

Nature Is Risky. That's Why Students Need It.

 [nytimes.com/2018/04/30/opinion/nature-students-risk.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/30/opinion/nature-students-risk.html)

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Nature is unscripted and hard to predict. Having recently discovered this reality, Penn State has decided that its 98-year-old, student-led Outing Club shall no longer be allowed to go on outings. Citing the high risk of remote environments and poor cellphone service, the university is recommending that the club restrict its offerings to films and speakers. Students are being funneled into engaging only in previously vetted human constructions.

The students of the Outing Club are fighting back — and good for them. Driven to explore both nature and risk, they are well on their way to adulthood, which means knowing how to resist injunctions that are more protection against future lawsuits than they are in service of the students themselves.

Not so long ago universities took on the authority of parents, in loco parentis. Now that many modern parents have absolved themselves of the responsibility of raising mature, bold, responsible adults, it seems universities have followed suit. At Penn State, the Outing Club wasn't the only one on the chopping block — caving and scuba diving are reportedly out as well.

In my 15 years as a professor at Evergreen State College, I led field trips to Panama and Ecuador that sometimes lasted months. My students and I explored archipelagos and jungles, coral reefs and colonial cities. And I experienced and heard tell of many dangerous situations.

On one trip alone, in 2016, which my husband and fellow professor Bret Weinstein and I led together with 30 undergraduates (and our own two children), there were life-threatening

emergencies involving a tree fall in the Amazon, a boat accident in Galápagos and, later, a serious earthquake in coastal Ecuador. Everyone made it home, but why take such risks? Is studying the politics of land use, the cultures of early Americans or territoriality in butterflies worth it?

Over the course of several trips, I saw students rise to challenges in ways that they simply could not at home. I purposefully sought out field sites that were remote not just because nature is more interesting and intact in such places — more lianas climbing their way up to the light, more vine snakes mimicking those same lianas — but also because encountering nature in its least disturbed state often comes at the “cost” of having no connection to the outside world. Far from the virtual eyes that document our every move, people are revealed, to themselves and to others.

In the field, I watched students descend into their own darkness, depression gripping them, and I watched as they emerged from it, stronger and more grounded. Romantic ideas of the jungle disappear with the reality of constant sweat and biting insects, and the realization that to see charismatic animals do interesting things, you have to get out there and fade into the forest, and then wait patiently for it to come back alive around you.

Some hate it. They cannot abide the lack of control, the discovery that nature is not a nature documentary. Most, though, find hidden strength and unanticipated freedom.

One afternoon on a tributary of the Amazon, a river with broad clay banks, a gloriously messy mud fight broke out between friends, while a few of us standing on the banks cheered them on. They were filthy and raucous and there were no books in sight. Students were exploring boundaries of all sorts, and it looked a lot like education to me.

Another evening, the students tried to give research presentations under a corrugated metal roof but a squall came up, and the rain was pounding the roof so noisily that we had to reschedule. We dispersed, some taking the opportunity to catch up on sleep, some wandering off into the forest to explore the warm, wet embrace of a tropical jungle at night. If education is, in part, preparation for an unpredictable and shifting world, teaching courage and curiosity ought to be a priority.

On domestic field trips in remote locations, my classes did field exercises and even, sometimes, endured lectures, but we also explored without explicit goals, cooked and shared meals, sat around campfires and told stories. In eastern Washington’s scablands, high winds can make standing on mesas dangerous, and climbing up to them, through scree fields, is a challenge, too. Students unaccustomed to physical exertion, injured and on crutches, or just born-and-bred in the city and not familiar with how to navigate a slope of jagged, loose rocks, all faced the fields and took them on. On the scree fields of eastern Washington, facing an unpredictable and shifting world is a literal endeavor.

One brave student from the 2016 trip was injured in the boat accident in the Galápagos. The boat was destroyed, but she soldiered on. Then, three weeks later, she was nearly crushed when the five-story unreinforced masonry hotel she was staying in collapsed during a major

earthquake. She was lucky: Almost everyone in the building died. She and another student dug themselves out of the rubble.

Her recovery was long and painful. She — a serious ballet dancer — was wheelchair-bound for months. After a year of surgeries, crutches and other frustrations, she caught me off guard. Despite everything, she said, she would do it all again. The trip had been that important to her.

In advance of these study-abroad trips, I led long conversations about risk, how to assess it, what we perceive our own relationship with it to be. We discussed how risk is different in landscapes that haven't been rendered safe by liability lawsuits and in which medical help is a very long way away. We talked about the hidden hazards of the jungle — rising water, tree falls — compared with the familiar ones, like snakes and big cats, that people are primed to be scared of. In the tropical lowland rain forest — the jungle — you might get stuck in deep mud and perhaps need help to get out. Look before you reach for a tree for leverage. Some trees defend themselves with nasty spikes, and a branch might be crawling with bullet ants, so named for the intense experience of being stung by one.

But it turns out that risk and potential go hand in hand. We need to let children, including college students, risk getting hurt. Protection from pain guarantees weakness, fragility and greater suffering in the future. The discomfort may be physical, emotional or intellectual — My ankle! My feelings! My worldview! — and all need to be experienced to learn and grow.
