

On the Wild Side...via the Slow Movement

October 2009 by Deborah Greaves

For me, it was those magical visits with my grandmother's partner to the dark, fragrant forest in Stanley Park. I was probably about four when Ron took my brother and I for the first time in among the giant trees that had stood for over a century even since the premiere logging-over of Vancouver.

As a little girl in 1957, I walked with Ron and my brother through the eerily quiet forest, quivering with wonder. The loamy ground beneath our feet sounded hollow. The moist air smelled rich. The silence was intoxicating; it seemed as though there was no city nearby.

For the fifty-plus years of my life since, I have found the depths of a forest magical. Coastal, island, interior, lowland or high elevation forests are all enticing to me. Despite the fact I'm now more educated about forest health, fire hazard considerations and the forest industry, and despite my acquaintance with and appreciation for alpine meadows and grasslands, the forest still has a hold over me. Whenever I walk in the forest, whether it's in natural state or human-managed, I am in a place of worship.

During a recent presentation from the David Suzuki Foundation, the speaker discussed an emerging set of values, different from the traditional commercial, industrial and agricultural values we've been used to. A new worth is being assigned to non-developed lands- not only to forests, but pasture, range, farm and natural land of any kind.

Lately, statistics have been compiled that detail the many ways that undeveloped land contributes to the cleanliness and well-being of air, water, creatures and human beings. The issues the world is having with greenhouse gases has reminded us that natural land doesn't have to be constantly manipulated by people to be doing us all some good.

Increasingly, an odd physical attribute of natural or 'fallow' land is being touted as reason enough to leave it alone: land with plants growing all over it, no matter what kind, absorbs carbon. It also supports a wide variety of non-human residents, from butterflies to birds to bears, all of whom make their own important contributions. Whether or not a big field looks to you like a weed patch, it lives and breathes.

Now that we've been reminded by many scientists that natural land isn't just lying there doing nothing because we haven't put stuff on it, maybe more of us can learn to appreciate it again, and have a good time doing it. You've heard of the slow food movement? I propose a Slow Visit Exploration movement for natural land encounters.

I maintain if more adults allowed themselves the same amount of time to walk outside that they do for their favourite television shows, more of us would have less trouble keeping our weight down, the medical system would save money and therapists wouldn't be as busy. Cholesterol and mood medication sales would drop, but walking shoe and fleece garment sales would go up.

Other community benefits to the Slow Visit Exploration – ‘SVE’ - movement: parents would be less cranky with their kids, and lonely or bored people would discover there’s entertainment that’s leaping, strutting, dancing, flying and singing among the shrubs and along the shores if they only wait awhile to find it. Those riding ATVs can stop their vehicles on their favourite secret stretch of forestry road, get out their thermos of coffee or a camera, and sit for awhile to see what comes by.

In the hope you’ll spend at least as much time outside during each walk as you would watching one of your favourite TV shows, here are some of my Slow Visit Exploration recommendations:

Go to the toilet before leaving- your walk is intended to be relaxed. Carry water, no matter how cool it is outside. Take a little packsack along with an umbrella, a warm hat and maybe fuzzy glove in it to use or doff as needed. Optional are binoculars or a small camera, a thermos with something hot in it and snack bars.

Once you’ve put on some comfy shoes or boots with good treads and bundled in layers, head straight for the nearest unbuilt, uncleared, unploughed and unfenced area you can find that doesn’t have a No Trespassers sign. Look for a trail made by other wanderers, take note of its starting point, and head out. (Legally speaking, your dog if s/he’s with you has to be leashed.) Turn around every few minutes to look back, so you’ll recognise the trail as you walk back toward home.

Forests should be visited in all seasons, even if you just stroll among the trees for the duration of a half-hour sitcom. Meadows, even those filled with weeds, and rocky hillsides and grasslands should also be visited in a relaxed, investigative way at any time of the year, with consideration of footwear appropriate for possible slippery conditions.

The only Okanagan weather that keeps me inside is high winds, or thunder and lightning. Almost everything else in our climate can be easily prepared for. Though swaths of it are disappearing, the entire Okanagan Valley is surrounded and intersected by tracts of wild or semi-natural land. Much of it is Crown land, which means it belongs to the people of British Columbia- you and me and our families and friends.

If you haven’t for awhile, I urge you to put down the remote, take along your good manners, and go out to visit your wild property soon.