**Ways of being in nature.**

Soren Bondrup-Nielsen

To “not see the forest for the trees” implies getting lost in the details of a situation and not understanding the broader issue. When applied to a real forest, it refers to focusing on the individual plants and animals around you but not comprehending the forest as a whole ecosystem of interconnected parts.

One such interconnection is between trees and fungi; trees communicate underground via the network of fungal hyphae sharing nutrients. Also, trees release air-born chemicals to communicate with each other to attract or repel insects collectively. Chemicals released by trees also impact the atmosphere within the forest, which has a positive emotional effect, certainly on humans and now promoted as “forest bathing”; indeed, other species of animals may be equally impacted.

All the various animal and plant species within an ecosystem are essential for maintaining nature in a healthy state. The traditional view that an ecosystem is no more than separate individuals competing for existence is a narrow perspective and not the only way to view an ecosystem. The idea of the interconnections among all species and individuals constituting an ecosystem gives a more holistic understanding of how nature works.

When we humans evolved, we left the forest and entered the savannah. Our survival depended on our upright posture walking on two legs, freeing our hands to become dexterous tools, and subsequently, our brains enlarged. However, we did and still depend on resources from nature, including the oxygen we breathe, various foods, building materials, firewood, and other resources. I like the saying by Robin Wall Kimmerer, author of Braiding Sweetgrass, that nature is not a warehouse of resources for us humans to use at will, but instead that nature showers us with gifts that we need to use respectfully and sustainably. We humans seem to be losing sight of our role in nature and should try to practice ways of being *in* or *being a part* of nature.

Being in nature – enjoying it, feeling a sense of peace, being part of it, feeling protected – can be achieved in different ways. Years ago, I spent three late winters, spring and early summers studying the Boreal Owl. The first year I travelled by skis and snowshoes when there was snow on the ground and later walking or travelling by bicycle. I was immersed in my study area. I encountered all manner of life and sounds within the forest, from the wind playing music as it wafted through the branches of the different species of trees, to owls swooping down to catch unsuspecting voles on the ground. Moving through the forest under my own power and exposed to the elements, I could witness and be part of the forest. In the second and third year, I acquired a car as I felt I needed to get around quickly and efficiently. It did not take me long to realize that I was cut off from the experience of being in the forest by being enclosed within metal and glass. Sure, I would drive to a spot and get out and do the things one does when studying some aspect of a forest, but I forgot to be in the forest. As a career ecologist, this has haunted me. When you study some part of ecology, you tend not to “see the forest for the trees.” So, the challenge becomes to find a harmonious existence between the two ways of being in nature – being focused on a narrow objective and being open to the whole of nature.

There is nothing wrong with driving along a road through a natural landscape; the scenery can be spectacular. However, it does not allow one to experience nature as an interconnected living system. There can be several different experiences if you go for a walk through a forest or a field. You may walk with a friend and be in deep conversation and nearly miss out on your surroundings. Or you may be by yourself on a walk but be so preoccupied within your mind that you also miss being in your surroundings. Again, there is nothing wrong with this – the discussion with your friend is valuable, or your solitary introspection may solve some serious issues and doing this on a walk in a forest may be just the right place. These ways of being in nature are beneficial, but you will not feel like you are a part of your surroundings.

You may walk through a forest and be intensely on the lookout for various species of organisms, whether just birds or plants or any species you encounter. I will argue that this is a way of “seeing the trees and not the forest.” When I focus on the details or individual parts of something, I tend to loose sight of the whole.

When I walk through a forest, I will often empty my mind and practice not focusing on anything specific. This way, I try to take in the whole of the forest by using all my senses. This can be accomplished by feeling the ground under my feet with each step, being aware of the sounds I hear, the smells I perceive, what I see, and the feeling when I touch a branch or a tree trunk. When we walk through a forest, many organisms become silent and hide as we represent a potential predator. Sometimes I will sit still for a long time under a tree and let the forest come alive. By sitting still, I become invisible. Sitting still, I have had birds land on me, and voles sit on my boots and preen.

There are many ways of experiencing nature. None is right or wrong. But next time you go for a walk, try to experience it using all your senses and take time to sit still and let your surroundings come alive. We humans should not see ourselves as just visitors in nature; we are part of the complex, interconnected living system we call nature.