

Building a Wilderness Experience in Three Steps

by William J. Finch

The Wilderness

In his writings, John Muir observed, “Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; and that mountain parks . . . are useful . . . as fountains of life.” The wilderness is always ready to welcome those who sense that, in Muir’s words, “the mountains are calling and I must go.”

Desolation Wilderness, sitting right here in our own backyard, shines in its remarkable combination of rock and water. Blue gems of lakes nestle in granite basins whose massive walls rise to heights of five hundred to a thousand feet or more. Crystal-clear streams move in rough-and-tumble cascades into quieter pools and ponds, winding their way from lake to lake on their journey down to the sea. Desolation Wilderness boasts more than 130 streams and lakes—all joys to behold.

Besides the pristine waters, the most prominent feature of Desolation Wilderness is the granite. Granite is everywhere, from relatively flat and smooth bedrock terrain—dubbed Sierra Sidewalk—to peaks, cliffs, and masses of jagged talus. Retreating glaciers have left chatter marks on the polished slabs and rounded car-sized erratics strewn about the landscape. The unique geology of Desolation is more than enough for a lifetime of enjoyment and study.

Beautiful forests of pine, fir, and cedar fill the lower elevations of Desolation, becoming sparse where glaciers of yore exposed the signature expanses of granite. At higher elevations, single trees and modest

groupings grow among granite slabs and boulders, as well as in any crack that holds enough soil to nurture seedlings.

A wide variety of flowering plants typically thrive near any source of moisture in Desolation Wilderness. Hanging gardens can be found on many steep slopes, where seeping water paints the mountainsides with a rainbow palette of blossoms. Abundant plant life also thrives in the higher, seemingly barren rocky landscape, where small flowering plants splash their confetti colors over the rugged terrain. The spectacular annual wildflower show begins soon after the snow melts and continues throughout most of the hiking season. Even into late summer and fall, it is possible to hike back into springtime if you climb high enough.

Just how we approach wilderness is very important if we are to receive all the benefits of the wilderness experience. With the right mindset, we can tap into the full potential of a rich and satisfying interaction that changes us for a lifetime.

The Wilderness Experience

Step One: Seek Solitude

True solitude has a calmness, a tranquility, and a quality of peace that open the way to serenity and bliss. It is the secret sauce in the mix of ingredients that create a wilderness experience. Solitude can best be found on your own, without distractions from other people or technological gadgets. John Muir stated, “Only by going alone in silence . . . can one truly get into the heart of the wilderness.”

How can we find this special place of solitude and engage with the wilderness experience? Again, Muir shows the way, suggesting that we

leave the beaten path: “Walk away quietly in any direction and taste the freedom of the mountaineer.” Away from the trail, the entire wilderness is yours. Here, where human contact is virtually nil, you can discover secluded places where quiet prevails and solitude reigns. Choose a place that appeals to you and be prepared to devote some time there. As you wander, remember to be mindful of fragile vegetation and ecosystems, leaving no trace of your passage.

Step Two: Open Your Senses

Engage all of your senses and set your mind free to absorb the wilderness experience. Cradled by solitude, quiet your mind and become immersed in the here and the now.

Look around you and take it all in, from the longest vistas to the tiniest flowers. Lie down on your back, look into the treetops, gaze into the sky beyond, and let your mind float with the clouds in the sky.

Listen to all that is going on around you: the moving water, the birds, the animals and the insects, the breezes. Rejoice in the silence of the wilderness, the serenity and the solitude.

Feel the high-altitude sunshine, the mountain winds, the trail under your boots. Touch some smooth glacier-polished granite, the rough bark of a fir, the silky petal of a wildflower.

Breathe deeply the fresh, crisp air mountain air and delight in the scent of everything wilderness: the water, the soil, the blossoms, the pine pollen, the musk of the deep forest. John Muir described this act as “taking long drawn breaths of pure wildness.”

Taste the cold mountain water, which has a flavor like no other. Notice how even the simplest foods taste better here.

As your senses blend together into one whole-body experience, relax and let the wilderness embrace you.

Step Three: Engage Physical Connection

Appreciate how your body responds to the ebb and flow of hiking, the roughness or smoothness of the terrain, the challenges on trail and off. Feel your muscles working and relish the sweat trickling down your limbs. Remember to stop once in a while to rest, enjoy your surroundings, and plunge your naked feet into snowmelt while sitting on sun-warmed granite. A satisfying weariness at the end of the day tells you: A job well done. Happiness achieved. Tensions reduced. Stress vanished.

It is not uncommon for wilderness visitors to experience spiritual feelings. Numerous writers have shared their thoughts about this kind of connection with the land. In particular, John Muir has written about the immersive qualities of the wilderness: becoming one with the totality of the mountains, the day, and the experience. If you allow yourself to be absorbed in your hike and flow with the play of the day, you will become one with your wilderness experience.

And, so, to the solitude of the wilderness we must go. A complete wilderness experience, I find, is truly a celebration of being alive—and Desolation Wilderness is the perfect setting for this joyful engagement.

William J. Finch is an emeritus lecturer of Leisure Studies, California State University, Sacramento. He has been a wilderness volunteer for 15 years.