Healing Our Connection with Nature: An Expressive Arts Community Engagement Project

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Healing Our Connection with Nature: An Expressive Arts Community Engagement Project

Capstone Thesis

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Clinical Mental Health Counseling in Expressive Arts Therapy

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Abstract

A community engagement project was created and implemented, comprised of two events for which the author facilitated nature-based expressive arts experiences to explore the integration of nature and expressive arts therapy. The events were offered to two different groups of community members, one for nature-curious adults held outdoors on the trails of a local conservation trust, and another for young children at a local library. The healing impact of nature connection and nature connection experiences are explored through a literature review, event methods, and the author’s personal experiences of the project via artmaking. The results include an emphasis on nature as co-facilitator or co-therapist. The contribution and potential for nature-based expressive arts therapy to address the climate crisis as a way to heal human connection with nature is highlighted. By offering opportunities for nature-connection through the arts, awareness is spread about the importance of nature and the more-than-human world.

Keywords: Expressive arts therapy, nature therapy, nature-based expressive arts therapy, nature connection, land conservation, community engagement project

The author identifies as a White, heterosexual cis woman from Maine, United States. Pronouns: she/her
Healing Our Connection with Nature: An Expressive Arts Community Engagement Project

**Introduction**

Integrating nature connection with expressive arts therapy has become an immense passion of mine, along with a deep desire to help the earth and earth’s inhabitants heal, and to allow the voice of the environment and nature beings to be heard. I explore the healing impact of nature connection and how these connections are experienced, through a community engagement project that incorporates the arts, a literature review, and discussion. My personal engagement with nature-based expressive arts practices and my experience facilitating two different nature-connected expressive arts experiences for members in my community are also shared. By exploring nature-based expressive arts therapy, I have learned more about how to experience it myself, how it is experienced by others, what the current literature illustrates about its use, and how it might support my local community’s efforts in nature awareness and land conservation.

While the community engagement events are foremost to explore the healing impact of connecting with nature and how that connection can be experienced through the expressive arts, these types of experiences have been a major part of my own healing journey. I want to share with others the healing impact that nature-connected expressive arts can offer. I hope that opening the events to the public in my community will create a ripple effect that expands the knowledge and shared stories from the events outward, so that seeds are planted for more folks to perhaps someday open to such experiences. Receiving a meaningful gift often leads one to spread that gift tenfold. Additionally, I hope that by collaborating with the Kennebunkport Conservation Trust (KCT), the community may be more apt to support the conservation of a particular piece of land, a biodiverse forest which serves as a crucial wildlife corridor, the last swath to connect major inland forests with the coast, such as where many animals can freely and safely pass through and be at home as part of a larger network. Holding these events for the community engagement project may serve as a place to share the importance of healing our
connection with nature, and how that connection benefits both people and the nature beings of the land.

The destruction of the earth’s environment is a major world crisis. Nature-based expressive arts therapy is one way to address this issue, as it offers a way for people to connect with the earth, leading not only to our own wellbeing but also, arguably, to the earth’s health. We are nature; however, the ways in which many of us live seem to harshly disconnect us from remembering our innate essence (Atkins & Snyder, 2018). My thesis exploration includes one possible way to heal this disconnection, by providing opportunities for people to experience nature connection utilizing the expressive arts. Fostering awareness for local land conservation efforts and for the more-than-human beings that importantly inhabit our ecosystem provide strong motivation for these events.

Is it not a coincidence that the earth’s environment suffers while people also suffer? Perhaps the relationship between the earth’s and humanity’s states of wellbeing are mutually inclusive. Arguably, corpocratic corruption, colonization, and modern society have greatly contributed to the pandemic of human beings’ disconnection from nature. Adult Americans spend approximately 90% of their time indoors (Environmental Protection Agency, 2021) and only about 5 hours per week outside (Weir, 2020), while adults worldwide spend about 7 hours per day in front of a screen (Moody, 2021). Meanwhile, at least 1 in 4 American adults cope with a mental illness, and American food travels an average of 1,500 miles from farm to plate (Center for Urban Education about Sustainable Agriculture, 2021). Together, these pieces of information illustrate the crucial need for more connection and reciprocity with nature.

In reviewing literature related to nature-based expressive arts therapy and nature’s healing impact, I have gathered evidence that connecting with nature in various ways does indeed lead to healing for people. A growing amount of research shows that spending time in nature, even simply feeling connected to nature, improves a person’s mental health, boosts
mood, and actually improves cognition (Weir, 2021). A quantitative study by Park et al. (2010) demonstrates significant observable psychological and physiological improvements from spending time in the forest, known as Shinrin-Yoku or “forest bathing,” compared to city settings. Park and Mattson’s (2009) experiment shows that the simple presence of plants in post-surgical hospital rooms have a significant positive effect on patients’ recovery. Both of these experiments shed objective light on the causal relationship between our ability to heal and our connection with nature, and both provide foundational support for my exploration of nature-connected expressive arts.

Additionally, qualitative and arts-based research provides a well-rounded complement to the quantitative findings about nature connection. Naor and Mayseless (2021) offer a framework for practicing nature-based therapy and demonstrate how therapists utilize awareness to integrate nature’s input with the client’s experience. A literature review by Hee Oh et al. (2020) presents the psychophysiologial healing effects of nature, categorizing aspects of these effects as a model for nature-based therapy processes. Tegart (2019) describes an event series of guided nature walks and expressive artmaking experiences that explores how silence in nature can open emotions. Wolfe and Russell’s (2010) arts-based research on unique, land-based natural art pieces in a public space demonstrates how a combination of nature and art can lead to new insights, openness, stress reduction, emotional balance, and connection. These resources directly inform how I facilitated the events and implemented activities for the community engagement events.

**Literature Review**

In 1800s America, a legacy of mental health practitioners believed that mental illness related to a separation from “life-sustaining natural elements” (McNiff, 2021b, p. 2). Providing natural settings of “asylum” where patients could directly make contact with the earth was considered crucial to their health. Unfortunately, this practice turned into one of making enclosures and separations. Thankfully, the importance of connecting with nature and its impact
on human health and wellbeing have gained interest and an increased research base over the
last two decades in the fields of medical science and mental health in general, and in nature-
based expressive arts therapy over the last five years especially (McNiff, 2021a; Weir, 2020).
Quantitative research provides a crucial scientific perspective for nature’s effects on people’s
ability to heal from both physical and mental-emotional suffering. Qualitative and arts-based
research illustrate the many ways that people experience nature connection, in therapy,
gathering in community, and in artmaking. Lastly, resources about nature-based expressive arts
therapy offer specific ways to practice the modality as well as implications for ecological and
environmental action. I use the term “nature connection” to allude to any practice, modality, or
experience that incorporates, integrates, and/or connects with nature, that involves conscious
engagement with the natural world. “Nature” includes the human and more-than-human
inhabitants of the earth, elements, weather, any non-human-made material, all types of lands,
and interconnected ecological systems and environments.

**Physiological Effects of Nature Connection**

Quantitative research examining nature’s impact on human health is very exciting when
considering the changes that need to happen to heal our planet and people’s connection with
nature, in this author’s opinion. The experiments discussed here demonstrate a causal
relationship between our human ability to heal and our connection with nature.

Park et al. (2010) conducted an experiment in Japan that tested the effects of Shinrin-
Yoku, also known as “forest bathing,” defined as “making contact with and taking in the
atmosphere of the forest” (p. 18). A total of 280 people walked through 24 forests and city
locations, in groups of 12 members each. Measurements were taken from the individuals before
and after visiting each location, including differences in cortisol, blood pressure, pulse, heart
rate variability, and a Profile of Mood States. Their statistical analysis and interpretation of the
results demonstrate a significant decrease in physiological responses associated with stress after
the subjects walked through the forest, especially when compared with the city location.
Specifically, they illustrate that lower cortisol, lower pulse rate and blood pressure, lower sympathetic nervous system activation, higher parasympathetic activation, and relief of psychological tension occur after participating in Shinrin-Yoku (Park et al., 2010).

Randomization is used in Park et al.’s (2010) experiment, and other variables are controlled, including environmental factors, background conditions, exercise load, and consumption of alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine. The experimental design is sound with considerations for internal validity. However, the sample is very limited, only consisting of healthy male college students, 20-23 years of age, without history of physical or psychiatric disorders. While this lack of external validation is a limitation, the experiment overall bolsters a strong argument for nature’s healing impact and supports other research about the human relationship with nature.

The Park and Mattson (2009) study illustrates a strong causal relationship between the presence of plants and a more positive surgery recovery, in the case of 80 female patients who had undergone a thyroidectomy in Korea, ages 26-46, none of whom had a reported illness prior to the surgery. The patients were randomly assigned to have 12 plants during their recovery or to have no plants in the control group. Rooms were otherwise identical, and all views consisted of only the sky and no outdoor vegetation. The experimenters collected data on “length of hospitalization, analgesics used for postoperative pain control, vital signs, ratings of pain intensity, pain distress, anxiety and fatigue, the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, the Environmental Assessment Scale, and the Patient’s Room Satisfaction Questionnaire” (Park & Mattson, 2009, p. 102). The results showed statistically significant differences in the patients’ recoveries who had plants in their room, favoring the plants in all points of data collection.

Park and Mattson (2009) present their method, procedure, data analysis, and statistical results, and they explain control of other possible variables. Because of the limited sample, the question of external validity should be considered. In order to apply the results to other populations, more research should be looked into; however, Park and Mattson (2009) review
other literature that support their findings. Additionally, they share qualitative information from the study, including nurse notes, which also support their findings.

**How Nature Supports the Therapeutic Process**

A growing body of research about nature’s role in psychotherapy informs how mental health practitioners can work with nature to support clients’ healing process. I use the term “nature-based therapy” as an umbrella term for the many forms and names of therapy practices that utilize nature connection (i.e. “forest therapy,” “eco-therapy,” “nature therapy,” “green therapy,” outdoor therapy,” etc.). Although each term may carry subtle differences, and various practitioners implement them in myriad ways, I will use them somewhat interchangeably. The research described here overall provides a framework and justification for how I have planned and implemented the community engagement events.

Hee Oh et al. (2020) present a review of previous research on the psychophysiological healing effects of nature and describes an analysis of 180 essays about forest therapy experiences. They reveal a six-step model found within nature-based therapy processes, categorized by emotional, cognitive, and behavioral changes due to the nature-connected experiences: stimulation, acceptance, purification, insight, recharging, and change. Experiences in nature consisted of observations and self-reflection which led to recovery in a holistic way for the participants, an integration of mind and body (Hee Oh et al., 2020).

Hee Oh et al.’s (2020) research did not collect data through direct interaction with people or observe experiences first-hand. Rather, the collected essays were self-reported to the Korea Forest Service in 2014 to 2015, which were open to the public and did not disclose any personal identification, therefore the multicultural context for this population sample is largely unknown. Their research is based in grounded theory, and the essay content was analyzed using open coding and categorization of themes and concepts, from which they derived the six-step model for a nature-based therapy approach. The authors state that possible biases were
eliminated by having both a forest therapy consultant and a qualitative researcher on their research team (Hee Oh et al., 2020).

Naor and Mayseless (2021) conducted interviews with 26 nature-based therapy (NBT) practitioners and observed six nature-based workshops to explore how nature influences the therapeutic process and informs therapy content. They found that NBT practitioners view their work as not only in nature but also with nature. Nature acts as another entity in the therapeutic alliance, “evoking powerful conscious and unconscious metaphors through real-life encounters that confront the client with various issues in concrete and material form” (Naor & Mayseless, 2021, p. 186). Findings demonstrate how NBT practitioners utilize their awareness with nature to intentionally integrate nature's input with clients’ connection to the natural experience, through five basic methods: creating safety and trust, internal and external nature awareness, new ways of knowing, modeling, and symbolic reflection (Naor & Mayseless, 2021).

The population of practitioners in the Naor and Mayseless (2021) article are of diverse professional backgrounds who use various approaches of NBT and are from five countries, demonstrating some variety of sampling. Their research method is sound, as they explain their use of grounded theory to inform a theoretical framework for NBT, data collection through field notes, memos, and interviews, and how their data was analyzed using themes and formulating conceptual frameworks. They discuss how their research contributes to the field by offering this framework. They do not include a philosophical statement, discuss personal bias, or offer insight on how their own identities as researchers, or how the research itself, may relate to larger social or political contexts. However, the article provides an extremely useful integrated model of nature-connected therapies on the whole and demonstrates how this particular field has recently evolved and gains awareness in the more mainstream mental health conversation.

**Nature Therapy as a Creative Method**

Berger (2020) describes the basic concepts and methods of Nature Therapy and shares a number of examples of applications, interventions, and case conceptualizations based on years
of experience in the field as a therapist and from doctoral and subsequent work. Similar to the major theme uncovered by Naor and Mayseless (2021) about nature as a co-therapist, Berger explains that nature actively participates in the therapeutic process, allowing the therapist to act as witness when indicated. Another foundational underpinning of Nature Therapy posits a psychoecosocial perspective, that “people’s estrangement from nature is linked to broad spectrum of psychosocial distress and manifestations such as loss of self-esteem and meaning, depression, anxiety, loneliness, and alienation” (Berger, 2020, p. 245). These practices “can also cultivate the well-being of the more-than-human natural world and help educate for nature conservation and development from a personal perspective,” (p. 246), an approach that echoes with my additional motive in engaging my community in nature-based arts experiences for land conservation efforts.

Berger’s (2020) in-depth examples of working with clients as a Nature Therapist illustrate ways to integrate the expressive arts, such as through the use of metaphor, aesthetic distancing, and characterization as in drama therapy. Unlike many traditional talk therapies in which clients directly explore their challenges, aesthetic distancing allows clients space between themselves and the challenging content, allowing an artistic representation to more safely contain the challenges. At the same time, the arts and nature can also be used to bridge that distance, a way of processing and gathering insight after the artmaking experience. A particular case describes how nature allowed a client to rediscover her personal strengths, deepen her feelings, and “express feelings in creative and nonverbal ways” (p. 249) by using drama therapy and nature metaphor. The approach provides ways for people to reconnect with not only nature but also themselves (as we are part of nature), by strengthening the mind-body connection and interpersonal relationships. “Direct contact with nature can deepen a person’s connection with [their] own nature... [which] can connect clients to a feeling of inner power and authenticity thus enabling them to develop and express important personal qualities” (p. 246). Nature
Therapy can also be used for trauma-informed care by helping clients connect with the resilience of forests that have been destroyed and then regenerated (Berger, 2020).

**Arts-Based Nature-Connected Research**

In order to address work-related stress and compassion fatigue as a counselor amidst the opioid crisis in Vancouver, Tegart (2019) utilized arts-based research to explore the aesthetic impact of silence in nature with groups, facilitating experiences for her colleagues by combining silence in nature with expressive arts practices. Using a format of three 4-hour workshops and a combination of outdoor and indoor space, participants sat in silence in nature and then explored their experience through the arts. Practices included walking through the forest, visual arts using natural materials, painting, writing, eco-poetry, guided mindfulness, body movement, and group discussion. Results illustrate the potential for connection and the soothing impact of allowing space for silence to process a range of emotions through these practices.

Tegart (2019) discusses her personal reasons for engaging in this art research, her values and meaning of the work, and the epistemological foundation, as well as the socio-political context of the opioid crisis and how the crisis impacts front-line mental health workers. She connects this with how silence in nature can reduce feelings of overwhelm and helplessness. She includes a literature review on nature-based expressive arts therapy as it connects with her project and adequately delves into the methods and results. The participants are described with consideration for relational dynamics while respecting their privacy and informed consent, and she integrates their feedback in order to triangulate interpretation of results. Additionally, implications for how these practices can assist front-line mental health workers are discussed.

Wolfe & Russell (2010) describe how natural sculptures challenge the mainstream and assist community members to open their minds and gain new insights. Visitors to the South Carolina Botanical Garden experienced 15 unexpected, non-conventional, site-specific sculptures made with natural materials, by various national and international artists, spread across 300 acres. The researchers gathered a series of interviews with the project’s founder and
visitors of the garden to illustrate how the enigmatic and whimsical sculptures elicit contemplation and evocation of new thoughts and perspectives. They report that the originality of the sculptures offers a large range of meaningful moments for visitors and that the sculptures make connections between people and place, offering a “dialogue [of] human nature” (p. 244).

Wolfe and Russell (2010) explore how the visitors' experiences of the artwork bring them toward openness and evolution of thought, connecting the intention, meaning, and results of the artwork to a larger ecological-social conversation about culture and humanity. The authors adequately describe the method and provide a number of excerpts from interviews, photographs, and descriptions of the artwork and how they were experienced. While they acknowledge the art as multiple ways of knowing and address a few concepts of somatic experience, they do not include their personal connection to the project. They also acknowledge a contradiction in their research, that the words and a few pictures alone do not represent the full meaning and that the sculptures should be experienced first-hand.

Kopytin, Bockhorni, and Zhou (2019) offer an in-depth exploration of two specific nature-based expressive arts therapy modalities, Ikebana, a traditional Japanese art form involving flowers and natural materials that strives for harmony and balance with nature, and botanical arrangement. Both art forms combine creativity and nature and contain a relational element, which encourages the artist to see the perspective of the flowers and to engage in a relational process that can mirror the artist's own aspects of life and bring about insight. “Ikebana helps us to experience the other deficient polarity of the duality that is essential in keeping ourselves in balance with others and with nature” (p. 99). The practice of Ikebana requires intuition, presence, and embodiment of the natural materials, which leads to a more balanced way of being.

Ikebana and botanical arranging can serve as a therapeutic activity within expressive arts therapy, such as a warm-up or sensory awareness exercise that leads to movement, journaling, performance, or rituals, later allowing clients to “step back from their creations and observe and
discuss their work for insight” (Kopytin, Bockhorni, & Zhou, 2019, p. 101). The creations can serve as powerful metaphors and can even foster environmental consciousness. Kopytin, Bockhorni, and Zhou (2019) share specific cases of how botanical arrangement and natural material artmaking in group therapy lead to higher wellness in participants. They met goals of “relieving emotional tension, multisensory and emotional stimulation, supporting mindful interaction with the environment, cultivating a sense of beauty, raising environmental consciousness, and improving self-perception and self-understanding” (p. 103). By exploring the natural surroundings through meditative walking, interacting with their natural creations, or making rituals and other creative activities, participants became more physically, emotionally, and spiritually connected to nature.

**From the Field: Nature-Based Expressive Arts Therapy**

In their master's thesis literature review, Newcomb (2019) synthesizes the connections between nature and expressive arts therapy, which are many: creative, nonverbal, relational, attunement, embodied, and sensory aspects are inherent in both. Aesthetic distancing, metaphor, movement, and community building are just a handful of other similarities between nature therapies and the expressive arts therapies (Atkins & Snyder, 2018). A number of forefront experts in the field of expressive arts therapy discuss the creative process as having a “flow of energy” or “connection with oneness,” which are not separate from the realm of nature (Atkins & Snyder, 2018; Kopytin, Bockhorni, & Zhou, 2019; Kossack, 2009; McNiff, 2021c; Rogers, 1993).

The commonalities between the fields of nature therapies and expressive arts therapy not only support, inform, and enhance each other (Newcomb, 2019), but also illustrate their inseparability, as McNiff (2021b) describes:

The creative process can be best understood as an eco-system of forces both inside and outside individual persons and inseparable from the whole of nature. The art that we
make and bring forth from our distinct and individual interactions with life, fulfills urges for expression that have always been fundamental to human presence on earth. (p. 1)

The arts and nature, together, have been an integral part of healing practices in indigenous communities, past and present, all over the world, and this way of being within and part of nature is inherent in all of us (Atkins & Snyder, 2018; McNiff, 2017; Rogers, 1993). Consciously connecting the arts and nature for the purposes of mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical healing is an essential part of being human (Atkins & Snyder, 2018; Newcomb, 2019). Because of this inherent inseparability, a reciprocal triangular relationship with ourselves, art, and nature, facilitating awareness, connection, interaction and exploration with each and any part can lead to balance and health not only for ourselves but to all entities of the relationship.

Shaun McNiff (2017, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c), a prominent leader and founding expert in the field of expressive arts therapy, writes extensively about the ecological and environmental connections with the creative process and implications for the therapeutic practice. “If, like Jackson Pollock, we view ourselves as nature, rather than approaching the natural world as distinct and separate from human existence, then every feature of our lives is a necessary participant in ecosystems of creation” (McNiff, 2021b, p. 6). Nature-based expressive art therapy is not just about healing from the picturesque ideals of looking upon nature, but rather, by allowing the dualities, the shadow and the light, vulnerabilities and strengths, we allow full immersion in nature’s organic processes, an authentic movement, a dance of tension, release, and balance.

McNiff (2021c) encourages artmaking to be “inclusive of all forms of expression,” an “eco-system of creation,” “[a] whole art process [which] generates life-enhancing energy and the transformation of afflictions and problems into affirmations of life—all of which corresponds to the metamorphic processes of nature” (p. 7). Transformation is a foundational element seen in everything of nature, change the only constant, movement unavoidable in all art forms; therefore healing, a moving, changing, and transformational phenomenon, is inevitable in the
process. Atkins and Snyder (2018) also describe how nature-based expressive arts therapy utilizes nature’s wholeness, an honoring of shadow aspects, which allow clients to heal in creative nature-connection processes:

In modern times, alchemy is generally considered not a literal change in matter, but a psycho-spiritual process of converting our own lead into gold. This transformation requires the courage to look inward, to recognize our own shadow and to hold our darkness in our arms without numbing or running away (p. 128).

Nature informs the creative process and how that creative process works as a healing mechanism through the powers of transformation and co-creation with nature, while both nature and the arts act as a holding space, or therapeutic container, for these transformations to occur.

**Methods**

For the community engagement project, I held two events in the state of Maine, one at the Kennebunkport Conservation Trust (KCT) and one through the Great Works Regional Land Trust (GWRLT) at a local library, which allowed me to explore facilitation methods within two different contexts. While each event carried the same intention of sharing nature-connected expressive arts experiences with the community, they provided different populations and settings, which fostered different approaches for planning, implementing, and facilitating. I was able to explore and practice how to co-facilitate with nature, a foundational aspect of nature-connected therapy (Berger, 2020; Naor & Mayseless, 2021), and to experience the practical elements of bringing the events into reality.

In order to facilitate nature-based expressive arts experiences for community members, I began by contacting the President of the KCT in September 2021. KCT has approximately 3,000 acres of conserved land, a large following of community members, and a network of regular volunteers. They graciously gave me permission to utilize the properties to hold events. Initially, I had planned for a series of events and provided them with a list of options. Their feedback was
that they preferred the series to be implemented synchronously with the announcement of and fundraising efforts for the conservation of the aforementioned piece of land, a process in which I am currently involved, and which will take about a year. Thus, the full event series I offered was postponed until the acquisition process would be more solidly underway, later than the deadline for this thesis, and thus the series turned into only one event at KCT.

Meanwhile, after sharing with a friend about what I was planning, she connected me with an employee of GWRLT and a local librarian. Together, we created an event for children at the South Berwick Library to teach them about vernal pools and share information not only about the importance of conserving land with vernal pools, but also about GWRLT in general and their future events. Then, I was able to plan for two different events for which I would be facilitating nature-connected expressive arts experiences for two different community populations.

**Gathering**

While both events carried the same intention, to provide nature-connected expressive arts experiences, each event would advertise for different target audiences and would have different activities and facilitation styles. In order to spread the word about the KCT event and to organize sign-ups, I utilized a group that I co-lead on Meetup.com with now over 800 followers in the Southern Maine and Seacoast New Hampshire regions. Without a website analytics tool, I was unable to find out exactly how many of the 800 Meetup.com group members actually saw the post online or via their email. I posted the event in January 2022, and all 21 spots were filled by the week before the event on February 26, 2022. The GWRLT event was advertised on their website as well as the South Berwick Library’s website; again, without access to website analytics, I could not see how many people viewed the post. No sign-up tool was used, and the librarian stated that they never know exactly how many people will come for their events, but to likely expect between 5 and 15 participants of ages 2-10.
The Meetup event post specified that anyone is welcome to join (although the site requires that users are at least 18 years of age), that no experience is necessary, and that it is for anyone simply looking to engage in nature-connected experiences, to meet other nature-curious folk, and/or to learn new ways to connect with nature and expand their tool box. While the event was free, participants were encouraged to donate any amount to KCT to go toward land conservation and educational programs. The announcement specified that the experience would be facilitated by me, held at KCT headquarters. Appendix A Figure 1 provides a screenshot of the event post. The GWRLT event flyer simply stated, “Big Night—Special Storytime; Celebrate Vernal Pools and the Big Night with books, songs, movement, and a special art activity!” along with a brief description of vernal pools and the time, date, and place. As is typical for free events on Meetup.com, many participants drop their plan to attend within the day before the event, and thus only 7 of the 21 initial participants attended the KCT event. All 7 participants were adults, as expected, and ages ranged between 40-80 years. The GWRLT event had 14 total participants, 8 children ages 2–6 and 6 adult caregivers.

Planning

Since Fall 2021, I’ve kept a journal to track my own experiences of connecting with nature and of the community engagement planning process. Because nature informs the process as a “co-facilitator” or “third entity” (Atkins & Snyder, 2018; Berger, 2020; Naor & Mayseless, 2021), I made a strong intention to involve nature in my planning process, which also involved artmaking, to tap into my own insights and intuition, as well as a way to connect with nature. This integration of nature and the arts is truly at the heart of my learning, so I knew I had to intentionally experience it myself before facilitating for others, and as a way to deeply attune myself with nature and my own creativity through that connection. After all, they are not separate.

Most of my artmaking has been done outdoors and at the very least completed just after spending meditative time in nature. I wrote vignettes of both past memories and current
experiences on the land, took pictures to capture moments in nature that particularly initiated
shifts within me, and created visual pieces in response to the outdoor experiences (see Appendix
A Figures 2-5 for examples). In many of these moments, I engaged in movement, meditation,
and vocal sound-making, based on what was naturally emerging for me. I allowed my
embodiment of nature to guide me, somatically, emotionally, aesthetically, and intuitively. From
these experiences, insights and ideas about the event plans would materialize. For example, I
created the song about vernal pool inhabitants for the GWRLT event while enjoying an
aberrantly warm day in February, connecting with sensations of the muddy smell of the earth,
the sun and wind, walking barefoot in a field with pen and paper (see Appendix A, Figure 6).

To gather external information to inform and support the topic and plan, I researched the
literature relating to nature-based expressive arts therapy using the Lesley University library
database. I also connected with Shaun McNiff, one of my professors at Lesley in 2021, who
recommended a number of sources. My previous experience as an elementary school music
teacher additionally informed the GWRLT event, as I knew what types of activities and time
frames would be engaging and appropriate for children.

Both the external information gathering of research, and my personal, internal process
of artmaking and nature connection combined, led to the following plans. The KCT event plan
framed a general outline, as details would depend on natural rhythms of the land at the time as
well as the participants: an opening circle, guided nature walk, inner tracking, visual artmaking,
and closing circle, with mindfulness and meditative exercises throughout. The visual artmaking
was a simple invitation for them to take photos when we paused in certain areas of the forest, of
moments that they felt drawn to savor or of more-than-human beings with whom they felt a
connection.

The GWRLT event plan was comprised of an introductory song, short lesson and story
about vernal pools, called The Secret Pool (Ridley, 2013), followed by a song and dance about
vernal pool inhabitants, visual art activity, and closing song. Because I did not know what the
exact ages or abilities of the children would be, I left the option open for whether the song would remain in three different parts or be a partner song as intended. I planned ahead for specific dance moves to represent each pool inhabitant, but I left open the opportunity for the children to create the moves themselves.

**Facilitation**

The different age ranges of each event called for two slightly different facilitation styles, regarding age-appropriate vocabulary and expression. The young children required more direction and structure, such as with maintaining safety. The KCT event with adults allowed for more openness and for participants to co-direct our path. For the GWRLT event, the librarian led the introduction, story, and closing; I led the song and dance, and we co-facilitated the visual art activity. With both events, all experiences, activities, and prompts were provided as invitations, not requirements.

My learning at Lesley University and internship experiences have helped me to tap into my “self as instrument,” to hone my ability to empathically attune to others, to hold space and witness, and to respond to others with unconditional positive regard. Again, I integrated the foundational concept of Nature-Based therapies that nature is a co-facilitator (Atkins & Snyder, 2018; Berger, 2020; Naor & Mayseless, 2021). I carried these ways of being, or ways of facilitating, with me to both events, by staying open to what emerged, connected within myself and to the natural surroundings, and by holding the intention of providing nature-connected expressive arts experiences to the participants. I allowed my presence, attunement with participants, my connection with nature, and the natural environment to guide my facilitation during the KCT event. Although I generally followed the outline I had planned, the details were informed by these presences. In other words, an awareness of sensations and observations, such as the rustling of evergreens, the way the sunlight touched the snow in contrast with the trees’ shadows, the crunching rhythms of the group walking on the trail, or the excited curiosity of a participant’s exclamation when discovering tracks, would tell me when to give pause and silent
space, to invite the group to notice something, to invite breathing awareness or other somatic cue, or to move forward in a certain direction. Although the GWRLT event was indoors, I maintained a similar type of presence within myself, connected and attuned to the participants and the energy of the room, which helped guide me by both external observations of the children and internal intuition, to sense when to give direction and when to receive their input and ideas, a natural flow of co-creation.

Results

All participants in both events were actively engaged, attentive, and cooperative. The KCT participants were inquisitive, curious about the natural world, and shared about their experiences willingly. Two of them had a good deal of general knowledge about the ecosystem that they shared with the rest of the group, and dialogue would emerge during the walk as they made connections with each other and with the land. Feedback they provided at the end was very positive with many comments about gratitude for the natural elements of the experience, for the opportunity to gather together in this way, and to have a shared experience of nature. One participant remarked that the group was “very congenial,” one remarked that the walk felt smooth, with “good flow,” and two remarked that they felt more relaxed and grounded at the end. I observed an increasing grounded sensation within myself throughout the walk, and a fresh clarity in my breath. I noticed that each participant left with a heartfelt “thank-you” and a smile.

Similarly, the GWRLT participants left with smiles on their faces, statements of gratitude, and the children with bouncy, lively steps. About half of the parties stayed to ask questions about the land trust’s future events and other offerings. During the event, the children were well-engaged and actively participated in the singing and creation of dance moves. They demonstrated retention of their learning about vernal pools by making connections during the song and dance with the story. The librarian commented that this was the most actively engaged group she had seen in a long time, “a very successful event.” During and after the event, I
observed in myself a great amount of energy, an outward electricity-like sensation that continued throughout the day.

The communication, planning, and organizing of these events have contributed to my learning about the practical and logistical elements of how to implement and facilitate these types of events. A number of unexpected changes occurred, and my flexibility and creativity allowed me to adapt as necessary. For example, because the planning process with KCT took longer than expected and their timeline did not fit with mine, I had to change the format and how much I would facilitate, and thus could only hold one event with them before the thesis deadline. On the other hand, positive unexpected changes arose, such as how the GWRLT members reached out to me to collaborate on an event with them after they heard about what I was doing at KCT. This gave me the opportunity to implement two various approaches and populations while stemming from the same intention.

I have learned through these events about how to integrate the expressive arts and nature, how to implement and facilitate meaningful experiences, and how to allow the land to inform the process. Facilitating these events has helped me to build skills in co-leading with nature while also allowing the participants to lead, to grow awareness and openness to the unfolding of what happens both in the planning process and in the presence of the events, and to foster further insight for future creative nature-connection activities and programs, which will be imbued into my practice as an expressive arts therapist. My Lesley University modality supervisor has also encouraged me to reflect on the facilitation of the events, such as with how my cues may invite participants to experience cognitive versus somatic awareness. Could my facilitation open further, to be even less directive, to allow participants to experience their own more natural ways of connecting with nature? The experience has invited further reflection on how I might adapt the project to other populations and situations and has sparked new ideas and ways of integrating expressive arts therapy and nature-connection. I am inspired to continue gathering tools and to grow my repertoire of nature-based expressive arts therapy.
practices, which I can share in future with other professionals in expressive arts therapy and related fields. Appendix B contains images of my artwork in response to and reflections of the events.

On another level, I hope that these projects inspire others to practice nature connection in their own lives and even ignite interest and passion for land protection and creating a healthier earth. Both events increased engagement with local land trusts and created connections with human and more-than-human communities. As my personal experience with healing has occurred via the expressive arts and nature connection and led to an immense desire towards environmental action and land regeneration, I imagine how a similar path may occur for others. All that is needed is an introduction, the gift to experience a small spark of connection that may later grow into a healthy, balanced, respectful and holistic relationship with the natural world. Interestingly, a small example of this phenomenon is illustrated in two pieces I wrote as part of my own learning process for this thesis (Appendix C, Figures 1 & 2). I shared the writing with members of the KCT board as well as the property owner of the aforementioned land that was likely to become an upper-socioeconomic housing development. Now, the land is in the process of being conserved, and this biodiverse forest will remain home to its wildlife. The owner stated to KCT that these writings played a role in his decision to consider conservation. Perhaps, the more we connect in a deep way, offering our presence, awareness, and compassion for the land and nature’s more-than-human beings, and then we express that connection through the arts, we offer a glimpse of it to others and can make changes for. In other words, through our expressive, creative connections, we allow the earth to speak through us, and to be heard.

**Discussion**

“Knowing that you love the Earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate. But when you feel that the Earth loves you in return, that relationship transforms from a one-way street to a sacred bond” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 124).
The community engagement project included the planning, implementation, facilitation and artistic reflection of two events that incorporated nature-based expressive arts experiences for community members. A review of the literature about nature’s healing impact, nature-based therapies, and nature-connected expressive arts therapy provided a foundation for the concepts and rationale behind the explorative events and informed the methods. Participants at both events were actively engaged and provided positive feedback on their experiences. I engaged myself in nature-connected expressive arts throughout the year-long process, to explore, plan, facilitate, and reflect.

I learn best through experience and reflecting on that experience, especially if the reflections are part of a process that triangulates the internal ways of knowing with external ways of knowing, such as professional literature and learning about other people’s experiences. The literature on nature’s healing impact, nature therapies, and nature-connected expressive arts therapy has supported and informed how I facilitated the events. The literature has also validated the importance and relevance for doing so, as well as bolstered understanding of my personal experience through nature-based expressive artmaking. A particularly prominent learning has been how to co-facilitate with nature, a foundational concept in nature-based therapies that I took from the literature and applied to the events. Creating, facilitating, and reflecting on the events has helped me to cultivate an array of skills, including flexibility, adaptability, openness, creativity, communication, connection with nature, and integrating the expressive arts and nature. An unexpected bonus in the process was that my own art has contributed to initial steps for the conservation of the aforementioned land.

I recommend that other mental health practitioners consider these outcomes and allow what resonates to inspire their own ways to connect with nature and to integrate the expressive arts and nature, for mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical wellness. These types of practices can also be used for self-care and for land advocacy in readers’ own communities. Engaging in nature-based expressive artmaking is a way to connect with nature’s more-than-human beings
and can act as a way to communicate with other people and raise awareness about the 
importance of treating land, the environment, and the more-than-human world respectfully, 
fostering a reciprocal relationship with Earth.

I’ve had the great privilege to live closely with nature throughout my life, an invaluable 
gift, whether witnessing wildlife, immersing in gardening, or having profound healing 
experiences. I have felt a strong urge not only to invite others towards this gift, but also to give 
back to the earth and the ecosystems of more-than-human inhabitants that have given so much 
to me. The particular piece of land in my community has been of special interest to conserve, an 
important biodiverse forest and wildlife corridor. As Maine’s coasts “develop” into massive 
houses for people who live in them for a couple months out of the year as second or third homes, 
the art I created helped to advocate for the wildlife and land inhabitants who have a right to 
exist and keep their home in this beautiful forest, serving as integral pieces of a larger ecological 
network. Building community around nature-connected artmaking is one way to contribute to 
such a cause by spreading awareness about this invaluable gift, one that has no price tag.

Sherri Mitchell (2018) calls for social action and indigenous wisdom to heal a broken, 
colonized society and reconnect with nature in deep, regenerative ways. “In order to live 
harmoniously with the rest of creation, we must be willing to listen to and respect all of the 
harmonies that are moving around us” (p. 14). Similarly, Ingerman and Roberts (2015) call for a 
“deep remembering” of who we truly are as people on this earth, that we are nature, and that 
our reciprocity with nature, being in a healthy relationship with nature and ourselves, is crucial 
to harmony and therefore survival. The expressive arts are an impactful way to foster our 
relationship with nature, to reconnect with our true essence through creativity, embodied 
presence, and mindfulness. These teachings resonate with the use of the expressive arts to 
cultivate awareness of our natural, more-than-human surroundings, and of the nature within 
ourselves, through somatic and imaginal mindfulness, and guided experiences with arts 
practices in nature. These practices facilitate human and more-than-human connection and
relational reciprocity, leading towards a more sustainable, regenerative, and respectful way of living. Hopefully, the more our connection with nature is healed, the healthier the whole of creation will be.
References


McNiff, S. (2021a, March). GEXTH 5122: Expressive Arts Therapy Studio [class discussion]. Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences, Lesley University, Cambridge, MA.


Appendix A (Methods)

Nature Walk & Inner Tracking Mindfulness Experience @ Emmons Preserve

Hosted by
Meg Marie

Details
Join Meg (she/her) for a nature-connection experience that combines mindfulness, guided imagery, and collective creative energy, informed by the natural rhythms of the land. We will begin with an introductory circle, walk through the trails, engage in mindful experiences throughout, and end with a closing circle. Anyone may join; no experience is necessary. Whether you're simply looking to engage in nature-connected experiences, want to meet other nature-curious folk, or interested in learning new ways to connect with nature and expand your tool box, this is for you!

You may wish to bring a notebook, writing utensils, and a cushion or blanket if you choose to sit for the guided mindfulness portion.

In order to heal ourselves and to heal this earth, we must heal our connection with nature. We must remember our interconnectedness and potential for the innate reciprocity with nature that each of us holds, which will lead to a more balanced, healthier, and happier world. Gathering on the land as a community fosters this co-creative relationship with each other, human and nature beings alike.

The event is free! Donations are appreciated, which will be given to the Kennebunkport Conservation Trust to support community efforts.
Kcoontrust.org

If you’d like to learn more about the facilitator Meg, she currently works toward a master’s in mental health counseling, and her thesis focuses on nature-based expressive arts therapy.

COVID-19 safety measures:

- Event will be outdoors
- Safety measures instilled by event host. Meetup is not responsible for ensuring that precautions are followed.

Figure 1. Screenshot of event posting on Meetup.com (2022).
January 2022

I lay my bare, already-cold hands on the even colder earth, and the frosty, stiff grass crunches slightly. I think, the ground should not be so bare this time of year, as I remember Januarys of younger days. Little patches of icy snow blink up at me as though they reflect the nighttime constellations above them. The rainstorm two days ago melted away most of their comrades. With no snow in the forecast presently, I wonder when we will all be blanketed with the next gift of restful calm that snow often brings. I suppose even without it, the cold and darkness invite us inward and into stillness, a time to put our efforts on hold, to wait and wonder in a wintry womb, in silence, as our seeds stratify. If we make it to spring, what will it bring?

No wonder so many people struggle this time of year in this part of the world. Not only physiologically, with less sunlight and warmth to receive much-needed vitamin D from the sun, but also mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Hope is at a low, as is the sun since December’s solstice. Our society continues to call for hard work, productivity, and high energy, despite the season’s beckoning for us to rest more at this time. Will we allow each other patience and forgiveness, especially towards ourselves, when we cannot fulfill these expectations, which are incongruent with our very nature?

I give a greeting of gratitude to the earth, saying to her, “I love you so much, more than I can even understand right now. I am you, and you are within me. May you be well.” And I lean down and kiss her, the cold grass contrasting with my own warmth, and I catch a glimpse of hope within the still, frozen sadness.

Figure 2. Journal entry, January 2022.
Figure 3. Oil pastels on 3”x 5” card paper & photograph. “Bark,” December 2021.

Figure 4. Oil pastels on four 3”x 5” cards. “Elements 1,” November 2021.
Figure 5. Photographs. “Fall to Winter,” October 2021, December 2021, February 2022.

Figure 6. Photo of handwritten songwriting. “Vernal Pool Song,” February 2022.
Appendix B (Results)

Figure 2. Photographs of the KCT trails on the day of event, February 2022.
Figure 2. Photography in the snow. “Processing the Work,” February 2022.
Figure 3. Photograph. “Inner Tracking Reflections,” February 2022.
Figure 4. Photographs. “Post-Event Reflection Time,” March 2022.
Figure 5. Photograph of oil pastel and colored pencil on eight 3” x 5” cards. “Circle of Seasons,” March 2022.
Appendix C

The Last Forest: Who Will Be Next?

I grew up in a stable home with privilege and lots of love, on the edge of a beautiful wild forest in the Goose Rocks area near the coast Maine. A curious and shy child, very drawn to nature, I spent a great deal of my time in these woods. Sometimes I’d split wood with my brothers and dad to heat our home, and other times my mom and I would walk our dog, an overly protective German Shepherd named Elsa. Most often, I spent time in these woods by myself, or at least in a sense, because I was not truly alone.

As long ago as I can remember, I imagined myself as kin to the nature beings, animals, and ancestors of the land. I never actually felt alone, but rather I felt more connected, alive, and invigorated in that forest than most other places and times in my life. Still today as an adult in my 30’s, when I’m in this forest, I sense that every cell in my body is somehow an important part of the complex interconnectedness of the forest and ecosystem, part of something much bigger than myself. The feeling envelops me, surrounds me, and indwells me. Somehow, my troubles disappear and I am at peace. Today, however, with the growing amount of development along Maine’s coastlines, this last forest of Goose Rocks may not remain intact, its intricate networks disconnected.

While recently visiting friends about 3 hours northwest of Kennebunkport, in a very remote town of 40 people along the Magalloway River, we spotted moose tracks and scat. It reminded me that there were once moose in the forest at Goose Rocks. We used to see them quite often moseying around our house, walking through our driveway or swimming in the pond. My parents would caution us to be careful around them, to back away slowly. Even our dog Elsa, usually brave and assertive, would obsequiously retreat and give the moose space. I remember one day biking home from working at the Goose Rocks General Store, stopping immediately in my tracks upon turning into the driveway, because a moose stood about 50 feet away from me, right in front of our shed. I did not feel afraid but instead felt awe, reverence, and curiosity.

No moose have been spotted in the Goose Rocks area for many years now. I have seen bear signs and heard of one spotted a few years ago, but I wonder, how long will it be before bears leave this place for good? In the spring very close to my parents’ home, I’ve heard male bobcat mating calls at night, an eerie yet thrilling sound to witness. Will they be next to leave? What about the deer, owl, snowshoe hare, fox, coyote, and many others who contribute to the overall functioning of the forest? Who will next be displaced from their homes, and when?

As housing developments continue, blasting away ledge for foundations of summer homes, as folks plaster their lawns in herbicides and pesticides, killing so-called “weeds” that otherwise would support the native pollinator population, I wonder, what will happen to the interconnection of the natural ecosystems in which we live, of which we are an important part? We have a choice of how to create development. We can choose to develop new ways for people to live that are in harmony with larger natural systems. We can choose to interact with nature in a way that honors every living being and their right to be on this earth, including ourselves, to have a natural, healthy, whole and connected place to call home. What is healthy for nature’s land is healthy for people too. Who will be here next? What do we hope for this land to be like for the next generations to come?

Figure 1. “The Last Forest: Who Will Be Next?” Fall 2021.
Amazing stillness. Deep in the silent woods, I turn left off the purple path just before the first swamp area and sit cross-legged on one of the large mossy rocks. There is no snow on the ground. The sun shines through the trees, the air is cold, no breeze. I connect with the forest, feel many presences watching me, more than usual this time, with an intensity as though I could reach out and turn the air into clay. I take my gloves off and place my bare hands on the rock, feeling both the rough coolness of stone and the soft, soothing warmth of dry moss. I breathe, send energy into the earth through the rock, imagine it ripple out in large circles, encompassing the entire forest, over 100 acres. Again I notice, as I had the last couple of days, very little animal activity, despite feeling such strong presence. Not even the usual Squirrel or Chickadee shows themselves. None, so far, actually.

After some time sitting this way, feeling the ground, trying to sense some kind of activity, I ask the forest to give me a sign. I’m not sure of what at first, not sure what I’m asking. Hmm. About this skepticism that won’t seem to shake. A sign to validate. Yes, to validate that my actions to protect this forest matter to their outcome. I ask for a sign by the time I get back to the house. Almost immediately, I hear a distant animal call, coming from somewhere in front of me, far enough that it’s barely audible to me. I respond, oh, the sign didn’t need to be that soon, but thank you anyway. But, wait, I ask, it needs to be much more obvious than that. Yes, please, I would like an obvious sign before I get back home. And not just about protecting the forest, but validation that all of this is real. All that I believe, the inexplicable transformations I have witnessed, the way I see healing happen, and the way I hope to serve the world. Is the magic real? I sense the spirits of beings who’ve spoken and shown themselves to me over time, ever since I was a child, walking, playing and imagining in the woods. I focus on their presence and want to know, is all of it real, I ask again. I plead for a sign.

After sitting there for some time, feeling into my question as an enormous dome of wonder and sparkling gold light, I realize it’s time to head back, the sun is about to set and it will get dark soon. Still silence. I put my gloves back on and look around one last time. Again I feel that unquestionable presence, and this time it feels like a sturdy vine connecting my heart to somewhere above my head. Exhale, well then. Inhale, get up. Within the moment that I stand, as quietly as I can without using my hands, right as I rise up to my full height, a huge span of wings flies downward from behind me, within inches above my head, then swoops back up in front of me and perches in the tree just ahead of me. She is about 20 feet away, diagonally above. I raise my head to meet her eyes. Her round head turns around in small, graceful movements, and I see her white face and feathered body, mostly white with some speckled-brown, in contrast amidst the bare branches and snowless backdrop. Surprise, enchantment, amazement.

I speak to her in my mind, I do not intend to harm you, I send my heart energy to you. Thank you for showing yourself to me. Her head turns again as I take another careful step closer, and she looks right at me, we lock eyes. What a precious, beautiful moment of awe and inspiration. I know this is the sign I asked for, although the skeptical parts of me hadn’t expected it. So synchronous, utterly and unquestionably magical. I watch her with pure joy and gratitude for an endless moment, every cell in my body smiling widely, every corner of my being breathing with exhilaration. Magic is real. It is in everything, and it is everything.