

Authentic Experience on the Belize Earth Expedition

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About fifteen months ago, I stepped off a plane, out of an airport, and into a climate of humidity with the mass and weight of lead. I have traveled—maybe I'm not *well*-traveled—but I've been fortunate enough to venture somewhat beyond my urban, city kid background. Here, in an instant flop sweat, I already knew it would be different.

I had applied to and been accepted for an [Earth Expedition](#) graduate class to my first choice destination, [Belize](#). I'm a student in Miami University of Ohio's [Advanced Inquiry Program](#). Part of my rationale for taking this graduate program was, after years of a career interpreting nature, science, and research for public audiences, I wanted my own research experience. I wanted to satisfy my own wonder and curiosity—themes I aimed to instill in others—and see how it *felt*.

Over just 10 days, working alongside about twenty other people, I was inland looking at jaguar tracks, hiking up a rainforest, and eating Ms. Dorla's kriol bread at a home stay with her family. I was observing a baby tapir, spying black howler monkeys, and surveying the landscape from atop the Mayan ruins of my childhood book-reading dreams. And finally, like every great nature documentary I watched growing up, it was *me* snorkeling over a tropical barrier reef (Belize has the second largest barrier reef in the world), southern stingrays swimming next to me, and a green sea turtle coming up for a breath beside me.



Green sea turtle and me, Belize. Photo by Brett Bartek.

Now, I'm not going to pretend. The trip wasn't exactly roughing it. We were guided, we were well-fed, my cabin had a fan (and strangely, a Spongebob Squarepants-patterned blanket). There were multiple trips to the Belize Zoo to practice observation. But it wasn't vacation—we had classes and assignments, and worked together in groups to practice *inquiry*, that is, observing and questioning to come up with something that can be scientifically investigated.

I remember questioning the heights of epiphytes on trees with Carol. And mapping the sway of palm trees, with Lea and others, during our off-shore stay at tiny Tobacco Caye. We helped "Manatee" Jamal do manatee research ("Zoo" Jamal was also on the boat with us). And Celso presented his work on tapir conservation, where he created [road signs and an awareness campaign to prevent tapir-vehicle collisions](#) (Poot & Clevenger, 2018).

Looking back on these experiences, I didn't immediately emerge a scientist of course. But I got a lot of the direct, hands-on experience I was looking for. That relates to other themes I've explored in my graduate program, the opportunities for direct, nature experiences in urban

environments. There is plenty of concern today for connecting people, and especially children, with nature in a way that encourages conservation (Soga, Gaston, Yamaura, Kurisu, & Hanaki, 2016; Cox, Hudson, Shanahan, Fuller, & Gaston, 2017).

Some of these experiences can be come by indirectly, like I alluded above—the books I read and TV I watched—and lead to concern for nature (Soga, Gaston, Yamaura, Kurisu, & Hanaki, 2016). But many are still concerned by a lack of direct, authentic interaction, or an “extinction of experience” (Soga, Gaston, Yamaura, Kurisu, & Hanaki, 2016). A survey of urbanites in London, showed that only 32% of their sample had some kind of experience being present in nature per week (Cox, Hudson, Shanahan, Fuller, & Gaston, 2017).

Maybe a critical part of this reflection is what I followed the Belize experience up with. I was fortunate to be asked to help co-lead a local, ecology-based NY Aquarium program for high school students, who conducted research along the Coney Island Creek. Restoration and stewardship along this urban Creek is of particular interest to me. I grew up nearby. It’s not a pristine waterbody by any means, but there *is* wildlife in there, and there *are* opportunities for direct connection, whether through birding, boating, or something else. Abroad or at home, I’m grateful for the path that Belize has helped me find.



Definitely *not* Belize. But there is urban nature to explore (and clean up).
Research along Coney Island Creek, Brooklyn.
Photo by Lee Patrick.

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Citations

Cox, D. T. C., Hudson, H. L., Shanahan, D. F., Fuller, R. A., & Gaston, K. J. (2017). The rarity of direct experiences of nature in an urban population. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 160, 79–84. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2016.12.006>

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<https://doi.org/10.1177/1940082918789827>

Soga, M., Gaston, K. J., Yamaura, Y., Kurisu, K., & Hanaki, K. (2016). Both direct and vicarious experiences of nature affect children's willingness to conserve biodiversity. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 13(6).

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