The programmes are often based on a hike, but also on practical knowledge – how we look after ourselves, what we can eat, practical skills like lighting a fire, wild cooking, foraging, making utensils from natural materials.

And we build in that reflective time around the fire, talking about how it feels to be in that space. Most of what we offer is about relationships, conversation, sharing memories, sharing cultural traditions connected to nature. And also addressing the loss and trauma in both being and having come to be disconnected from the natural world. For some people, it's the first time they've put those feelings into words.

The youngest participant we've had on the Nature Connectors programme was around 20 years old, the oldest nearly 70 – the intergeneration conversation that develops is one of the loveliest aspects of what we do. One of the things I love about this work is the sense of community that develops. Out in nature, we need each other more – in a modern home it takes just one person to flick a switch for light, to boil a kettle, but outside around a fire we need to work together. That has an impact on how we talk to each other, how we co-operate, and that level of connection comes, as we say, 'deeper, sooner'. You might leave the course not knowing someone's surname, but you have a real sense of who they are.

'Deeper, sooner' is brilliant – it sounds similar to the sort of connections that can happen in a Shared Reading group at The Reader. It feels like the literature in these groups is performing a similar function, as a kind of medium, to the part played by nature in a Wild in the City programme.

It sounds similar, and in a similar way what you do could be labelled

as therapy. We try to resist that, at Wild in the City, because as I've said we want to normalise this level of connection between people.

Anyone reading this should check out wildinthecity.org.uk to learn more about the full range of what you do, but I was really struck by one sentence on your website, about using the skills learned on the courses you offer to 'reflect on what it means to live rather than survive'. Could you say more about that?

Think of our state of being when we live in an inner city – the pollution, the noise, the frenetic energy, the perfunctory nature of most interactions, the competitive culture. These stresses have an impact on the way we behave and on our nervous systems. Our bodies can respond to these stimuli as if they are a potential threat and that puts us into 'fight or flight' mode. If we live with this high level of stress and adrenaline in our systems for a long time, it becomes both normal but also a kind of trauma – something we are surviving. We park our emotions, which is common in a survival state, and start to feel detached and dissociated from everything around us, including our own emotional experience.

Now think of our state of being in an open, green space – walking in open land or in a woodland, sitting round a fire. It's more conducive to reflection and conversation, to feeling calmer, feeling a sense of belonging, awaking parts of our brain that deal with empathy and love. This is all more conducive to living.

What are your aims for the next few years?

We want to build capacity and expand our Nature Guide programme, through which we train people of colour as leaders in nature, teaching a range of skills to enable them to facilitate other people in nature. We want to expand this and all our regular programmes to have a national presence in the next three to five years.

I'm writing a book about Nature Allied Psychotherapy and chapters on race and the environmental field. When I was about eight or nine, I was in our orchard watching a pair of birds flying backwards and forwards from their nest in search of food. I was watching them so intently, it felt it a bit like I was in a trance, and I knew afterwards I had learned something that I couldn't put into words – a direct, heartfelt understanding.

This kind of knowledge is available to everyone, but it means slowing down, creating that space to live, connecting with ourselves and with something deeper.

It's urgent to get this knowledge out there because generations are missing out. If Black adults don't feel safe or at home within typically white middle class environmental organisations why would we encourage Black young people and children to be exposed to this discomfort? We need to increase the number of Black professionals and leaders first. I would like to see families and communities remembering there was a time when we didn't learn about nature from an organisation, we learned about it at home.



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