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Get Outside the Box – and Go Outside!

By Alaina Bernard
UCF Forum columnist
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We live in a fast-paced society, driven by technology and air conditioners. What would be the motivation for someone to get outside their box and go outside?

I have spent most of my life outdoors. I identify with nature; it is my home. But too many miss the opportunity to understand the value and relationship we have, or could have, with nature.

When I started at UCF more than 10 years ago as a graduate student, I was drawn to the 520 acres of natural lands on our 1,415-acre campus. We have such unique grounds that not only serve as home to migrating students, but host federal- and state-protected plants and animals, and a mosaic of Florida habitats. Since 2000, we have expanded the opportunities by creating more than five miles of hiking trails, managing the green space through a prescribed-burn program, and creating opportunities for the UCF community to get involved.

Some know of this hidden treasure on campus, but many do not. I'd like to share the significance of these natural features with you – but more importantly, convince you to connect to the great outdoors, wherever you may be.

The natural lands managed on campus comprise more than 320 acres of upland and wetland habitats preserved in perpetual conservation easements to the St. Johns River Water Management District. More than 200 additional acres of natural areas on campus have verbal commitments for preservation, and are currently being preserved and managed, such as the Arboretum and smaller isolated wetland areas.

In addition, the campus contains an extensive network of storm water ponds. These areas, in combination with the large area occupied by wetlands on the east side of

campus, constitute a significant percentage of the UCF campus (approximately 50 percent of the campus acreage).

Similarly, UCF's urban areas host unique plants and habitats, including approximately 7,000 trees, which shade about 60 percent of the campus. In 2013, UCF students completed an evaluation of UCF's tree campus. They estimated that carbon emissions sequestered, or removed, by the canopy were approximately 5,000 tons, which is equivalent to the emissions of about 555,000 gallons of gasoline, or nearly 1,000 passenger cars annually. The total amount of pollutants reduced by the urban forest was estimated at 36,000 pounds per year. Primary pollutants removed from the canopy are ozone and particulate matter, which contribute to respiratory illness.

This success story is also noted nationally. The U.S. Department of Agriculture recently finished the first assessment on the impact trees have in removing pollutants (<http://www.nrs.fs.fed.us/news/release/trees-save-lives-reduce-air-pollution>). The study found that trees within the continental United States successfully removed more than 17 tons of air pollution in 2010, resulting in a \$6.8 billion savings in human health costs.

While these statistics are meaningful, they still do not present a case for connection to the natural world. My opinion is that most of us understand the importance of nature, but still do not see how we fit into the fabric of the natural world.

Beyond the bugs, snakes and heat, which I understand can be limiting factors in experiencing the outdoors, there are new experiences when we connect to something bigger than ourselves. As a child growing up in rural Louisiana just outside of New Orleans, my memories are of adventures in the nearby woods. We created rope swings over small creeks and built forts up in the trees for a nearby escape. I would have never known that those experiences as a child would connect me to my present career. However, the times have changed.

In 2005, Richard Louv wrote the book, "Last Child in the Woods," which highlighted nature-deficit disorder, or the mental disorder that occurs in those who spend less time outdoors, especially in children. Although controversial, his findings are similar to the *biophilia hypothesis* presented by ecologist Edward O. Wilson, who suggested that humans have an instinct to connect to other forms of life, or nature.

With all the known benefits of our connection with nature, why do we stay inside!? I am sure you can think of at least five excuses immediately, but I invite you to find your roots and go outside.

Just take a short hike around campus, through the Arboretum or around Lake Claire. It will ease your mind, reduce stress, and connect you to the beauty of nature.

One of my favorite quotes from Jeff Johnson, host of the exploratory documentary “180° South,” is: “The best journeys answer questions that in the beginning you didn’t even think to ask.”

I invite you to take a journey across campus — or wherever you are — to notice the lovely beauty of nature that surrounds you, and take the opportunity to learn something you didn’t even know existed.

My hope is that this experience will connect you to our true home, the outside.

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