

# Finding peace of mind with nature

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Photos courtesy: Adithi Muralidhar

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The world is running at a faster pace than ever before. Whether it is the access to digital technology or information overload, we are all living lives that are characterized by constant mental stimulation. And yet, if we decide we want to break away from it all, and gather ourselves to experience a moment of peace and calm, there is one timeless remedy that never ceases to disappoint. *Nature*.

Being in the midst of nature and observing nature has a profound impact on physical and mental health. This is not merely an experiential statement, but is also supported by a growing body of research (see References). Nature has the potential to instill calmness and a sense of wellbeing that can be transformative to human beings. It is no wonder that we often seek to escape into the mountains, beaches, and other picturesque locations to connect with the vastness and beauty of landscapes, the gentle rustling of leaves and the rhythmic flow of streams.

My own life in a chaotic metro city is punctuated by intervals of escaping into the wild. Somehow, these moments spent in the heart of the jungle seem to offset the bane of living in a polluted and crowded city.

The act of observing wild animals invokes a multisensory experience, and it requires one to have a heightened awareness. Take the classic example of walking through a forest. When you are walking deep into the jungle, looking to have an encounter with a wild animal, every fibre of your body is primed with anticipation, excitement, instinct, fear, and heightened senses. Not many situations can make you feel all of those things at once!

### Languid to lively afternoon

I remember this one lazy afternoon in December 2017. We were visiting the jungles of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The morning of that day, we spent more than six hours outside observing birds and butterflies. We thought to take a break in the afternoon, for most wildlife activity dips during the hotter periods of the day. I was seated in the balcony of our quaint homestay, browsing through the pages of my bird field guide. My eyes were almost drooping, but I was determined to stay awake. *Why waste precious day time in sleeping when you are in such a beautiful place*, I thought to myself. From the balcony, I could see some coconut trees between me and the stream which was no more than 50 metres away. As I gazed out at the charming landscape from the balcony, I noticed what appeared to be some movement near one of the trees. I walked

up to the edge of the balcony to get a better look and squinted my eyes to concentrate my view near the foliage surrounding one coconut tree. After a few minutes, I thought that perhaps my eyes had played a trick on me. I went back to where I was sitting.

A couple of minutes later, I saw movement again. But this time, the movement was on the tree itself. I got my binoculars out and there I saw it: a gigantic *monitor lizard* making its way up the tree.

The monitor lizard's scales blended seamlessly with the tree bark as it climbed upward, moving with a clumsy gait. My curiosity piqued, for I wondered if it had spotted something or was on the hunt. I checked the tree for nests or other forms of life. As the lizard circled the bark, I lost sight of it but caught glimpses of its sharp claws gripping the tree. Glued to the bark, the lizard seemed to be part of an unfolding drama, and my previously drowsy mind, was now on full alert, anticipating scenarios from a National Geographic documentary. The best part of this situation was that the lizard was not aware of my presence and therefore I got to observe an unadulterated episode of natural history: *a day in the life of a monitor lizard*.

A passing glance of this specimen could lead one to think of it as a baby crocodile, for monitor lizards can grow quite big. These carnivorous reptiles, native to Asia, Africa, and Oceania are known to defend their territories and hunt actively. But unfortunately, on this particular afternoon, while I hoped for a dramatic prey-predator scene, the lizard had decided to just explore around.

An hour passed, and I silently observed the lizard stuck to the bark and finally making its way down to the ground. Once it touched the ground, it was constantly flicking its tongue to get a sense of its surroundings. As the foliage it ventured into thickened, I sighed with sadness, realizing that my view would soon be obstructed. And as if on cue, it disappeared right in front of my eyes.

What I thought was going to be a lazy and sleepy afternoon, turned out to be quite an exciting nature observation spree. I am not sure what it is about such moments that manage to capture one's attention and set one's mind down a captivating path.

### Self-discovery through nature

Personally, it feels like the act of observing nature encourages a rare sense of mindfulness, a practice that involves being fully present in the moment without

judgment. Whether you are on a quest to look for wildlife, or you are observing birds or reptiles, or if it is even watching the sun dip below the horizon during the last few minutes of the day, or repeatedly watching the waves crash on the edges of the rocky cliffs, these experiences anchor individuals in the present giving them respite from the past and the future.

The beauty of nature observation is that it is not limited to “beautiful” places or “a specific time”. It’s a revelation when you realize you don’t have to be “in the middle” of a jungle to experience this feeling. You can experience it even in the most chaotic city where elements of nature thrive in the most unique micro-habitats: be it the black kites and cattle egrets opportunistically feeding from a pile of trash or a colony of frogs actively feeding on mosquito larvae in the gutters.

With a keen sense of observation now ingrained in my everyday life, I realized that I find unexpected delight when I see resilient wildlife fighting all odds in the dirty city sewers just to survive. No doubt, this is not the future we want for our urban biodiversity, but the sheer resilience of tiny creatures living in filth showcases nature’s adaptability. It translates into a positive message of strength and perseverance in us human beings who so often struggle to find meaning and strength to deal with complex situations. This message has the potential to etch in our minds a deeper appreciation for the simplicities of life and a fresh perspective on convoluted challenges in life.

Additionally, for me, observing nature seems to promote a sense of interconnectedness with the world around us. It makes us reflect on how we, as individuals or a community of human beings, are connected to the web of life and how our actions have repercussions on all living and non-living things around us. It leads us to a corridor of introspection and contemplation. This awareness can also help develop a sense of humility

and responsibility towards the environment, which I feel is much needed in today’s world.

In summary, I would argue that observing wildlife and natural habitats is not just a way to quench one’s stress and curiosity, but rather it is an introspective journey that nurtures the peace of mind and body. It does seem like nature is the precious antidote we have all been looking for our entire lives!

**Note:** The above article has excerpts from a previously published blog post by the author and can be found here <https://earthlynotes.com/2019/11/16/an-afternoon-with-a-giant-lizard/>.

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