



Best Practices in Europe

Introduction

It is a valuable source of information on biology and ecology available to researchers or anyone else who sets foot inside it. A perpetual source of knowledge about nature and about ourselves. And a place we can experience in every sense of the word, immersed in our own emotions. It is nature in the raw: the wilderness.

Its educational potential has been neglected. The public barely knows where to find virgin nature, or how to move in it and enjoy it. And this is a great pity. The wilderness has fundamental significance not just for itself, but for each of us and for the sustainable development of our planet. Honestly-have you ever seen an attempt at systematic education about our natural history? At the primary school level? Or the secondary?

A number of institutions have been established of late to try to do something about this situation. They include the institutions that administer natural reserves, along with information centres and NGOs that offer wilderness experiences to children and other age groups. Informal learning about outdoor activities helps adults to relax and shake

off work related stress, and a number of studies have shown that being in the outdoors replenishes our spiritual well-being and helps us lead more satisfying lives.

The way Europe conceptualizes wilderness has undergone significant change over the past 15 years. A great milestone was achieved with the adoption of the European Parliament Resolution on Wilderness in February 2009. This resolution formed the basis for the work of four ecological organizations which, thanks to the ERASMUS + EU program, began to target wilderness education and the sharing of experience directly in the wild.

This guidebook offers a cross-section of wilderness education programs that ranges from one-day hikes to week-long intensive stays to multiyear systematic training. We have chosen the best of well tested programs with years of history that have enjoyed great interest from the public. These programs offer a number of paths to the wilderness: tourist programs, natural history excursions, survival courses, and deep ecology meetings with a spiritual component. We believe they will inspire you.

About us

Hnutí DUHA (Czech Republic) has been promoting a healthy environment for living, the diversity of plant life and species, and a smart economy for more than twenty-five years. We move politicians and authorities, negotiate with companies, help households and offer participation in several volunteer programs. www.hnutiduha.cz

Mountain Wilderness (France) has been promoting a global approach to mountainous regions for twenty years. The organization's key objective is to maintain the natural environment and to bring about social justice and a locally-based economy. www.mountainwilderness.fr

Lesoochranárske zoskupenie VLK (Slovakia) has been striving to preserve natural forests and their wild character in Slovakia and throughout Central and Eastern Europe since 1993. It also focuses on protecting large predators and runs its own publishing house. www.wolf.sk

European Wilderness Society (Austria) identifies, designates, manages and promotes Europe's last wilderness areas, old-growth forests and wild rivers as part of the European Wilderness Preservation System. www.wilderness-society.org

Inside the Polar Circle with Siberian Huskies

(Jokkmokkguiderna, Sweden)



Many Europeans find the northern lands uniquely charming and are attracted by unusual experiences. They have the opportunity to satisfy their desires near the village of Jokkmokk, Sweden in a number of programs offered by the small company Jokkmokkguiderna. Most popular are trips of several hours to the surrounding area via dogsled, but there are also single-day and two-day trips. For the especially courageous, there are excursions of four, eight, and even ten days. These trips provide participants with the opportunity to come in personal touch with the beauty of true European wilderness.

Participants experience an authentic stay in the wilderness, helping out with the necessary common chores:

cooking over an open fire, feeding the dogs, loading the sledge, cutting wood. They learn how to control their own individual dogsled team and learn about husky mentality. With a bit of luck, they will view a one-of-a-kind attraction: the aurora borealis. All participants, in groups no larger than five people, take an active part in the trip.

An Opportunity to Know the Beauty of Sarek National Park

In search of worthwhile experiences, expeditions head to Sarek National Park in Lapland, in the north of Sweden. The area was declared a national park in 1909-1910 and thus ranks among the oldest national parks in Europe. With 1970 km² it is one of the largest national parks and is a key attraction for hikers and climbers alike. Although there are eight peaks higher than 2,000 m, no tourist centres are located in this mountainous area, which strives to maintain its wild, almost virgin character.

The expeditions are organized by Matti Holmgren and Stina Svensson who live in Jokkmokk throughout the year. The village is approximately 130 km outside the park, located to the north of the polar circle. They keep their 40 Siberian Huskies and two Border Collies there.





In summer months they prepare trips around the Sarek National Park using kayaks and canoes. In winter they organize adventurous dogsled expeditions. They look after their dogs with care and love; they are their fellows and friends. The dogs love their “work” and Matti and Stina diligently and patiently train them. All the dogs in the pack are very friendly, calm and used to working under extreme conditions.

Matti and Stina are the only guides in Jokkmokkguiderna. Matti studied ecology and later economics and law. Dogsledding and life in the forest and in the mountains are his life’s passions. Stina has loved caring for animals since she was a little girl. After she met Matti, she started to focus on Huskies. Matti and Stina manage Jokkmokkguiderna with love and passion. As Stina says: “We are a small company, just Matti and me. We have a very personal approach not only to our dogs but also to our customers. We do not do business. We do not do this for money. We do this to survive and to lead a good life.

Apparently, Matti and Stina manage their company well. This is testified to not only by satisfied customers from around the world, but also by the many awards Jokkmokkguiderna has received. In 2003, they obtained certification to provide ecotourism services. Some of their journeys have been awarded the “Nature’s Best” certificate.

“Jokkmokkguiderna is not only one of the best ecotourism organizers in northern Sweden, with globally unique products that include dog sledding, hiking and kayaking. It’s also a company that inspires and works with others to develop and demonstrate the many possibilities of the World Heritage Laponia.”

Grand Travel Award 2008

The approach and work done by Jokkmokkguiderna lets you see what nature and the wilderness in particular offer us. If you respect the wilderness, you will learn something new and unforgettable every day.

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Wilderness Walks

(DUHA, Friends of the Earth, Czech Republic;
Šumava National Park, Czech Republic)

“Wilderness Walks” are traditional annual walks into the wilderness of Šumava National Park. Only a limited number of people can take part in these single-day and multi-day trips, to make sure the area’s natural inhabitants are not disturbed. Specially trained guides lead visitor groups through the most precious areas of the national park, leading the way off the marked tourist paths and entirely off paved roads, through demanding terrain to places the public cannot go without a special permit. Adventure trips aimed at getting to know the Šumava countryside are organized by different entities: commercial travel agents, ecology-focused nonprofits, and the national park administration itself.

Why ‘Wilderness Walks’?

Šumava National Park is in a somewhat paradoxical situation. Approximately one-quarter of the national park is wilderness. In the context of the Czech Republic, the area is extensive and unique. No timber can be cut. The environs are subject only to natural processes; nature is untamed, with almost no interference from humans. Paradoxically, though, visitors to the national park encounter real wilderness only within limits. In most cases, the marked paths lead along paved asphalt roads that have been in place since before the area was a national park, when it ran alongside the “Iron Curtain”. At many

locations, people cannot leave these marked trails, because the wilderness that surrounds them is at the Zone 1 Protection level. At other spots, the terrain is hard to access, and tough to walk and get oriented in.

The Wilderness Walks project offers an elegant solution. A small group of motivated visitors set out into the natural terrain to experience the romantic atmosphere of walking through raw nature. Experienced guides who are also experts in the local environment lead them over exacting terrain to show them the beauty of the Šumava countryside and explain the underlying principles of the national park. The restricted number of visitors in the individual groups and limits on the number of walks taken in a single season work to ensure that the landscape, which is sensitive to excessive activity and trampling, will not be disturbed. Only under these conditions can the guides obtain the special permits needed to walk the precious Zone 1 areas of the national park. This makes Wilderness Walks an exclusive, unforgettable experience.

Wilderness Walks offer not only a powerful experience of a quiet and a humbling walk through the kingdom of nature. They also offer the opportunity to come in contact with phenomena unknown to regular production forests. Walk participants will realise that nature possesses the power to renew itself without human interference or care, and will come to know the value in





understanding these processes. They will see that death is an inseparable part of life, even on a mass scale. A large number of spruce trees, perhaps the entire ‘tree floor’ may die off when attacked by spruce bark beetle. But new life ensues immediately in the form of a new generation of spruce: natural regeneration is at work. There is something beautiful and admirable about this cycle. Participants get the opportunity to change their relationship to nature and at the same time, to understand why it makes sense to protect these areas and what human-related threats must be faced.

Who organizes these trips to wilderness?

The national park administration is the key entity that organizes wilderness walks. In 2015, it prepared single-day guided tours to ten areas of Šumava National Park along nineteen varied routes. It also organized two-day hiking trips around both the Czech section of Šumava and its German counterpart, the Bavarian Forest. Specially trained locals with personal ties to the location served as experienced guides through these valuable areas.

Traditionally, DUHA – Friends of the Earth, an ecological organization, also organizes these excursions. In 2016, DUHA is organizing the seventeenth run of a four-day excursion to a number of unique locations in the national parks on both sides of the border. These four-day excursions are demanding in terms of participants’ physical fitness and provide room for learning and getting in deeper touch with nature. For those not up to four-day hikes, DUHA organizes three shorter-single day or weekend-excursions. The guides are members of DUHA who have focused on environmental protection within Šumava National Park over the long term, or specially trained Šumava enthusiasts.

Wilderness Walk routes intentionally include sections that are completely off the marked trails, where participants must hike demanding terrain, climb rocks, wade through brooks, and walk barefoot in wetlands—along with more comfortable stretches down paved paths. This is an entirely new experience for the participants who, when it’s all over, find they are not exhausted by a whole-day physical strain. Information is provided continuously: on the ‘experience’ sections of the trail, not much information is provided; on the paved path, more information is shared.





Each of the guides knows the local terrain and routes well and knows the natural history and ecological issues that concern Šumava National Park. All get specialized training and have proven abilities to guide. Guides can explain specialized issues without getting caught up in too much irrelevant detail. The core of the information turns on the principle of spontaneous development and its place in the protection of the environment; the impact of the spruce bark beetle is seen in the broader context. The core conflict about environmental protection in the park is explained. Guides must also serve as mediators of the genius loci and the deep experience related to it. They make excellent use of excerpts from literature and utilize special experience trails like the Soul Trail in Bavarian Forest National Park.

People of diverse interests and professions focused on environmental protection set out on these excursions. They are of all ages and share a love of experiencing nature. This project traditionally resonates powerfully with people from large cities.

What attracts people to these excursions?

Living in the outdoors, coming to know the Central European wilderness and issues related to the spruce bark beetle are all topics of some significance. Accordingly, they have played a role in promoting wilderness excursions. The fact that participants get to areas subject to the greatest degree of protection and off the marked trails is also a big draw.

Sample DUHA invitation to a wilderness excursion:

Excursion across the Šumava Plains: Modravské Slatě, Březník and Ptačí Potok

Together we set out for the vast, mysterious Šumava peatlands, especially the usually inaccessible Rokytecká Slatě. We follow the Roklanský Potok brook, the king of the local moors. On the second day, we walk to the Březník cabin and then to a location where four years ago hundreds of people protected precious forests from illegal tree felling. We commemorate what happened there. Along the way, we learn about various ways of looking after forests and leaving the landscape alone so that it may evolve spontaneously. We see forests in various phases of decay after being attacked by the spruce bark beetle. We enjoy the evenings at the Antýgl camp and, if weather permits, sit around the campfire.

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Education in the Wilderness

(Wildniswissen, Germany)

How varied and extensive an education in the wilderness may be is easy to see with the German organization Wildniswissen. It operates a forest kindergarten, and more than 10,000 children have taken part in its school program. It also organizes a range of educational courses and events for adults. Wildniswissen offers a long-term, comprehensive educational program in the wilderness (Wildnispädagogik); people interested in narrow, specialized areas may take one-year programs or sign up for short-term experiences and educational programs in the wilderness lasting a few days. But it is the long-term educational course for adults that represents the core of the organization's work.

Wildniswissen builds its activities around a non-conventional outlook on society: that the contemporary lifestyle, with all the associated conveniences of civilization, represents only a fleeting episode in the history of mankind. For much longer, we were hunters and gatherers, closely connected to nature. Although our lifestyle has changed significantly over recent millennia, we have kept our nature-related skills and mentality. All you need to do is get back to the wilderness, overcome your fear and potential alienation—and you will find your lost abilities quickly return...

Wildniswissen educational programs focus on a broad range of skills and knowledge related to living in the outdoors. What do participants gain?

- Skills for long stays in the wilds, and understanding of potential risks and the ability to survive
- Knowledge of mammals and their lifestyles, an ability to identify animal footprints and tracking skills
- Knowledge of plants and trees and their potential uses for humans
- How to get oriented in demanding terrain
- An understanding of ecological relationships
- Practice in identifying birdsongs and sounds, and concentration exercises
- An ability to learn outdoors from nature itself

The Wildnispädagogik educational method is specific. It is based not on direct training but on getting to know oneself and learning through experience. Participants find themselves in various situations and their ability to deal with them becomes the basis of the learning process. The organization draws its inspiration from the traditional “educational” approach taken by Native North Americans: the Coyote Teaching. Rupert Ross, a Canadian writer and author of *Return to the Teachings*,





describes it as follows: “It seems indigenous peoples understood that ideas and information must be presented in a manner that remains open to the people who hear it. They can take whatever from it they consider to be of substance. In other words, participants are motivated to find personal meaning and value in the experience gained. Neither the teacher as a person nor the teacher’s intentions should become a focus of attention.”

The Wildniswissen long-term educational programs are conceived as multi-year continuous learning experiences. People may take part in them without leaving their regular professions. Among the programs offered are:

- Identifying footprints and tracking – one-year course
- Making clothes from leather – one-year course
- Wildnispädagogik – comprehensive educational program for one, three or four years

Wildnispädagogik

This one-year program consists of six weekend educational blocks; participants have “homework” in between blocks, and this is an integral part of the program. It helps verify the experience gained. The program is completed by a traineeship and final thesis prepared by each participant. In the end participants receive a certificate of completion of the course.

In the three-year program, the single-year program is expanded to include an additional two-year block. This two-year cycle consists of 41 days divided into nine blocks that build on one another (there are four three-day blocks, two four-day blocks and three seven-day blocks). The time in between these blocks includes homework, e.g., assimilating the novel experience and knowledge gained into one’s everyday life.

Having completed the three-year program, participants may take part in a fourth year. In it, the core of instruction consists in a three-day stay in the wilderness of the Western Carpathians. Participants may further deepen their outdoor knowledge and skills and their ability to experience nature. They test whether they can actually survive in wilderness. Several months afterwards, a final weekend takes place in which participant contemplate the education received and determine what changes they have experienced and how they have changed. Their subjective experience is the basis of the written final thesis. At program’s end, they become certified teachers of wilderness education.

Wildniswissen is headquartered in Hannover in Lower Saxony and has branches in other parts of Germany, Austria and Slovakia. German educational programs take place mostly in German and Polish forests. All lecturers have received training and are certified in wilderness education.



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Camping in the Wilderness

(Kalkalpen National Park, Austria)

Kalkalpen National Park covers the largest consistently forested area in Austria. Four-fifths is covered with spruce, fir, and beech. In the wilderness within the National Park boundaries trees grow, live, get old and die entirely naturally. The park offers a plethora of educational programs. The offering is broad: visitors may opt for an extraordinary outdoor experience in any season of the year. With park employees they can watch chamois in heat, trek to orchid meadows, or wade into the winter forest on snowshoes. Adventurers may immerse themselves in the depths of the national park on a rock tour led by an experienced leader, or discover the Enns and Steyr Rivers on a canoe trip. In its “WildnisCamp” the National Park Service carries out educational programs for schools, adults, and families with children.

Kalkalpen National Park

The Kalkalpen National Park originated in 1997 and covers 21,000 hectares of which 13,000 hectares have been certified as wilderness. It preserves the last large area of wild forest in the heart of Austria. Varied mixed forests, crystal clear mountain streams, mountain peaks with stunning views and beautiful mountain pastures shape the landscape and provide the basis



for life of many species of animals and plants that are rare elsewhere. Nature rules here. The forest evolves under its own laws and is regaining its wild character. Kalkalpen National Park is one of the largest continuously forested areas in Austria – a sea of trees undisturbed by roadways and construction development. It also takes in one of the lengthiest intact stream systems in the Eastern Alps.

WildnisCamp and Adult Education

Running barefoot through the woods, taking walks, hiking, observing wildlife, cooking meals for everyone





from ingredients gathered, sitting around the campfire. All that and much more is available in WildnisCamp educational programs in Kalkalpen National Park. The camp is situated in a sunny clearing in the middle of the ocean of forest, approximately an hour's walk from the nearest parking spot. It serves as a base for wilderness programs led by national park administrators and natural history teachers. It provides opportunities to experience nature in its diversity and discover one's own wild side. Its slogan? Adventure in the wilderness is calling you!

In addition to programs for schools and families with children, it offers collaboration with Wildniswissen and courses that exclusively target adults. The focus is on interconnecting people and nature and rediscovering natural cycles. In ages past, the wilderness was our home. Old cultures relied on the deep, complex symbiosis with nature in all its aspects. Everyone was part of nature, not only in mind but in feeling and instinct. As humankind developed, this connection was partially lost. Today many people long for it. The "wilderness education" course focuses on effective ways to rekindle this connection.

Teaching method

The teaching method is based on ways of indigenous people. It closely resembles Coyote Teaching. Instead of providing quick answers, the teacher encourages his or her student to become immersed in the issue at hand. Emphasis is placed on the teacher-student relationship. The more the teacher knows about the student, the easier the process of education will be. The true 'coyote' teacher presents the laws of nature to students in a way that motivates the students themselves to learn and look for answers. Participants not only learn about nature but about themselves as well, which places high demands on the teacher's expertise and personal qualities. Course guides are trained, attentive, determined, and have a healthy sense of humour. The course for adults takes place over the course of a year, divided into six weekend blocks that build on each other. In between blocks, intensive self-study is required. (More information is available in the chapter on Wildniswissen.)

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Bushcraft – More than a Survivor Course

(Woodsmoke, Anglie)

Some people think of bushcraft as a set of skills that lets them break free of their own limitations, that lets them go further, experience more. Bushcraft is for adventurers who want to be self-reliant and enjoy freedom of movement in real wilderness. It is a skill development course for young and old alike, for scout leaders, wilderness guides, soldiers, instructors and others. Ultimately, it may be a stand-in for the child's desire to discover. Bushcraft instructors themselves say that for most people, bushcraft is an effort to break free, to reconnect with nature in the wild, to satisfy a thirst for something new and spend time with people who see life similarly and have common interests.

What is bushcraft good for?

Would you travel into the wilderness on an adventure knowing that you would lose your backpack or be stuck far from civilization? Could you build yourself a shack with no man-made fabric? Start a fire by friction only, sans matches? Could you feed yourself using only what the forest provides? Find, filter and purify water without modern chemicals? Bushcraft courses teach you these forgotten skills. You take them with you, in your mind and in your muscles, just like the modern equipment you carry in your backpack. Survival courses impart skills ranging from the basics to specialized lessons on lumber jacking, tracking, plant identification, and cooking using only what you find in the outdoors. The organizers present an opportunity for a perfect union with nature, accompanied by inspiring guides and teachers.



People often fear the wilderness, but their fear is based on lack of knowledge. Survival courses teach them to overcome various kinds of obstacles. They let them regain their confidence and their trust in nature so that they can fully experience their time in the wilderness.

Woodsmoke, the organizer, was established in 2001 and has received international recognition for its pioneering survival courses in the wild (bushcraft), as well as for its professional approach to teaching the classic skills needed to live in the wilderness.

The Lake District

Bushcraft courses take place in the very heart of the Lake District, England's largest national park. A series of glaciers have created glacial valleys, glacial cirques, and England's most beautiful mountains. At 978m above sea level, Scafell Pike is the highest point in the park. Its presence, together with the misty veil that hangs over the lake and a palette of warm colours, creates a magical atmosphere. William Wordsworth, the romantic poet, expressed his admiration for the mountains in these words: "In the combinations which they make, towering above each other, or lifting themselves in ridges like the waves of a tumultuous sea, and in the beauty and variety of their surfaces and colours, they are surpassed by none".

What are these courses like?

Each course is unique but mostly consists of theory, instruction and a section that offers participants the space to test out their theoretical knowledge in practice. The Wilderness Bushcraft course includes the greatest number of outdoor activities of all the courses. Participants acquire survival skills, try out traditional crafts, use primitive technology, cook with ingredients found in the wild, camp, track, and observe wildlife. In the course of a week, they acquire a fully-rounded bushcraft skill set, the so-called "go-anywhere" skills that ease future outdoor excursions. Over time, fear of the wilderness is replaced by trust and understanding.



The tracking workshop is a specialized course. In the course of five days, participants learn to recognize animal footprints, skulls, bones, droppings and sounds. The workshop is led by Ben McNutt and Steven Hanton, the only holder of a special animal tracking certificate in Britain.

Most courses are designed for 10 to 14 people, but the lumberjacking course, for instance, has a smaller capacity for safety reasons. Participants need no special equipment—just a tent, sleeping bag, mat, appropriate clothing and a flashlight. Just as if you were going on a several-day track. Any specialized equipment necessary will be provided by the organizers.

Who leads the courses?

The teachers and wilderness guides are people who have spent lots of time outdoors. Ben McNutt has an encyclopaedic knowledge of survival skills and extensive experience with trip logistics. Lisa Fento studied ethnobotany and has a PhD in ethnobiology. She specializes in outdoor skills and the transfer of knowledge from indigenous peoples. “All we teach here we have experienced ourselves, here in the forest of our home country, in the desert, the jungle or in subarctic conditions. We learnt how to teach it – we understood it through our actions. There are many people who teach things they have never experienced themselves. It is as if someone who had

never been in the water taught you to swim,” says Ben McNutt. If anyone else wants to organize such courses, Ben has a message for him: “Organize courses only if you are one hundred percent passionate about bushcraft. It is a lifestyle. If you are interested in money you will never get rich, but your life may be enriched. Sometimes it will be hard but so much time spent outdoors is worth it. Do it out of love for nature, not as a business opportunity.”

And what do participants take home?

An absolutely inspiring week. I learnt such a range of new skills and knowledge and was able to extend my knowledge in so many areas. I found the feeling of full immersion in the woodland environment over the six days really heightened my awareness and understanding. I loved all the subjects we covered and am particularly excited by my new found love of wildflowers and plants. The whole Woodlander experience is incredibly intense, which I thrived on. I would thoroughly recommend this course to anyone who enjoys being immersed in nature and wants the opportunity to broaden their knowledge of bushcraft under the expert tuition of highly skilled course leaders. Ben and Steven are inspiring and excellent tutors. Both incredibly knowledgeable and excited by their subject areas. They clearly thrive from helping others to gain knowledge and instil a sense of inquisitiveness in their students.” Woodlander, July 2013, Ro Thomas.

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Gaia Our Home

(Lesoochranárske zoskupenie VLK, Slovensko)

Eight nights in the midst of the untouched forests of Eastern Slovakia. A special field seminar in which participants come to know the wilds and learn about environmental protection, organized by Lesoochranárske Zoskupenie VLK for 18 years now. The days are spent without fire, with nothing more than basic equipment. Yet this is not a survival course. The focus is not on participants' needs, but rather on developing an awareness of the manifestations of nature, animate and inanimate, around them. With no fire, no musical instruments, no meals cooked in common, one must make do with what one has brought along. Evenings spent round the campfire may strengthen interpersonal ties, but they also weaken the relationship between human beings and their immediate environment. This is why no fires may be made. Gaia also includes instruction on observing nature and getting to know your environment. As of 2015, 464 people have taken part. Mostly they have come from Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Poland, but others have come from Great Britain and Switzerland. Gaia takes place in all weather, under all circumstances: it has never been cancelled.

Vičí Hory – A Unique Location in East Slovakian Mountains

To take part in Gaia, an experiential seminar, people come to the Čergov mountain range in northeastern Slovakia

(near Vlčia, a private, non-intervention natural reserve owned by Lesoochranárske Zoskupenie VLK) and Busov: places where you can still admire the beauty of the wilderness. On old maps, these locations and the Eastern Carpathians are called Vlčí Hory. They are deep forests of beech and fir in which wolves, lynx and bears find refuge. There you may commonly observe grazing deer, wild boar and beaver dams; owls hoot and eagles circle the sky. Here, VLK strives to create a network of non-intervention reserves where people may observe how nature evolves spontaneously without human intervention. Seminar participants see, feel and experience it all.

Why Gaia?

The idea of organizing a nontraditional field seminar was born out of the personal experience of the founders of Lesoochranárske Zoskupenie VLK. They had spent hours, days and months in the outdoors, in the open air; hundreds of nights listening to owls in the rain and under the stars. The founders slept in wet sleeping bags; burnt their faces in the summer sun; endured frostbite on their fingers; met wolves. All these experiences formed these people with the wilderness in their hearts. Today, VLK offers anyone who feels the need to resonate with nature and help preserve forests by their own hand a streamlined, eight-day version of this walkabout. The core name





of the seminar is Gaia, a word that describes a living being, and one used by the Greeks two thousand years ago. Seminar participants may add a subtitle based upon what takes place during the seminar. We have had, for instance, Gaia of the Mythical Salamander, Sulphur-Yellow Gaia and Lost Gaia. Seminar participants learn more about Gaia herself on the seventh day of the seminar.

What does Gaia bring to people?

Gaia puts forth a notion in which life on Earth is symbolized as a cobweb-and humanity represents but a single thread. It strives to rid participants off anthropocentric thinking and point out that life on Earth existed before and will continue to exist without us. It emphasises our responsibility for influencing natural processing and for the quality of our natural environment; it wishes to generate interest in our common issues and support a commitment to take specific actions to improve our situation.

A great majority of Gaia participants discover a desire to contribute personally to protecting the forests and supporting the wilderness; not only to maintain biodiversity and to support ecological stability, but also for



themselves and for others. It wishes to give future generations the opportunity to visit truly natural forests full of life, to admire the plants, trees, and animals that are part of them. Some people return to take part in the seminars, and many of those who have taken part in Gaia have become VLK supporters, activists or members.

Program

Gaia appears to resemble a natural history excursion. The first days are devoted to learning about plants, trees, mosses and lichens, animals and stars. This is because you become aware of the intricacy of forest ecosystems best in the middle of the forest, where you see for yourself the incredible numbers of forest organisms and the infinite ties between them. The second half of the seminar is devoted to the theory and practice of forest protection and contemplation of the role of humankind on Earth, as well as the Gaia theory.

The first day begins with a recounting of the diversity of Central European flora, tied to an excursion in which participants identify plants and trees. They learn about the connecting principles that join plants and fungi, animals and other organisms. Mosses and lichens are also discussed.

The second day is devoted to the skies and observing and learning about birds; excursions are made in the proximity of their habitats. Participants learn about individual bird species, their distinguishing features, food chain, and the roles they play in the ecosystem. They learn to recognize birds based upon their voices and the significance of ancient forests for bird nesting. After dark, astronomical phenomena are explained; participants observe stars and planets and learn their importance to indigenous peoples and to the present inhabitants of the forest.



The third day is devoted to mammals, the largest inhabitants of the forest world. An excursion is made to their habitats. Participants learn to recognize them and glean information about their lifestyle from their footprints, droppings and other signs of their presence. The role of mammals in the food chain and the forest ecosystem are also discussed.

On the fourth day, the group learns about transformed and primeval forests and participants learn to understand it as the comprehensive whole it in fact is. There are various phases in the forest lifespan in which deadwood, mycorrhiza and complex forest information network play their roles. The excursion discusses how timber is felled and how renewal processes take place in production forests, and explains the forestry markings that are made. For this you must understand forestry growth and timber extraction maps and forest management plans. Forests may also be managed on the basis of the non-intervention principle.

On the fifth day, participants learn to “Think Like a Mountain”, mostly through conversations, discussions, meditations and rituals leading to a full understanding of

deep ecology, a counterbalance to the “regular” interpretation of ecology based upon technology and cosmetic improvements. Part of the process involves the “Council of All Beings” ritual. In contrast to a classical systematic approach to learning about nature, these exercises provide room for simple emotional and sensory perception of the natural connection between people and the forest and non-human creatures.

The six day is spent in voluntary work to help a selected protected area, i.e., restoring the bar marking of boundaries of protected areas or exchanging signs and poles. In the May and June excursions, participants may look forward to an excursion to the Vlčie private natural reserve.

On the seventh day, participants learn about Gaia and hear the testimony of an eco-warrior. They learn about the theory of our planet Earth as an organism with its own feedback mechanisms and the consequences of disrupting them, using forest devastation as an example. This is closely related to the history of the protection of wilderness and the origin and work of Lesoochránárske Zoskupenie VLK.

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Council of All Beings

(Pracownia na rzecz Wszystkich Istot, Poland)

“In the Council of All Beings, we participate in a series of experiential deep ecology processes that echo the ceremonies and rituals of indigenous peoples throughout the ages to honour the alignment of the human being with the rest of Earth’s family. By experiencing our interconnectedness with air, water and soil, we invite the spontaneous healing of the psyche and dissolve the illusion of our disconnection from the living Earth.” This is the description of the Council given by Ryszard Kulik, a long-time member of the Workshop and Ritual Instructor.

The name of the organizing association might be translated as the Council of All Beings Workshop. Established in 1990, in 1991 it organized the first ritual. Over the years, there have been more than a hundred such rituals. But the association organizes more than just these rituals. In Poland, it is known for campaigns aimed at protecting the most precious wilderness areas: the Białowieża Forest, the Rospuda Valley, the Tatra Mountains, the Karkonosze Mountains, and other locations.

The Council as Ritual, the Council as Workshop

The Council of All Beings is a name used for more than the ritual itself. It refers as well to the entire workshop, which also takes in other activities—some of which are indispensable for a full workshop experience. “Council of All Beings” also serves as the subtitle for the book *Think Like a Mountain*, written by John Seed, Joanny



Macy, Pat Fleming and Arne Naesse. This book serves as the methodological basis for the rituals.

Who takes part in the workshops?

Participants come from different locations, work in various professions and have life experiences that also greatly vary. All must be at least 18 years old. They are usually searching for greater meaning in life, are aware of their disconnection from the wilderness, or are unhappy with mainstream civilization. Frequently, they are ecological activists searching for deeper motivation to protect the environment.

“We organize the Council because we think it’s the best way to develop a deeper sense of motivation for protecting our environment. We do it for the environment and for ourselves. Taking part in the ritual is an opportunity for each participant to progress in self-realisation,” says Ryszard Kulik.

The rituals are most effective in the wilderness, where there are few traces of human activity. People often come to these meetings to Bystra (Beskid Śląski), Leśkowiec (Beskid Makowski) and Jaworina (Beskid Niski), as well as to many other locations where wilderness has been maintained: the Beskids, Białowieża Forest and Bieszczady. The courses are led by experienced instructors and lecturers with extensive experience. They often obtain their experience as participants in the Council.

The Council consists of the following key sections

The Mourning

Unless it takes on emotional reality, the notion that all life is interdependent remains strictly a mental concept with no power to affect our attitudes or behaviours. Participants must feel the connection. How can they be made to do so? In the ritual, between the steady beats of a drum, the names of the endangered animals and plants disappearing from our lives today are recited. Or, a Cairn of Mourning is created. Gathered in a circle, the participants moved to the centre, one by one, to place a stone. Each such stone represents a loss that has occurred or is occurring right now.

Remembering

Interconnections with other forms of life presume the unity of all life on Earth. Within this conceptualization, one sees mountains, plants, animals, and people as connected deep in their being. Our connections to other life forms are thus based not on emotional ties to the locations or beings we have loved. They are embedded in our bodies across space and time. The “Evolutionary Remembering” workshop is an experiential process that guides participants’ imagination, drawing on multiple senses and on inner corporal knowledge. It contextualizes our hurried contemporary lives within more extensive timeframes.



Speaking for Other Life-Forms

This is the core of the Council of All Beings. When time permits, it is enhanced to include the preparatory practices described above. Participants begin by letting themselves be chosen by another life-form, whether animal, plant, or a natural feature like a swamp or desert. How? In the wild, one can wander off alone in search of an identity to be assumed. Respectfully, silently, you ask its permission to speak for it in the Council of All Beings. Then participants make simple masks, working together in companionable silence with paper and paint, twigs and leaves. Then, with due formality, the participants assemble in a circle and the Council of All Beings commences. To create a sense of sacred space, prayers and invocations are spoken.

The council unfolds within three consecutive phases. First, the beings address each other, telling of the changes and hardships they are experiencing in present times. The second stage of the Council begins after most have spoken, and the guide invites humans to the centre. Since it is clear that one young species is at the root of all this trouble, its representatives should be present to hear these testimonies. So, a few at a time, the beings put aside their masks and move to sit for a while, as humans, in the middle of the circle. The other life-forms now speak to them directly. In the third stage of the Council, the other life-forms offer gifts to the



humans. Recognizing how dependent they have become on humankind, they would help this young species deal with the crisis it has created. After speaking, each leaves its mask in the outer circle and joins the humans in the middle, receiving the gifts still to be given.

In the ritual, participants gain a deeper sense of the interconnections present in nature and broaden their perspective on other lifeforms. They develop deeper empathy for the myriad species and landscapes of the earth, have the opportunity to step outside their human identity, and experience the beauty and power of their interconnectedness with all life, strengthening their commitment to defend nature. They also have the opportunity to sense the power of the group and develop their self-confidence.

The ritual may last 1 to 10 days. 6 to 12 people take part. Since the rituals are organised in the wilderness,

participants need appropriate clothing. Special aids are provided by the lecturers.

Pracownia na Rzecz Wszystkich Istot, which organizes the Council of All Beings, offers significant support for wilderness conservation in Poland. After the ritual, many participants become activists and get involved in numerous ecological campaigns in Poland: protecting wolves, protecting the Białowieża Forest, Pilsko Mountain and other causes.

“We keep in touch with our workshop participants. We invite them on camping trips during the summer solstice, for instance, and support their involvement in environmental protection,” says Ryszard. He has a key piece of advice for anyone who would like to organize rituals like these: “First of all, you must experience the ritual yourself. Then contact an experienced instructor who will take on the role of supervisor.”

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