

Reflections On A Youth Outdoors

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As the whirlwind of autumn transitioned through a cicada-filled-September to an overflowing-goldenrod-October to a finally-frosty-November, I've felt a bit more wistful than usual. Fall has always been my favorite season.¹ I've always loved the riotous leaves, the frosty mornings paired with warm afternoons, and looming promise of all my favorite holidays. I've also – somewhat unpopularly – always loved the start of a new school year, with its fresh, blank notebooks and its neat, not-too-crowded schedules promising a well-organized semester. While neither the notebooks nor the schedules ever remain as organized and uncrowded as hoped, I found myself having to try a bit harder than usual to find that optimism this September.

Looking back on it, I've decided that the added wistfulness – and, I'll admit, touch of dread – has stemmed not only from the inevitable exhaustion of starting my 20th year of school (yikes!), but from an odd feeling of a summer skipped. I've no right to feel like I skipped the summer, really: I took time off work with my family, I traveled to new states and hiked new trails, I dipped my toes in the ocean and did every other obligatory summer activity. But despite that schedule of vacations, despite the plethora of heat waves and mosquitos and cicadas experienced, I still feel like I missed out on something critical from the Summer of 2023.

And, as I've trudged between my apartment's desk and my office's desk over the last few months, I've finally realized why: this was the first summer I can remember that I didn't get to spend outside.

I had a lucky string of jobs that made so many outdoor summers possible. My first jobs in high school and college comprised leading backpacking trips for a summer camp, maintaining wildness areas for NYC's Central Park, and wandering the preserves of the Kent Land Trust itself for a variety of conservation-related tasks. Even the past few summers – during which I've been employed full-time as a researcher – I spent most of the season writing or taking Zoom calls with the verdant surroundings of my parent's deck, or, on less busy days, traveled up to the beautiful preserve at Sharon Audubon Center to help tend their menagerie of birds, snakes, and turtles.

No such luck this year. In proper, grown-up fashion, I spent my longest days of summer instead trekking into the office and plunking down in front of my laptop. I didn't have much choice about it – I'm entering the third year of my PhD program, which left me with a heap of work to do: preparing for my first presentation at an academic conference, prepping mathematical models for publications, and steadily working my way through the piles of pre-existing research that should, hopefully, contain whatever information I'll need to eventually get a degree out of it all. Sounds fun, right?

But as drab as the day-to-day of my current desk job feels after all those happy summers outside, I can't deny that it was the joy of the outdoors that got me to this desk in the first place.

I probably wouldn't have ended up at a rural liberal arts college intent on introducing me to field botany, mathematical biology, and environmental policy had I not grown up rambling through the forests of Kent – and especially had I not spent my summers working with different conservation organizations to protect those forests. And without the college experiences my first jobs led me to, I doubt I would have sought out my current ecology graduate program in the first place.

¹ This is true except for when my favorite season is spring. It's tough to pick between fall leaves and spring flowers, so I'm allowed to have two!

Spending formative years in a beautiful town, tucked between rolling hills of intact forests and learning not only how to clean up a trail or replant native underbrush, but why we would bother to do so, instilled a strong passion for environmental work. I am certainly not the only Kent native to have this experience. My oldest friends – classmates from glorious KCS Class of 2012 – have often remarked during reunions on how many of us have gone into some corner of conservation or another. My older brother, who held many of the same jobs that I did, now works as a project manager for the National Forest Foundation, facilitating critical fire management and ecosystem restoration in California.

This is the power of youth engagement.

Each and every one of us who has grown up to take on challenging environmental work in adulthood did so with a background that taught us why that work mattered. We took field trips to explore the Housatonic River, Macedonia Brook State Park, and Marble Valley Farm; we hiked up the Appalachian Trail, Cobble Mountain, Numeral Rock, and Bulls Bridge, exploring our valley; we worked for the Kent Land Trust, the Sharon Audubon Center, the Housatonic Valley Association, building skills and knowledge alike. We learned every day to care for the beautiful places around us, and we took that care with us into adulthood.

As morose as I sometimes am to see that my all-outdoors summers are, for now, something of the past, I can't ignore the power they had in shaping my current goals. My highest ambitions for the research I do today is to have a positive impact on the conservation missions that got me into this work in the first place. By inducting my peers and I into the task of caring for the natural world, our smatterings of outdoorsy summer jobs, naturalist mentors, and well-conserved surroundings created a force of dedicated people, ready to advocate and care for our planet.

This positive feedback between teaching young people how to care for the nature around them and they, in turn, shaping the next generation to care for that world is a key reason that programs like KLT's summer internships are so important. Engaging the next generation by sharing not only our passions, but also our skills, is how conservation work has always been passed on. That legacy continues with every opportunity we have to take a walk in the woods, to share our favorite paths and trees, and to bring our family, friends, and neighbors outside with us.



Alison, center, on Kent Mountain in 2017 with a visiting Americorps NCCC team, while serving as KLT's Summer Intern