

Getting Away?

GO

ONCE UPON A TIME, kids who had never heard the word “ecology” shared their swimming hole with bullfrogs, dug up a pail full of nightcrawlers for an afternoon of fishing and picked peaches right off the tree. The symbiotic connection between humankind and planet earth was unmistakable. These days, most Americans live in “concrete jungles,” and while environmentalism has become a trend, people actually seem to be spending less and less time in the natural environment.

Theme parks and other commercial complexes offering thrills and excitement will always be popular getaway spots for families in search of fun. But even Disney recently realized the lack of “green” in America’s recreation palette and, in 1998, created Animal Kingdom, a nature-oriented theme park complete with an imported African savanna that will

Green!

By Margaret Winchell Miller

“Going green” translates as nature travel to those diminishing places where nature is unfettered—where you can see and smell and feel original wilderness

when anyone’s appetite for “the real thing.”

“The real thing” is the living part of planet earth — the forests, wetlands, prairies, grasslands and oceans, plus the profusion of flora and fauna that flourish there. Since we depend on the earth for survival, and since it’s our obligation to keep the air, water and land clean for future generations, it makes sense to spend a little time getting to know these fragile ecosystems, learning what makes them tick and doing what we can to help them endure. “Going green” means going where nature is unfettered — where you can see and smell and feel the wilderness first-hand.

Choosing a destination

“Ecotourism,” or travel with an emphasis on the natural environment, is an activity for all age groups. Even the planning stages of a trip can be part of the learning experience. Unfold a map of the state, the country or the world and let family members mark places that appeal to them. Talk with your children about what they’d like to see and do — whether it’s wildlife viewing, fishing, swimming with dolphins, hiking, horseback riding, caving, rock climbing or bird watching — and allow those ideas to generate others. Then match your interests with destinations that of-

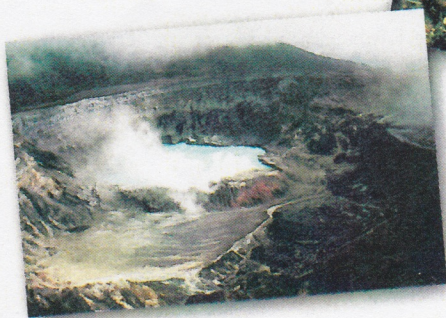
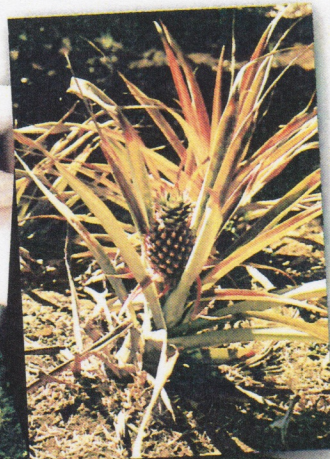
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fer what you're looking for. Forests, prairies and grasslands, oceans, coasts and wetlands are all teeming with life; wilderness areas of one type or another can be found in each of the 50 states.

Take into account the season of year you're free to travel and how far you're willing to roam. Consider visiting your favorite ski resort in early summer, when woodland animals are more visible and plant life abounds. Lakes and wetlands may seem a natural choice for summer vacation, but they offer unexpected surprises in the fall, when leaves change color, or the spring, when new life emerges.

Keeping a green environment for the future is a powerful dining-room conversation that pushes us to libraries



Computers make it easier than ever to select a vacation spot. Have some fun by logging onto the National Park Service home page (see sidebar) and taking advantage of their "search" feature. Type in the combined attributes you're looking for, whether it's "kayak," "salmon" or "wildflower." Then sit back and survey your options. Many National Parks offer a variety of activities in secure, protected environments. For instance, St. Croix Falls National Scenic Riverway, in Wisconsin, is open during the winter months for cross-country skiing and snow shoeing. Buck Island Reef National Monument in the Virgin Islands offers divers and snorkelers a unique underwater trail. Some parks also provide ranger-guided programs dealing with eco-systems, wildlife, history and resource management. New England foliage tours, whale-watching excursions in Massachusetts, and butterfly observation at Congaree Swamp National Monument in South Carolina are other off-beat options.

Our family's story

Over the years, my two sons and I have visited some extraordinary spots: the foot of Mount Rushmore, the streets of Colonial Williamsburg, San Francisco, EPCOT and beyond. But last year we were ready for something more untamed, and in the spring, when my eighth grader reported that Central America was the focus in his social studies class, we agreed that the best way to learn about a country was to pay a visit. We decided on a long weekend in San Juan, Costa Rica; direct

Native plants, coffee plantations, tarantulas, waterfalls and volcanos were some of the sights awaiting the author's family in Costa Rica

flights from Houston cost less than we would have spent traveling to Hawaii. The boys applied for passports and brushed up on their Spanish in preparation for their first trip out of the United States.

The highlight of our stay in Costa Rica was a whirlwind, dawn-to-dusk tour of the most unspoiled natural sites on the western coast. Our van pulled away from the hotel at 6 a.m., sweeping around hairpin turns on the way to a mountain inn where we enjoyed a traditional breakfast of melon, *gallo pinto* (black beans and rice) and scrambled eggs. Farther down the road, we toured Café Britt, a working coffee farm, where our guide explained the effect of altitude and rainfall on the quality of

stimulator of thought and and the Internet

the beans. Next, we trekked around the rim of Poas Volcano, one of the world's largest active craters, and gazed down into its turquoise sulfur lagoon. At the fourth site, a hummingbird sanctuary, my 10-year-old held a native tarantula as big as a slice of bread while a dozen species of hummingbirds sipped nectar from feeders just steps away. After lunch at Selva Verde Rainforest Lodge, the boys and I boarded a one-of-a-kind air tram, suspended just over the canopy of a virgin rainforest, for a 90-minute ride. The tropical birds, bromeliads, shimmering blue butterflies and wild orchids we spotted looked almost too exquisite to be real. At the end of the ride, a parade of leafcutter ants bearing scraps of foliage led us back to civilization on a trail through the misty, unlit woods.

Finally, we boarded a boat for a lazy excursion down the Sarapiquí River, where native children splashed in the water and picnicked along its muddy edge. The pilot used a pocket mirror like a flashlight to identify bats, sloths and howler monkeys in the sprawling trees along the riverbank. Nearby, a three-foot iguana sunned itself on a log. The boys were captivated, as was I. It was a time of simplicity and camaraderie in a place that appeared to be much the same as it was thousands of years ago. Our van delivered us back to the hotel at sunset, where we reviewed the day's adventures over plates of fried plantains and snapper fresh from the Pacific.

Before-you-go homework

Concepts like pollution, deforestation, soil erosion, composting and the food chain may seem too complex for children, but there are ways to start discussions and initiate interest, making nature travel

Ideas a Click Away



THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
www.nps.gov

This outstanding web site features detailed regional maps, articles describing scenic riverways and lesser-known national parks, as well as general information on fees and reservations. You can also obtain links to the home pages of all National Parks and download park maps.



GREAT OUTDOOR RECREATION
www.gorp.com

Log onto GORP for great trip ideas, articles, books and hundreds of places to hike, fish, camp and explore the ecosystem.



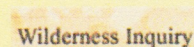
THE GREEN TRAVEL NETWORK
www.greentravel.com

Green Travel boasts "a commitment to minimizing travel's impact on the environment and maximizing benefits for the local community." Find unusual ideas for thousands of getaways in more than 100 countries around the world and close to home.



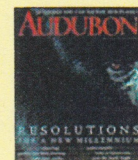
SIERRA CLUB
www.sierraclub.org

To fulfill this organization's mission to "explore, enjoy and protect" the wild places of the earth, Sierra Club sponsors more than 300 national trips and outings each year. Local chapters sponsor day hikes, bird watching trips and conservation-oriented walks.



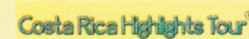
WILDERNESS INQUIRY
www.wildernessinquiry.org

This unique non-profit organization provides affordable outdoor adventures for people with physical, sensory and cognitive limitations as well as able-bodied travelers. Groups often include a diversity of ages, backgrounds and abilities. For a list of programs call 1-800-728-0719.



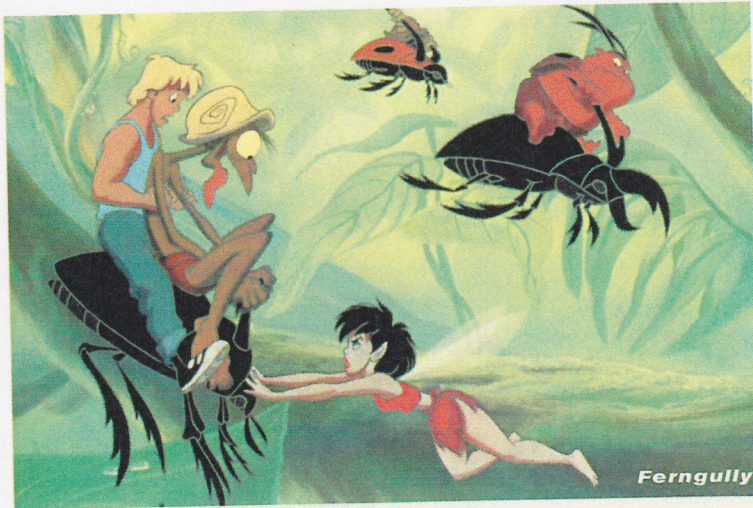
AUDUBON SOCIETY OF AMERICA
www.audubon.org

Family trips, photography workshops, youth and adult summer camps, and other excursions are detailed on this web site. For a catalog of information about programs, write Audubon Ecology Camps and Workshops, 613 Riversville Road, Greenwich, Connecticut, 06831.



COSTA RICA HIGHLIGHTS TOUR
www.ecoscapetours.com

Rates and additional information about this 11-hour tour are available here.



Worth a Thousand Words

Check out these videos for wholesome family entertainment that focuses on important ecology-related issues and are bound to inspire discussion.

Free Willy – A young boy befriends a 7000-pound whale in the Pacific Northwest and helps it find the way home

Ferngully – The Last Rainforest – Magic sprite shrinks a human lumberjack to show him the ecological damage he's causing in this colorful, lavishly animated musical fantasy with an environmental message

The River and **Places In The Heart** – Americana-rich dramas about families fighting to save their farms from land developers

Pelican Brief – Toxic waste pollutes water supply in urban community

Fly Away Home – Orphaned flock of Canadian geese are taught to fly by a young girl

Did you know?

Ernst Haeckel, a German biologist, coined the word "ecology" more than 100 years ago. It refers to the study of the relationship among organisms and the environments in which they live. Haeckel based the original term "oecology" on the Greek word "oikos," meaning "household," which is also the origin of the word "economy." He saw the living world as a community in which each species has a role to play in the global economy.


Almost every area offers interesting terrain that you could scout out to hike and then help to keep green.

more interesting for everyone. You can begin by asking questions in the car, at dinner, while taking a walk, or whenever it seems appropriate: Why does bottled water taste better than the water that comes out of the faucet? What would happen if there were no frogs in the world? What if we cut down all the trees? Why do you think carnations cost less than orchids? Where do the garbage collectors take our trash? If bugs are useful, why do we kill them? The answers your children come up with, as well as the questions that follow, may surprise you and lead to conversations that

impact the way your family understands and manages the environment. Public libraries have plenty of magazines, books and videos about the plants and wildlife in every corner of the world. Be sure to peruse the kids' section for books on conservation and ecology, too. Many include hands-on experiments that explain principles in simple terms kids can understand.

Closer to home

If plane travel is prohibitive, time is limited or some family members aren't yet old enough to appreciate the wonders of nature travel, you'll find plenty to see and do in your own "backyard." Every city, county or neighborhood offers interesting terrain whose care and conservation is vital to the life of the community. Scout out a river, pond, marsh, bay, lake or bayou and obtain permission to hike its perimeter. Many local groups offer day trips down rivers and bayous, led by expert guides. Beach and bayou clean-up projects are sponsored from coast to coast; volunteers help keep the seashore and waterfronts clean and the wildlife safe from harmful plastics, trash and other non-biodegradable debris that clutter the habitat. On a smaller scale, plan an afternoon outing to a farm stand or natural food store. Seize the opportunity to talk about where various foods are grown, what it means when vegetables are "in season," "out of season" or "organic," why some fruits and flowers cost more than others, why foods cost less when you buy them "in bulk," the environmental impact of a paper bag versus a plastic one, or why some shoppers bring their own cloth sacks from home.

It's not coincidental that futuristic films depict human beings in cool, sterile environments with not so much as a blade of grass on the streamlined horizon. The high technology that has simplified our lives could mean even brief encounters with the natural world become a thing of the past. Make the most of your travel time by breaking out of the concrete jungle. Go green for a change. Your children — and the planet — will thank you. 

A freelance writer based in Houston, Texas, Margaret Winchell Miller is currently coordinating her next getaway—a safari in Nairobi, Kenya, where she and her fiancé will spend their honeymoon.