**Director’s Corner: Lessons from Nature**

“The lasting pleasures of contact with the natural world are not reserved for scientists but are available to anyone who will place himself under the influence of earth, sea and sky and their amazing life.”

Rachel Carson

Ten years ago, our educators discussed Richard Louv’s 2005 book, “Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder.” Louv’s aim was to encourage discussion of “the increasing divide between the young and the natural world, and the environmental, social, psychological, and spiritual implications of that change” (p. 2). Since that time, we have worked more purposefully to include nature in the classroom, focus more on “nearby nature”, make our school more “green”, and improve our “outdoor classroom”. For example, our classrooms now include more plants and a wider variety of pets, we take more walks on campus and in Schenley Park, we have broadened our recycling and composting programs, and we have added more natural elements and gardens to our outdoor space. Both CMU and the city of Pittsburgh have supplemented our efforts with their own steps toward “green urbanism”.

This year, we decided to capitalize on children’s fascination with animals and increase our contact with the natural world by choosing the Whole School Theme of **ANIMALS in the WILD**. We aim to engage children, educators and families in discovering the “amazing life” Rachel Carson described. In this series of articles, I will explore the lessons we can learn about educating and raising children by observing the animal kingdom. Principles such as niches, adaptation, interdependence, and biodiversity – each of which is crucial for the balance of nature and stability of ecosystems, can also be applied to the health and sustainability of our learning communities and families.

For example, a simple internet search for life lessons from elephants revealed lots of ideas, such as living in community, respecting elders, having thick skin, using touch as a form of communication, eating mostly plants, and drinking more water. The Flourish Anyway web site uses observations about common neighborhood squirrels to offer life lessons, including taking time to chew things over, always having a backup plan, accentuating your best features (for squirrels, the bushy tail), and saving for the future (https://owlcation.com/misc/How-To-Live-Your-Best-Life-Lessons-Learned-From-Squirrels).

Basically, taking the perspective of animals to explore their lives and learning may help us think outside our proverbial boxes to notice more creative approaches, unique solutions, or broader vision than we have previously considered. Research shows that simply being present in nature has significant benefits for mental and physical health, as well as cognitive functioning. My hope is that reflecting together about our experiences with animals in the wild will also inspire our work with children as educators and parents. I’d love to hear your ideas about life lessons from your favorite animal!
Exploring Animals in the Wild

This year, we plan to intentionally focus on building our relationships with the environment by studying **ANIMALS IN THE WILD** for our Whole School Unit, including both a local and a global emphasis. The timing of this unit in February and early March coincides with the **United Nations World Wildlife Day** (March 3, 2018) and ends just before the **US National Wildlife Week** (March 14-18, 2018). Studying Animals in the Wild will enable us to discover 1) the safe ways we can observe animals in their natural habitats, 2) the life science features of animals and their life cycles, adaptations to the food, water, shelter, etc. available in their habitats, and ways that communication and interdependence help them meet their needs, 3) the physical science properties of animals’ physical features, homes, etc., 4) the earth science aspects of animal behavior based on the weather and seasons, 5) the historical, social, and cultural changes related to humans’ environmental responsibility, and 6) the representation of animals in literature and the visual, dramatic, movement, and musical arts.

In preparation for the unit, our educators visited the Humane Animal Rescue Wildlife Center (https://www.humaneanimalrescue.org/wildlife-rehabilitation-center/i-found-an-injured-wild-animal/) during our professional development time prior to the beginning of school. “The Wildlife Center is a fully licensed wildlife rehabilitation clinic that specializes in the care and treatment of injured, orphaned, and ill native Pennsylvanian wildlife. All animals are admitted to the clinic with the goal of releasing them back into the wild as healthy individuals.” We anticipate having some of the wildlife center’s “educational ambassadors” visit our classrooms during the unit in February. Meanwhile, we encourage your family to notice the animals you encounter near your home and in your neighborhood parks. In my backyard in Crafton Heights, I’ve seen birds, insects, and a variety of mammals, including squirrels, raccoons, opossums, and deer. I even saw a coyote walking on a city street near my home at dusk one night recently. If you are interested in helping to design the unit or have ideas to share, please contact me (sc0e@andrew.cmu.edu) or your child’s teacher.

Perhaps you wondered …

**why we organize our curriculum into thematic units.**

Studying topics in depth builds children’s knowledge base, starting with what they already know and creating a network of concepts that are richly connected in ways that help children apply their knowledge to new contexts. We combine verbal and visual representations and provide a variety of activities to help them acquire, strengthen, and refine concepts via experimentation, stories, dramatic play, art, games, technology activities, etc. Children converse and reason in more sophisticated ways about content they understand, so themes provide a foundation for other cognitive challenges.

Across the school year, we include a variety of topics that span literature, social studies, science (life, physical, and earth & space), and the arts. In every unit, we include activities that strengthen children’s skills in all of our developmental domains: self-esteem & independence, interaction & cooperation, communication, discovery & exploration, physical capabilities / health & safety, and artistic expression & appreciation.