



# AWAKENING TO NATURE

RENEWING YOUR LIFE BY CONNECTING  
WITH THE NATURAL WORLD

CHARLES COOK

# AWAKENING TO NATURE

RENEWING YOUR LIFE

BY CONNECTING

WITH THE NATURAL WORLD

CHARLES COOK



CONTEMPORARY BOOKS

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Cook, Charles, 1945—

Awakening to nature : renewing your life by connecting with the natural world / Charles Cook.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-8092-2399-6

1. Nature. 2. Human ecology. 3. Natural history. I. Title.

QH81.C745 2001

508—dc21

00-64349

***Contemporary Books***



*A Division of The McGraw-Hill Companies*

Copyright © 2001 by Charles Cook. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. Except as permitted under the United States Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 AGM/AGM 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 0-8092-2399-6

This book was set in Adobe Jenson

Printed and bound by Quebecor-Martinsburg

Cover design by Monica Baziuk

Cover photo copyright © Ed Dimsdale/Photonica

McGraw-Hill books are available at special quantity discounts to use as premiums and sales promotions, or for use in corporate training programs. For more information, please write to the Director of Special Sales, Professional Publishing, McGraw-Hill, Two Penn Plaza, New York, NY 10121-2298. Or contact your local bookstore.

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

*This book is dedicated to everyone who longs to reconnect  
with the wild heart and soul of nature .*

## INTRODUCTION

YOUR DEEPEST ROOTS are in nature. No matter who you are, where you live, or what kind of life you lead, you remain irrevocably linked with the rest of creation. Your ancestors arose and evolved within the heart of the natural world; nature is the birthplace and spiritual home of your species. Whether you're aware of it or not, you still have a vital need for regular, meaningful contact with this nourishing realm.

Your predecessors shared the natural landscape with an extremely rich and diverse community of life, and within this vibrant universe the defining characteristics, unique qualities, and current potentialities of human beings were molded. Hundreds of millennia of nature-based living helped shape your genetic and physical makeup, your instincts and intuitions, your emotions and desires, and your spiritual longings.

Consider the increasingly synthetic and frenetic world we occupy now, which couldn't be more different from that of our origins. It's not surprising that some of us feel like displaced per-

sons, partly because our society changes more rapidly than we can easily adapt to, and it leaves some of our essential non-material needs unmet. Of course, our consumer culture provides us with countless pleasures and benefits, which is why most of us remain loyal subjects; but it also gives short shrift to nature and promotes technology-mediated living. Nature-based ways have been abandoned, and most of us spend the bulk of our waking hours indoors, occupying artificial spaces and surrounded by countless products of the human mind. Not coincidentally, our lives have become more stressful, unbalanced, and unhealthy.

Such changes are extremely recent for the human species, so they've barely begun to alter our basic makeup. If we were somehow to come face-to-face with our early ancestors, we initially would have trouble communicating with them, and the cultural and technological gaps between us would be enormous, but we would probably discover that most of our fundamental needs remain similar.

Nature still runs rampant in our bloodstreams and souls, no matter how many layers of civilization we impose on ourselves, how many years of education we undergo, how many technologies we surround ourselves with, or how many walls we build to isolate, insulate, and protect ourselves from the wild. Some of us know and feel this instinctively, but there are also forces in our world that encourage us to dissociate ourselves from the deeper realities of who we are and what we need in life.

Although separating ourselves from nature won't necessarily prove fatal, at least in the short run, we can expect to eventually pay a steep price psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually. The overall quality and depth of our lives are certain

to be diminished when we're cut off from nature, and we're less likely to feel at home here on earth, although we might not always recognize what's missing. Becoming a reasonably whole and contented human being is never easy nor guaranteed in this life, where the obstacles of the modern world are many and daunting, but it's especially difficult when we lack regular access to the beauty, inspiration, meaning, and sustenance of the natural realm.

Perhaps you don't need convincing. Most of us harbor positive associations and feelings about nature, and some of us are fortunate to have had experiences that helped us bond with the natural world. Few of us are immune to nature's attractions, although not everyone may acknowledge it; recognizing one's need or love for nature in a culture that devalues it can be painful. If we're willing to venture out, though, how many of us can resist the sensory delights of wild nature, especially when the natural landscape is in full bloom, or fail to feel excitement when encountering wildlife? Who among us hasn't sometimes longed to flee our stuffy spaces for the wilder, greener, more peaceful places of nature, or fantasized about abandoning the rat race and relocating to a tropical island or a mountaintop retreat?

Indeed, you'd have to be seriously numbed or alienated to be incapable of responding to the natural world. Imagine being left cold by a spectacular mountain or canyon vista, or the piercing music of birdsong, or the pounding of ocean surf on a windy day, or sweet meadow fragrances, or the warmth of the sun's rays in early spring, or the impossibly rich colors of fall foliage, or the mesmerizing roar of a waterfall, or the weird harmonies of a chorus of coyotes, or the wide-eyed stare of an elk at close range,

or the sight of waterfowl gracefully taking flight from a wild lake, or an open view of the vast glittering night sky . . .

So much of what makes up the natural world resonates with us, stirs us, or soothes us. A few elements may irritate or frighten us, especially at first, but most negative reactions fade with experience. Deep in our bones we still possess a strong, species-wide affinity for other living things, and many of us find we're most content when we have close, frequent contact or communion with the natural world. Nature is like food for us—nourishment for the body, the senses, the mind, the spirit, the soul.

What then is to be done about our predicament as citizens of a de-natured culture? The challenge we face is clear: how can we ever live successfully and sanely in this society, which requires so much time and energy for most of us to meet our basic needs, and still maintain a meaningful relationship with nature? The solutions may not be entirely simple or easy to carry out, but most of us can unquestionably do much more to integrate nature into our lives. One of the purposes of this book is to show you how.

No, you don't need to drop out, relocate permanently to a remote wilderness area, and take up residence in a tent in order to develop a deeper relationship with the natural world. Nor do you have to make great sacrifices or invest huge amounts of time, although the more hours you can spend in natural surroundings, the more you're probably going to benefit. You may want to change some elements of your life to make it more nature-friendly, but the choices are entirely yours to make. If you're a city dweller, you should find a number of options available close to home. Wherever you happen to live, be aware that connecting with nature can be so gratifying that it might become one of the most important and meaningful relationships you know.



And can you really afford to do otherwise? Modern life with its manic pace obviously has the makings of an extremely stressful journey. Fortunately, nature provides a perfect antidote to many of the imbalances, absurdities, and insanities—offering limitless opportunities for relaxation, solitude, contact with countless other living things, the exploration of lovely scenery, and as much exercise as we want. Our health, well-being, and state of mind can only benefit—as can our spiritual life, our sense of meaning, and our ability to know life as something much richer and deeper than the often limiting experiences of everyday existence.

Because of the radically new ways human beings have learned to live in modern times, which have led to such a diminished relationship with the natural world, our culture has come to think and speak of nature as something totally separate from us. Such a concept is alien, of course, to the indigenous peoples of the world. It's actually an error in perception to see nature as "other." Your body is as nature-based as that of any animal in the wild. Every particle in every cell of your body comes from nature. Every aspect of your physical and emotional makeup has evolved over time in the course of your ancestors' interactions with the elements of the primordial landscape. That we consider nature to be a completely separate entity is one of many signs of our disconnection from the earth.

As a culture, we also shrink from acknowledging that we're dependent in any way upon nature or the workings of the living world. This is another indication of our alienation, and it helps explain how we've been able to engage in such self-destructive practices as poisoning our own water and air and exploiting other precious natural resources. However, it's obvious that we're fully a part of the earth's web of life and can't possibly exist with-

out it, regardless of how civilized we supposedly are or how self-sufficient and independent we may feel.

None of us can breathe without the oxygen exhaled by trillions of trees and other plants that blanket the surface of this beautiful blue-green planet. Nor can we live without a stream of clean water flowing through our bodies. Nor will we exist for long without the intake of food furnished by the earth's flora and fauna. Our long-term survival and that of other species depend on our adoption of a more planet-respecting perspective—one that acknowledges our dependence upon the earth's ecosystems and embraces the knowledge and wisdom that our well-being is invariably interconnected with that of other living things.

Stop for a moment and take a look out the nearest window. Notice what predominates in the view before your eyes. Is it nature or the man-made world that prevails? Or a mix of both? If the vista is mainly natural and it's available to you on a daily basis, you have something to be thankful for; merely having regular visual access to nature can benefit your life in a number of ways. Now try an easy exercise, if you're so inclined and assuming a few elements of nature are within sight: spend a few minutes simply gazing out, resting your eyes on whatever natural forms you see. Then notice your thoughts and feelings. Has your mind become quieter? Is your body more relaxed? Is there any detectable improvement in your mood?

As you may already know, it's difficult to stay stressed out or maintain a negative mood while quietly focusing or meditating on nature. You'll often feel noticeably better after spending even a short time soaking in some natural scenery. The positive effects will be magnified when you actually get outdoors and

interact directly with nature. For example, simply walking in the woods or sitting in the grass (the quieter and more secluded the area, the better) is capable of markedly improving your state of mind and, if you're sufficiently receptive, sometimes transforming it.

The truth is there's no healthier or more effective way to temporarily disconnect from everyday stress—and at the same time raise your spirits—than by removing yourself from the confinement of the four-walled world and immersing yourself in nature. Even a fifteen-minute break or an hour at lunchtime can help; a much longer period is preferable whenever possible, especially if you're someone who's suffering from nature-deprivation, overwork, or burnout. Large natural areas are ideal, but even the smallest city park will sometimes offer a gratifying degree of respite and restoration.

Recreating or resting in nature won't solve all your problems, of course, and the difficulties of the day will usually await your return. You'll sometimes find, though, that troubles shrink to more manageable sizes while you're away, and you can later view them "through fresh eyes" from a more balanced perspective affected by your experiences in nature.

At the same time, you don't need to be a nervous wreck to reap rewards from spending time in the natural world. Feeling at one with the universe, or uncommonly happy should you be so fortunate, certainly doesn't require you to stay home; nature is one of the best places to be when you're in such a mood. Whatever your circumstances or state of mind, you'll find no ceiling on the potential benefits you can tap into in nature.

The positive effects of spending time in the wild are many; some are subtle, others more striking. For example, regular con-

tact with nature is capable of enriching the content and quality of our dreams, stimulating an intensified sense of aliveness, eliciting feelings of excitement and joy, and awakening in us a strong awareness of our close relatedness to other living beings—resulting in a much deeper connection with our wilder “brethren.” We may be inspired to engage in soulful inner explorations that can lead to major improvements in our lives.

Some of us find ourselves falling into a passionate, lifelong love affair with nature. Others develop a more sober respect, seeking out nature for wisdom as one would a great teacher or mentor. Still others are filled with a feeling of profound reverence in nature’s presence and come to see her extraordinary manifestations as expressions of god or spirit.

Our inner experiences in nature aren’t always easily conveyed to the uninitiated. Skeptics abound in our culture, of course, and some will assume our epiphanies are merely the effects of being exposed to such pleasurable and healthful elements as fresh air, sunshine, exercise, lovely scenery, and being able to rub elbows with an array of interesting living things. It’s hard for those who have no firsthand experience to understand that such an underadvertised and underappreciated realm as the natural world can actually offer some of the deepest satisfactions, fulfillments, and sources of meaning available to us.

To those who are used to finding life a constant struggle or have been taught that everything comes at a price, some of the rewards may sound too easy to achieve and too good to be true. After all, these benefits are totally free and available to anyone who knows how to reap them. Our culture’s complicated requirements don’t apply. We’re often taught, especially by our media, to view the wild as a dangerous place, and at first we may

have difficulty accepting the truth that nature is actually safer in many respects than civilization. Of course, we need to know how to take care of ourselves there; nature can be unforgiving to those who are reckless or unprepared. However, with the proper know-how, the risks are minimal and the rewards infinite.

The kinds of benefits that come more easily than we expect include feeling unaccountably high or ecstatic “without having done anything” except sit quietly in a pristine setting, or experiencing a deep sense of connectedness with other life-forms, or discovering easy yet profound insights into complex problems, or finding our consciousness flooded with an overwhelming feeling of peacefulness. Science might be able to offer some possible explanations, but many mysteries remain in nature and life. Thankfully, we don’t need to fully understand what happens to us in the wild to be deeply affected or changed by it.

So how do we get started? Where do those of us who have been living a relatively nature-deficient life begin? How is it possible to get on a more nature-oriented path? How might we invite nature into our daily lives? What can we do to develop a meaningful and lasting personal relationship with nature?

Probably the most basic and obvious action some of us need to take is to make more room for nature in our everyday lives—to allot more time in our schedule to be outdoors. If you don’t already spend at least a few hours in the natural world each week, try to start doing so now. A minimum of an hour or more each day would be ideal, along with some weekends devoted to nature-based recreation or leisure.

But if visiting nature on a regular basis is currently impossible for you, or if transporting yourself to a natural area is prob-

lematic, don't despair. In a later chapter will be a discussion on how to maintain a connection with nature when you're stuck indoors and unable to get out often. If an overload of work is keeping you inside, incidently, how about transporting some tasks, such as paperwork or reading, to a nearby park? You're sure to benefit from being there no matter what you're doing.

The options open to us in the wilder places are almost unlimited. A few of the possibilities include such ordinary everyday activities as walking, picnicking, and socializing with family or friends; participating in more adventurous and physically demanding pursuits like hiking, canoeing, rafting, cycling, or horseback riding, either for the day or while camping out; engaging in bird-watching, identifying plants, animal tracking, and other nature studies; and experiencing the natural world in more contemplative ways such as meditating or quietly communing with nature. Many of the choices that are available to us will be examined in this book.

While almost anything we do in a natural setting can help us feel more connected, there are ways we can intentionally increase and intensify our awareness. These will be invaluable in helping us fully awaken to nature, which offers the potential of renewing or transforming our lives. Throughout this book are many ideas and suggestions that will assist you in getting closer to and communing with the natural world, including a number of explorations of various elements of nature in Part II.

Have you ever spent time consciously communing with nature? If not, it's time to try. Have you ever been immersed in the natural world for an entire day or longer, completely free of everyday distractions? This, too, should be on your agenda. Do you know what it's like to relax in a natural setting without need-

ing to accomplish anything? It's a way to unwind more completely than some of us have ever experienced. Not to criticize goal-oriented behavior, but some of us have been so indoctrinated in the importance of productivity, believing we must always have "something to show for our day," that we're incapable of taking time off for ourselves to totally relax.

Have you ever had the experience of feeling "at one with nature"? Have you ever felt like a full-fledged member of the natural order and not merely a lone individual in search of personal contentment? With a surprisingly small amount of effort on your part, these experiences await you. Imagine what it might be like to feel intensely alive and aware, with your senses wide open, yet calmly and completely in harmony with your surroundings. Imagine being unhurried and undistracted, with a deep sense of relatedness to the natural world, as if you were fully a part of the living, breathing landscape yet still a citizen of the human community. If you find this hard to visualize, fear not. We're all capable of expanding our horizons and boundaries to encompass nature.

Try to also imagine what it might be like to absorb some of nature's vital energies into your body, mind, and spirit on a regular basis and bring them back home with you. Imagine becoming more completely grounded and connected with the earth. Can you sense how your inner life might be enriched by your experiences in nature? How they might enliven your participation in the human drama? How your whole being might be strengthened or healed? How you might be inspired to live more fully and deeply?

Whatever steps you need to take to make room for nature in your life won't feel like a sacrifice, at least not for long. The

rewards you'll receive from connecting with the natural world are more reliable than most things in life, and they'll be quickly self-reinforcing. Anything you give up is almost guaranteed to be greatly outweighed by the gifts you'll gain.

What happens to us out there in the wild sometimes seems magical, but it's also wise to refrain from idealizing or sentimentalizing nature. Life perpetually preys on other life, after all, and harshness as well as suffering is a part of the total picture. Yet it's impossible to overestimate what the natural world has to offer us. Among other considerations, many of the missing pieces and answers to personal and societal problems tend to turn up there. Nature is a place where a more complete perspective on life can be acquired, where invaluable wisdom awaits the sincere seeker. Ultimately, beyond the splendid landscapes, the fascinating forms, the interesting flora and fauna, and other external enticements lies one of the most meaningful, spiritually expansive, and sacred places we'll ever know—where human beings still belong, although too many of us have lost touch with this truth. Enter this land and your life can only be enriched.



## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK is to help you connect with nature. In the chapters that follow you'll find hundreds of ideas, thoughts, and suggestions intended to assist and inspire you—whether you're a total beginner or a seasoned devotee—to cultivate a more meaningful relationship with the natural world, integrate nature more completely into your life, and experience more fully the joys and benefits of communing with the wild.

Although the chapters may be read sequentially, which is indeed advisable in Part I for those who are inexperienced in the natural world, this isn't essential. Some nature-related topics may be of more interest to you than others, so feel free to skip around as much as you like. Pay special attention to any subject matter that resonates strongly for you. While the book may be read for pleasure, you're encouraged to use it in a way that energizes and motivates you to interact with nature.

The twelve chapters of Part I, "Getting Closer to Nature," address a broad range of subjects related to the process of con-