

Resources for young leaders

The five pathways to nature connectedness



You will learn

The five pathways

What are the five pathways to nature connectedness?

Incorporating the pathways into your session

How can you put the pathways into practice?

The five pathways to nature connectedness

We are part of nature. As humans, we have a special relationship with the natural world: our actions affect the health of our planet, and nature is really important for our wellbeing too.

Connecting with nature can make us feel good, give us the chance to exercise, and let us breathe fresher air.

When we talk about connecting with nature, it's not just about being outdoors – it's about how you engage with nature while you're there. What you do is more important than how long you spend doing it. It's a bit like being in a hospital – it's not the fact that someone's spending time there that makes them better, it's the activities that happen and the things they do during that time.

When we look at key mental wellbeing outcomes, connecting with nature brings greater benefits than just being in contact with it. In fact, studies found that the time people spent in nature wasn't significant. The sense of connection and feeling part of nature were more important.

When the University of Derby did some research, they came up with ways that people can build a better relationship with nature – a relationship that helps themselves and the planet. They suggest [five ways to be closer to nature](#) and improve wellbeing:

1. Sensory **contact** with the natural world.
2. Taking time to appreciate the **beauty** of nature.
3. Thinking about the **meaning** and signs of nature.
4. Finding an **emotional** bond with, and love for, nature.
5. Showing **compassion** and care for nature.

When you're introducing this topic to others, you could start by asking everyone to think about why nature is important to the planet and to themselves. You could:

- Host a group discussion outdoors, maybe around a campfire or in a sunny, grassy area.
- Create a graffiti wall. Encourage people to write or draw their ideas on big pieces of paper, a whiteboard, or sticky notes stuck on a wall.
- Make paper planes and write ideas on them. Encourage everyone to throw their paper plane to someone else so they can read out the idea.

People might suggest that nature is important because being outside can improve people's wellbeing or encourage them to be more active. Others might talk about how biodiversity keeps our planet healthy.

Next, encourage everyone to think about why people might be less connected to nature these days. People might mention the industrial and technological revolutions that have enabled more jobs or tasks to be done remotely or by machinery. They might also think about how technology means there's lots of competition for people's attention, or how there are now more entertainment options available indoors. People spend time inside in their own homes (with televisions, laptops, phones, or books) and in local spaces (like shopping centres, cinemas, or community centres).

How can I put the pathways into practice?

The pathways to nature connectedness are about people noticing and appreciating nature, recognising how important it is, and caring for it.

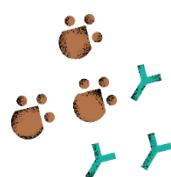
You can explore each of the five pathways (contact, beauty, meaning, emotion, and compassion) by doing the following:

1. Contact: use your senses to tune into the sights, smells, sounds, tastes, and textures of nature.
2. Emotion: feel joy, wonder, and calm when interacting with the natural world.
3. Beauty: use the art and music of nature to inspire creativity and celebrate what nature means to you.
4. Meaning: notice how nature appears in songs and stories, poems, and art, and celebrate the mystery, signs, and cycles of nature.
5. Compassion: take action to look after the natural world.

You could explain the five pathways by playing a matching game. Write the names of each pathway and their definitions on different pieces of paper hidden around a space; teams can then work together to find the pieces and match them up. You could change things up by swapping definitions for actions you could take, for example, writing 'go on a litter pick' instead of 'take action to look after the natural world'. You could also play your own versions of charades, get people to draw the names of the pathways for others to guess, or ask people to explain each pathway without using certain key words.

We've included some ideas below, which you can use to help everyone put each pathway into practice.

You can use these ideas when you're planning and running outdoor sessions.



Contact

When you're outdoors, encourage everyone to use all their senses – what can they see, hear, smell, feel and taste?

- Do trees or plants have a smell? What do they smell like?
- Are there things that they can touch? Make sure it's safe to do so and won't cause any harm.
- What do things feel like? Are they soft, hard, smooth, or prickly? Different things have different textures. Can people feel the difference between bark on a tree, a smooth blade of grass, and a cool pebble?

Get everyone to pause what they're doing for a minute, and just take in what's around them. They may want to close their eyes to help them tune into their other senses.

- Can they hear any birds singing?
- Can they feel any breeze on their skin?

You might not be able to taste things, unless you've got an adult who knows their stuff with foraging who can identify safe things to eat, like blackberries and wild garlic. Even if you don't have a foraging expert, you could try to help everyone to tune into this sense in other, safe ways.

- Can they taste the air outdoors, or does it have no taste?
- Does the air feel different to breathe?

Make it accessible:

- If you anyone in your group can't use (or has difficulty using) any of their senses, for example, if they have hearing loss or sight loss, think about how you can make sure they're included and comfortable. How do they experience nature?
- Some people might not be comfortable touching or smelling new or different things, and that's OK. Everyone can go at their own pace – they don't have to do anything they're not comfortable with



Beauty

Encourage everyone to take their time when they're spotting and identifying nature. Can they notice different colours and shapes? Can they spot any patterns? People could notice the pattern of veins on a leaf or the different colours on an insect, for example.

Photos can be a great way to capture the beauty of nature. The group could take some photos while they're exploring. They could try to capture something from a new angle, or do some close-up photography that brings out hidden details.

Emotion

Talk about what it feels like being outdoors in nature. Everyone will be different, but it might make them feel joy, calm, wonder, or awe. How does it affect people's energy levels?

- How did people feel before going outside? How do they feel now? Did they notice a change?
- Ask people to imagine a calm, wonderful, or awe-inspiring place – was it somewhere in nature?
- What does it feel like to watch wildlife? Did people enjoy watching anything in particular? Do some plants and animals bring more joy than others?

Talk about how everyone feels about damage to the environment.

- How do people feel when they see litter or learn about ways humans are damaging the planet?
- What does it feel like to take action to help?



Meaning

Talk about what nature means to everyone.

Do they have a favourite place or a favourite view? Does anyone have a favourite memory of time they've spent in nature? If people haven't spent much time in nature before, they may be making their favourite memory right now!

Think of a famous painting or poem – is it about nature?

Talk about the seasons when you're doing your activities.

What season is it now? Look around – what clues does nature give people?

Compassion

How people can care for the natural world and take action to help nature.

- Make sure everyone is involved with your project and understands what they're doing and why.
- Talk about how a big part of being a Scout is being kind and helpful – this goes for the planet as well as people.
- When you've finished the programme, help everyone to think about the difference they've made. How they can continue to care for nature?

