Lance Heard:

When you learn things, you're able to put that knowledge into action. I'd heard and I'd read about the Monarch Butterfly and the fact that the numbers are severely decreasing and it's disappearing in California. That was really what motivated me to find milkweed and plant it. To bring the milkweed back in California so that the butterfly has a place to thrive. I didn't know that that's the only plant that can nurture the Monarch Butterfly. I think the more that we can learn, the more that we can actually use what we learned to help make it a better place.

Christina Barsi:

Hi, I'm Christina Barsi.

Sun Ezzell:

And I'm Sun Ezzell, and you're listening to the Magic Mountie Podcast.

Christina Barsi:

Our mission is to find ways to keep your ear to the ground, so to speak, by bringing to you the activities and events you may not have time to attend, the resources on campus you might want to know more about, the interesting things your colleagues are creating, and the many ways we can continue to better help and guide our students.

Sun Ezzell:

We bring to you the voices of Mount SAC from the classroom to completion.

Speaker 4:

And I know I want to achieve my goals, and I know that people here are going to help me to do it.

Speaker 5:

She is a Sociology major, and she's transferring to CalPoly Pomona! Psychology major. English major.

Sun Ezzell:

I'm transforming part-time into full time.

Speaker 6:

Really like the time that we spent with Julie about how to write a CV and a cover letter...

Christina Barsi:

Or just finding time to soak in the campus.

Speaker 7:

Think of the natural environment around us as a library.

Christina Barsi:

We want to keep you informed and connected to all things Mount SAC. But most importantly, we want to keep you connected with each other. I'm Christina Barsi, Mt. SAC alumni, and producer of this podcast.

Sun Ezzell:

And I'm Sun Ezzell, Learning Assistance Faculty and Professional Learning Academy Coordinator.

Christina Barsi:

And this is the Magic Mountie podcast.

Sun Ezzell:

Welcome back to our summer mini series on nature. This week, we continue a conversation with Lance Heard that we started last summer. In today's episode, let share some ideas for staying connected to nature in our increasingly online work lives, guides us through how to forest bathe and why, and walks us through some of his favorite resources for discovering more about the natural world around us. So put on your forest bathing shoes and let's get started.

Sun Ezzell:

So last summer, when we talked for the podcast, we had a wonderful conversation. We met over at the koi pond and had a great conversation about spending time in nature and how it kind of ground and connect us. And thank you so much for joining again this summer to continue our conversation.

Lance Heard:

Well, I really appreciate you having me, and I love the idea of an ongoing conversation that, I think we talked about before, it would be great to more people on campus. And so I know we haven't forgotten that even during these interesting times this past semester. So I look forward to seeing what we can do no matter what the school year looks like in the fall.

Sun Ezzell:

That would be wonderful, I hope we can work on that together. Are there spaces on campus that you are missing right now that we've been working from home?

Lance Heard:

Yeah. In fact, I was just thinking about that recently. One of the things that, obviously for me, I'm spending a lot of time on Zoom and Zoom meetings, and I have started the, it's kind of one of my efforts to use a background screen for my Zoom, because when I'm outside and sometimes I'll do Zoom meetings outside and I have some natural backgrounds, but when I'm inside, I prefer to throw up a background on my Zoom meetings, and I've been thinking about the pleasant visual that I can offer as a gift to the people I meet with. And so, because of the idea that we talked about in the past about natural scenery and outdoors and trees and forests, how that benefits us when we see those, I have been collecting kind of a catalog of natural scenes to show.

Lance Heard:

And one the ones I commonly use is of the koi pond from a picture I took when you and I met there. And so when I go into a Zoom meeting and I picked the koi pond, it reminds me of how much I miss being there. And another one of the backgrounds I use for my Zoom meetings is the wildlife sanctuary. And of course that reminds me of how many walks I enjoyed there last year and how I would love to get back to doing that as soon as possible.

Sun Ezzell:

That's such a lovely idea to infuse our technology experiences with some nature. You said that you mentioned the impact that seeing natural spaces has on us and can you talk a little bit more about that?

Lance Heard:

Certainly. So one of the things that I learned when I became a certified forest therapy guide is the connection that we have with nature. And just one of the aspects where we get our wellness from is through our senses. And so simply seeing nature, smelling nature and hearing nature are three of the powerful senses from which we can quickly connect to the world around us. And so on my walks, and part of the research that I did when I was training to become a guide, is I read The Nature Fix, which is a book written by Florence Williams. And what I love about that book is she consolidates much of the research that's gone on around the world, in this area. In fact, during her writing of the book, she actually participated in some of the research from some of the groups that she was interviewing.

Lance Heard:

And so you really get a firsthand experience of what it's like to find yourself out in nature. And as she was writing the book, they were actually testing her and seeing the impact that seeing nature had on her. And so a lot of the research was done on, going outside, spending time, let's say, in a forested area, and just doing as little as possible. So many of us, we have these hobbies, and we like to go on hikes we like to go on trail running or maybe mountain biking, and we all know the benefits of these things, but those are designed with a purpose. When you go out into nature without a purpose, you're just able to just be there and then let your senses take over, let your body takeover. You get to see things you didn't notice before, maybe on a walk or a hike or a run.

Lance Heard:

You get to smell things because you've slowed down enough to actually allow yourself to smell things and let your body react to that. And so while doing it outdoors is perhaps the best way for us to get that visual experience, how many times do we have that opportunity? For many of us who work indoors or for other reasons, we find ourselves indoors. There have been studies on looking at visuals, whether that's photographs or other kinds of images. I mean, think about those of us who have the digital televisions and flat screen TVs. Many of the smart televisions will have these links where you can go and look at nature images. And many people find themselves going to that if they turn their television on. That's us reaching out for that nature connection while we're indoors. And so that's another benefit that we can get from it that we just do that.

Lance Heard:

In fact, one of the things that I've decided to do recently, and it was something that my mother reminded me of, she passed away a few years ago, and I always remember what a strong desire she had to grow plants, house plants. And it's something that really gave me edges and I was able to recently overcome my fear and the emotions of fear and frustration that I wouldn't be able to keep the plants healthy, or I find myself constantly trying to water them. And I actually started putting plants inside my home. And once again, it's not just an opportunity for me to see the plants, but it's also an opportunity for me to interact with them. And the contribution I make to the plants in my home, it's reciprocated because they do provide healthy air to breathe in our homes. And so it's this idea of being in nature and having a mutual benefit from the interaction that we have with it.

Sun Ezzell:

Well, congratulations on becoming a plant parent, that's exciting.

Lance Heard:

It is exciting. And I have a little story to share around that, so we recently went on a trip for our vacation and my number one concern around the vacation was my plant care during the time that I wasn't going to be home. So I realized that my trip wasn't going to be as pleasant as I hoped if I spent that time worrying about what was going on with the plants at home, so that was an interesting time.

Sun Ezzell:

So, so what did you work out? Did you get a plant sitter or...

Lance Heard:

Well, that was one of the options I looked at it and I liked the idea of doing that because we have had house sitters in the past, but this time I tried something different. I tried just to use a simple watering system. And I was amazed at how many innovative ideas there are now that we have access to the internet and I found a few of the innovative ideas and I tried one of them. And I'm kind of an experimenter, so I'll probably try some others in the future when I go on trips. But I liked the idea of finding that there are simple and affordable ways to accommodate our lifestyle, if you want to make changes like having an indoor garden,

Sun Ezzell:

Going back a minute, I'm so glad that you mentioned also, in addition to spending time outside, but looking at images of nature on our screens, because not everyone has a big backyard, or maybe doesn't have an opportunity to go walk in the gardens or go to the ocean, especially now with the situation with the virus. It made me think of how many places are doing nature cams now, for example, the Monterey Bay Aquarium, where you can take a peek at what the ocean looks like from their deck and so many other different nature cams.

Lance Heard:

I so agree with you. Going back to Zoom, one of the backgrounds I often share is a video of me sitting over the ocean, right? And you can see the movement of the water and the wind. And then I have another one of an aquarium where the fish are just so colorful and so vibrant and I get a lot of reactions from that. And it really makes me feel good that even if it's just for this meeting, perhaps I planted the idea right, in someone's mind that, "Hey, I want to do that when I have a chance," and so they can go out and explore and find some of those. I've always loved the webcam idea, dreaming about trips that I might go on or head out to take a look at the webcam and see how things are before the visit. And so I hope it's contagious I hope other people are catching that trend.

Sun Ezzell:

I think it is. One of my favorite webcams is the Monterey Bay Aquarium. They have the jelly cam and they play music and you can just watch the jellies sort of float across the screen, it's very calming.

Lance Heard:

So I really appreciate that because now I'm going to check that out. Thank you.

Sun Ezzell:

You're welcome, thank you. So I was wondering now that we're all working from home and spending much more time at home, are you noticing things in the natural world in your neighborhood that you maybe didn't have a chance to notice before?

Lance Heard:

I certainly am. It's funny because my first reaction to the circumstances was not to try to predict and not to try to guess what was going to happen, but just take each day and see what it brought. And one of the gifts I gave to myself was, I got a book called The Naturalist Notebook, and I just wanted to try it out and see where it would lead. And I've been fascinated by it because it's simply allows me to sit in one of my favorite nature spots and it could be for example, right in my front yard where I started a garden last year, and I love to go out there and sit there on a daily basis, but this is an opportunity for me to jot down what I'm seeing, right. And so I started doing that, and it's fascinating.

Lance Heard:

One of the local places by my house that I like to go regularly is Bonelli Regional Park, and they have a lake there, and a lot of people like to go there and not just to picnic and play in the park, but they'll go on walks and they'll ride their bikes. And I usually go out on the water because I find it very relaxing, enjoyable, and a healthy activity. But on the last visit, I actually just stopped and sat down and noticed a woodpecker. And I think it was the first time, now I've lived in this area for over 15 years, and I think it's the first time that I noticed a woodpecker in that area and I was fascinated by it. And I just sat there just taking it all in and, and saying, well, my next visit, I'm going to see if the woodpecker welcomes me. So that's just one example of the things that I'm thinking that the woodpeckers have had to been there in all this time, but it took me just quieting myself and not trying to go out on the water, not trying to make something out of my park visit to actually hear and notice what was going on very nearby.

Sun Ezzell:

That's really lovely. I can see how, for those of us who maybe aren't practiced at going out into nature and just doing nothing, The Naturalist Notebook can help us kind of pause right, and pay attention and be really present so that we can notice something to write down in the notebook.

Lance Heard:

It's really helping me. And so I highly recommended it. One of the things I like about it is, it's really brief. So the idea is you just make the shortest possible observation that comes to you. So it's not like, I feel like it's an assignment where I have to fill a page or a half page. Now, of course, if I want to write more, I can write more. And the idea around it is to cultivate our curiosity, that's all it is. So we hear things, we see things, we smell things. And we just ask, well, why is that happening? Or what is the woodpecker doing, is he building a nest, is he looking for food, right? Does he have, chick woodpeckers that he's caring for? Should I be looking out for them? Just having that curiosity, you never know what you'll discover. And so just becoming familiar with the birds in the area and the plants in the area makes it a more enriching experience. So when I go on walks, I often try to bring additional information with me, whether that's just checking out a YouTube video or actually finding someone who's experienced in nature to give you tips on what to look for and what you can learn from the environment. I find it makes it even more rewarding.

Sun Ezzell:

So, if I wanted to get started with forest therapy, and I know you have a whole episode of the podcast devoted to forest therapy, but if I wanted to go for a walk in my neighborhood, or even just in my backyard, can you give us kind of just like an easy tour of how could I get started?

Lance Heard:

Certainly, certainly. And before I do that, I will mention that many of the working guides are doing online walks. And so for those who have that level of interest, I would encourage them to go on the internet and you can have an opportunity to actually see and participate in one, especially if you're more of an experiential person to do that. So I just wanted to share that upfront. But for me you want to start with a space that you enjoy, an outdoor space you enjoy. And so I've done walks at a trail, that's about two miles from my home. So I haven't had to actually go far. For example, there's actually a trail that's right outside my backyard, which I could use. I have not used it for a walk, but I think I might do that now that I've mentioned it.

Lance Heard:

And so let's say that I was to choose that trail since it's the closest one to my house, right? So you select your trail and you basically tell yourself, you're making an agreement with yourself that you're going to spend your time just connecting with nature. And so what this is an acknowledgement that you want to experience what's going on in the present. And for many of us that were so, for a lot, good, bad, and in between, we're tied to our smartphones. And we do that in so many different ways and it can be enjoyable, but it can also be life altering. And so this is a time where you're going to say, "I'm not going to look at my phone. I'm not going to listen to my phone. I'm not going to be thinking about things that are on my phone, what I'm doing this afternoon, or the next day, I'm simply going to go in to and spend this time experiencing the nature around me."

Lance Heard:

And so that's the first thing you want to do. So what you're basically doing is you're kind of doing a switch, you're switching your mind off. And one of the things I like about that is we get to benefit from that, right? We get the opportunity to rest our minds, which is something that some of us are good at practicing and others could possibly do better at. So there's a real opportunity to take a break, right, especially a mental break, and so that's what we're doing. So then you simply notice what you're noticing. So let's say you're on that trail, you just stop there and ask yourself, what do you see? And perhaps there's a interesting plant or a flower or a tree nearby, and you're just taking it in. What does it look like? How do you react with what it looks like?

Lance Heard:

Is it nice to look at? You just want to stand there and enjoy it, or sit there and enjoy it. One of the things that helps the experience is noticing how your body reacts to your surroundings. And so there is some, what we call, embodiment to it. How do you feel standing there? How does the breeze feel on your skin? How does the ground feel under your feet? What that allows us to do is it allows us to just focus, and focus is the connection that allows us to experience nature in a different way, to actually be present with it. And so you want to spend time doing that before you just march into your trail. And that can take five, 10, 15, 20 minutes of just relaxing, where you are. During that time, you may not only notice how you feel, how your body feels, but you may notice what you hear.

Lance Heard:

And for example, bird life. Bird life is constant for many of us when we're outdoors, but how much do we actually notice the bird life and the sounds of the birds? And so there is an opportunity, if you have a place that you know of where you do hear and see birds, then that's a place that you'd want to choose, if you have that choice. The things that many of us are most drawn to are healing bird sounds, and the sounds of running water. So when you're thinking of a trail or a park or a spot, if it has one or both of those things, you found a spot that most likely you will be able to appreciate. And what are you doing? You're just simply listening. You're just simply letting your body experience the sounds around you, whether it's the squirrel in a tree, whether it's the bird flying around, whether it's a bee buzzing, whether it's a babbling brook, you're simply experiencing that.

Lance Heard:

So for however much that experience is, at some point, you will want to walk along your trail. And for those of us who hike, it's not a hike, it is a very slow movement with no particular destination in mind. It's moved from here to there slowly enough to see what you can see along your trail. And that experience is different from every person because we bring to it our own individual selves. And so it's not about trying to gain something from it or trying to understand something from it. It's just being present and experiencing it. So that's something that, just like being still and noticing what's around, you can take five, 10, 15 minutes of doing. Once you've gone on a little walk, what usually happens is you become aware of so many things you weren't aware of before. And so that might prompt you to want to explore them more.

Lance Heard:

You might've seen some leaves on the ground or a special plant that you wanted to smell the flower of. Because that's an opportunity to just invite yourself to go experience that plant. Or you might have crossed the stream and seeing some interesting pebbles in the water, you might want to go back and pick one of them up, do a treasure hunt and collect them. So this is just an opportunity for you to, now that you really are relaxed and you really are present, just to play, just to spend some quiet time playing in your little environment. And if you're drawn to the flowers and the plants, or if you're drawn to things you find along the trail or the animals, it's your choice to experience. After having an opportunity to do some of those things, indulge in some of those things, one of the best things you can do for yourself is just find a comfortable spot to sit in. Many people like to sit beside a body of water and just either look out over it or find something attractive and just contemplate it.

Lance Heard:

Some people like to journal during that time. I've often sat and sketched something that I found, and you let the moment kind of show you why you're there. Some of the things that I've suggested to people to do that I've done myself is maybe you did have something on your mind before you went on that walk. And I remember when I was a runner, many times I found myself when I went on a run, getting the answers to many of the questions I had during the day or during the week and I was always amazed by that. Well, you can do a similar thing when you go on a forest bathing walk, you can simply spend that time sitting and see if perhaps something isn't revealed to you about that question you had, a decision you were needing to make, or wherever it was that was on your mind before you went on that walk. So I've kind of summed up pretty much the three or four things that you would do on your own, trying out a walk.

Sun Ezzell:

Thank you so much. I feel like I had this peaceful experience listening to you describe that process. And as you were talking, I was remembering some of the really lovely walks that I've been lucky enough to experience at Descanso Gardens, the way the air is cooler under the oak trees and what the sunlight is like on the water at the pond at the arboretum. So thank you so much for sharing that with us.

Lance Heard:

My pleasure.

Sun Ezzell:

I was wondering, I can see how this is a very healthy thing for us to consider kind of working into our daily or our weekly practice, especially right now when maybe a lot of us are experiencing more stress or more fear than we have in the past. And we have maybe a little more control over our schedules. Do you have any suggestions for maybe those moments when we just feel really overwhelmed or really stressed or really fearful, and maybe we don't have a chance to go for a walk outside, but as there's something that's useful that comes out of forest bathing, that could be really useful to kind of help folks out right in that moment.

Lance Heard:

So that's an interesting thought and I kind of think about my own experience because I have found this to be a very challenging time. And I have found myself thinking more about what I'm lacking and what I'm missing. And so what I've discovered doing is focusing on what I have and what I'm appreciating. And so often for example, when I heard the bird sound earlier, I appreciate being able to simply hear the bird sound. When I'm looking out the window, I appreciate just the warmth of the sun and I start focusing on what is there right now or something I've just experienced recently that I really appreciate. I like spending those moments and I find it really changes the tenor of my mood and it can really affect the rest of the afternoon or the rest of my day when I do that.

Lance Heard:

And even if it's just to think back of my last experience, because that's one of the best things to do is just think back to one of those special moments and appreciating what I did have in that time and in that experience. One example I'll give you is the garden because I didn't know what was going to happen, it was an interesting situation. We were forced to do some landscaping in front of our home, and I just continued to go to work and walk by that space day after day. And I just came to the realization that by planting a few plants, it would become a garden and it would become a more usable space instead of just walking by it.

Lance Heard:

And I have spent so much time there just enjoying the birds that come through there now because of all the plants, the butterflies now, and I've gotten greedy. So I wanted to attract more butterfly. So recently I planted some milkweed in hopes to attract some Monarch Butterflies. And so I just appreciate being able to plant those plants and watch them grow. And it's little things like that, just thinking about I can do that and I'm thankful for that. So I think spending time remembering and thinking about what I can be thankful for and what I do have really centers me and gets me back to a healthier place.

Sun Ezzell:

That's really lovely. And I couldn't see how you're working to create more spaces like that in your home with your house plants and then out in your garden as well.

Lance Heard:

Absolutely. For example, I was thinking about, because I started the garden over a year ago, and I was thinking recently about how much it's changed and how much it's grown. And I'm already thinking about next year when the milkweed matures, I'm visualizing all these wonderful flowers. And I mean, I even getting pleasure out of that, something that I'm anticipating that hasn't even happened yet and I think it's because I can see what's already changed since last year, so I can anticipate seeing that in the days ahead.

Sun Ezzell:

And look through all the seed catalogs and plant catalogs and decide what else you'd like to plant to attract more butterflies.

Lance Heard:

I know, so I definitely want to, but you know how it goes and what I discovered when I experienced, I was just looking at the tiny little, I mean, they're less than half the size of the tip of my finger right now. And just imagining I was reading how they grow from two to five feet and I'm imagining, I can't imagine them being that big as I look at them right now.

Sun Ezzell:

Wow. Is that the milkweed?

Lance Heard:

That's the milkweed. Yes, that's the milkweed. So hopefully I will become a milkweed aficionado at some point and I'll have some, I actually have a few butterfly photographs that I've taken as they've come to visit the garden, so I'm looking to grow my butterfly images in the months ahead.

Sun Ezzell:

Oh, that's wonderful. We'll definitely have to have you back to give us the Monarch update.

Lance Heard:

Thank you.

Sun Ezzell:

You mentioned so many wonderful resources, The Nature Fix, The Naturalist Notebook, I was wondering, are there other resources as folks are listening to this episode and getting excited about doing some forest bathing or spending more time outside? Are there other resources you would like to share?

Lance Heard:

So generally speaking, it's great that there are, even on YouTube, there are short videos on how to do a nature experience or find a favorite spot to sit in. And so I really would encourage people to do their own research in that area. There are many books that are beneficial, in addition to the two I mentioned. I am a guide who is certified by The Association of Nature and Forest Therapy Guides and Programs. So their website is a tremendous resource for information about those who are really interested in what it has to offer. And the founder of that organization, Amos Clifford, he has a book called, Your Guide to Forest Bathing, that I highly recommend.

Sun Ezzell:

Great. Thank you. I was just taking notes on all those so we can include them in the show notes.

Lance Heard:

Excellent.

Sun Ezzell:

Well, Lance, thank you so much for joining us today to talk about spending time in nature and forest bathing and how we can create some opportunities to have beautiful experiences even at home, thank you so much.

Lance Heard:

Thank you Sue.

Sun Ezzell:

Thank you Lance, take care.

Christina Barsi:

Thank you for listening to the magic Mountie podcast. Remember to subscribe on Apple podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you like to get your podcasts so you can listen in the car in your office or however you like to listen. Once you subscribe, we'd love to hear what you think by leaving us a review and don't forget to share your favorite episodes.