

Natural History

Environmental education is a learning process that increases people's knowledge and awareness about the environment and associated challenges, develops the necessary skills and expertise to address the challenges, and fosters attitudes, motivations, and commitments to make informed decisions and take responsible action (UNESCO, Tbilisi Declaration, 1978).

Some people like to examine in mathematical detail, the life of bugs and birds or lizards and snakes. Precision and narrow focus is important, the kind that can be expressed in equations and where hypotheses are tested by statistics. But others lean more towards observation instead of experimental methods of study. They notice things in nature, and might enjoy learning insights gleaned from those observations in the life of a snake or the way of a bird, but you don't need to know calculus to understand what they're telling you. If each wrote an article about their finds, you'd read the first in an academic journal and the second in a nature magazine.

Natural history therefore leans toward observation of plants and animals. No less a science nor unsystematic, it looks at categories of natural organisms, but its outlook is broad in a world full of many narrowly focused disciplines.

Natural history is considered to be the foundation of biology and its main goal is to describe patterns and relationships in the natural world, and to share this information with society.

Modern natural history can trace its routes to studies from the ancient Greco-Roman world and the medieval Arabic world through the European Renaissance scientists working in isolation, to today. More than ever, it now relies on an interdisciplinary approach with cooperation amongst many sciences.

Closely related to natural history is the field of Interpretation. Interpretation brings natural history alive, revealing hidden secrets of the natural world, unveiling its mysteries and power with passion and enthusiasm. Interpretation can be defined as a communications process that reveals meanings and relationships about cultural, historical, natural, and recreational resources, but in our context its focus is on the natural world.

Here's the thing: something, someone or some activity facilitates connection to nature, and most often it's a combination of all three. Interpretive explanation by a father that unveils the life of a Golden Trout to his 10-year old son is going to leave an indelible impression. In a broader public sense, interpretation is effective communication that relies on brochures, exhibits, trails, first-person interpretation, science educators, park rangers, and nature center staff. For many it is a profession, but for us it's an important part of the program we offer – one leg of a three legged stool, the other two being outdoor activity and environmental education.

Environmental education takes place via the more formal vehicle of a lesson paired with each activity, but natural history interpretation takes place on the trail, with nature lending a hand by way of opportune moments, or what we like to call Sparkles.

The Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County maintains that conservation of biodiversity requires an understanding of natural history. Part of the discipline of natural history is the collection and study of collections by taxonomists, and this is what they are referring to. But long before one reaches that level you have to experience an insatiable curiosity about the magnitude and wonder of life that surrounds you. This is the natural history we hope to stimulate trailside, with mom and dad, grandma and grandpa lending a hand.