

Making Ripples

Connect with Nature Online

by Amanda Bancroft

Plenty of people are exposed to the outdoors briefly every day. However, for many of them, it takes a bit more than encounters with nature to inspire respect and love. A general impression of “ick,” boredom, disregard, or perhaps sheer terror are all common reactions to the natural world. But the internet is bridging the divide between our cozy unnatural homes and the adventures that await us outside.

Some websites turn terror into “terrific!” for a person reluctant to embrace the elements. After all, we often fear what we do not understand. These websites also boost the interest of a passive observer of nature, encouraging that person to become more active or even adopt a new career path. They’re also great for planning educational summer travel, such as a trip to the Smithsonian Institute. The National Zoo boasts 2,000 animals from 400 different species, and their website lists fact sheets on these mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish and invertebrates in their collection. Not to mention the zoo web cams! Visit NationalZoo.SI.edu and select “Animal Index.”

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology has one of the most impressive, user-friendly and interactive websites on bird biology and conservation at AllAboutBirds.org. Enter their Funky Nests in Funky Places (maybe in Funky Fayetteville!) contest, or play Birdsong Hero and learn how to identify birds in your area.

MonarchWatch.org will get you started converting your backyard to a wildflower garden to save pollinators like the Monarch butterfly, whose population is in severe decline. Or check out ArborDay.org for help with tree identification and to learn which native trees you can plant. The National Wildlife Federation (nwf.org) would love to assist you in certifying your backyard as wildlife habitat, and their Great American Backyard Campout is always a fun event.

ProjectNoah.org is an online platform for citizen scientists (that means you!) to document wildlife by uploading photographs. They list thousands of organisms worldwide, including fungi and plants. The World Wildlife Fund has an excellent interactive WildFINDER (worldwildlife.org/science/wildfinder) with a map that takes you all around the world! It allows you to “visualize global distribution of animal species” and search by city name, ecoregion or species name.

If you have young naturalists who are keen on video games, National Geographic’s Animal Jam is an online educational game that makes learning fun. Winner of the Mom’s Choice Award, AnimalJam.com teaches kids about plants, animals, and the researchers who study them.

Another great site for kid naturalists is the American Museum of Natural History's Ology (amnh.org/explore/ology). Regarding all things ending in "ology," it's a great tool to enhance a child's learning on anthropology, archaeology, astronomy, biology, psychology, paleontology, zoology...well you get the idea! Get more ideas by exploring these websites on your own or as a family, but remember: the internet is only a springboard to further our understanding of the world, not a substitute for time outdoors.

Ripples is an emerging online educational center inspired by a holistic approach to making a difference. Follow our journey to live sustainably and make ripples with our lifestyle at: www.RipplesBlog.org.