

Nature Education in Parks

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Nature Education in parks is a response which has developed in recent years to a need for a type of recreation which would satisfy the mental and aesthetic demands as well as the physical. This movement is a timely one dovetailing into many of today's social problems such as (1) leisure time, (2) enrichment of life, (3) adult education, and (4) conservation.

Because of the greater amount of leisure time, the character as well as the number of people attending parks has changed. A few years ago people sought the out-of-doors on days of leisure because there they could find rest physically and mentally. That is no longer true; today the trend is toward activity. With the vastly increasing numbers using our parks it is necessary that they learn the reasons for conservation. This is a problem of the nation concerning which all citizens should be informed.

In 1920 a few people sensed the need and a foundation was laid when Harold C. Bryant and Loy Holmes Miller conducted field trips in Yosemite National Park. Naturalist work in the national parks increased very rapidly and is now well organized as the Branch of Research and Education in Washington, D. C. under the National Park Service.

A study of nature education being carried on in state parks shows that very little is being done under the auspices of the states. A small amount has been done in some Iowa parks by the Iowa State College at Ames through the cooperation of the State Board of Conservation. It was my privilege to do some of this work in the summer of 1935.

Guided trips and nature trails are the principal methods being used in state, municipal and other small parks. My work dealt principally with the nature trail. This method was first successfully employed by W. P. Alexander of the Buffalo Society of Natural History in the Allegany State Park in New York, and later crystallized by Dr. Lutz, Curator of Insect Life of the American Museum of Natural Science. Several projects have received their inspiration from Bear Mountain, New York, where the trails and trailside museum now represents the most extensive nature guide service outside the national parks.

In the work done in the Iowa State Parks we attempted to find if the people visiting the parks were interested in a labeled nature trail and what types of labels were educational.

Temporary trails were laid out using commercial markers requiring 4 x 6 and 8½ x 11 placards and varying from 18 to 40 inches in height. A number of objects of interest were selected and suitable placards prepared. These placards were made to vary as much as possible, but in order to evaluate the interest shown by the people and the educational value they were considered to be of four types.

1. Those contrasting or comparing two plants, as "Virginia Creeper. This plant is often mistaken for poison ivy. It always has five leaflets while poison ivy always has three. Look for poison ivy farther along this trail" (A drawing of a leaf of each followed.)

2. Those naming and describing the plant and giving its botanical relationship, as "Horse Mint. The flowers of this plant are very striking along roadsides. Like other mints this plant has a distinctive odor and a square stem."

3. Those telling the use of a plant, as "Basswood or Linden. This is a tree whose wood is quite valuable. It is soft, light, tough, and long fibered though not durable. It is highly prized for paper pulp, woodenware and excelsior."

4. Those containing a picture, as "Do you know that most of our grasses have beautiful flowers? This is a picture of our common Kentucky Blue Grass magnified fifty times." (This was placed where Kentucky Blue Grass was growing.)

By counting the number of people who passed over the trail and the number who read the markers it was found that over sixty per cent of the people read all of the labels and an additional twenty per cent read the majority of them.

Considering the amount of time a visitor spent as a criterion, people were most interested in a marker containing a picture. Next in interest and ranking near the first were those contrasting or comparing two plants. Some labels which might not appeal to one person might have a great appeal to another, and a nature trail should have some appeal to every person who might be found on its path. On a very mossy bank the marker was placed containing the question, "How many kinds of moss can you find here?". Of the three hundred and seventy people who read the marker only about thirty made an attempt to answer it. Five people were observed to sit down and remain for over ten minutes to study the mosses. Was it worthwhile to place this marker here for those five people?

Some of the conclusions of this study are:

1. At least eighty per cent of all the people who go on the trails in Iowa parks are interested in the nature trail.
2. A label containing a picture or contrasting two objects holds the interest for the longest period of time.
3. A label or series of labels consuming more than a minute are valuable to one-third of the visitors.
4. Labels giving new facts concerning some familiar object or bringing some new object to people's attention have the greatest instructional value.
5. Scientific names, or technical terms should not be used.

In this time of mental stress, we who know the inspirational and aesthetic value of the out-of-doors should encourage the development of nature education in our state and municipal parks, for there are those who will never see the national parks. Arno B. Cammerer, Director of the National Park Service, says: "He who has drunk deeply of the cup of pleasure the park has to offer, has found it an exalted spiritual adventure, the memory of which will enrich all his days. To such a one new fields of thought have been opened. . . . So he goes home to study more about the particular subject which has appealed to him. The libraries yield books on the subject, museums offer supplementary material, and a new avocation is born. We need no longer worry about the worthwhile use of that person's spare time."