

Restorative Forest Walk

This activity focuses on tuning into our senses and learning about the healing power of nature through a guided forest walk and ending in Forest Tea.

Ties to Manitoba Curriculum:

- Demonstrate an understanding of different First Nations, Métis and Inuit ways of knowing, being and doing in relationship with the land and the natural world by exploring Indigenous methods of observing and interpreting the world, applying scientific principles, and creating technologies within local traditional and contemporary cultural contexts (e.g. wholistic, reciprocal, interconnected and sustainable ways, land-based learning, intersections with Western science, etc.) **(SCI.6.INW.1)**
- Develop a sense of agency, identity, and belonging in science by cultivating natural curiosity about the world and building a personal connection to nature **(SCI.6.SI.1)**
- Explore the interconnectedness of self, others, and the natural world **(Global Competencies in Science)**

Materials:

- Sit spot tarps - tarps cut into 2x2 squares and edged with duct tape (optional)
- Mugs/cups
- Hot water (can use a camping stove, or bring a large carafe)
- Harvested plants for tea
- Forest Tea Plant ID Chart
- Wagon for supplies
- Nature-related Indigenous story to share during the tea circle
 - Braiding Sweetgrass for Young Adults - Robin Wall Kimmerer (adapted by Monique Gray Smith)
 - The Gift of Strawberries, Three Sisters, Allegiance to Gratitude, The Honourable Harvest
 - Meennunyakaa/Blueberry Patch - Jennifer Leason
 - Pakwa che Menisu/Wild Berries - Julie Flett
 - Mnoomin Maangowing/The Gift of Mnoomin - Brittany Luby
 - The Nanabosho Series - Joe McLellan

Instructions:

Choose a starting point along the Seine River trails to explore. Weave in the provided information.



We Evolved with Nature:

Help students understand that our connection to nature isn't new—it's deeply rooted in how humans have always lived.

- Humans are naturally drawn to forests, rivers, and wild places because that's where we evolved. For thousands of years, people lived outdoors and depended directly on the land for food, shelter, and medicine.
- From an Indigenous perspective, people and land are in relationship with one another. This includes teachings about respect and reciprocity—what we do to the land, we also do to ourselves.
- For most of human history, people lived in rhythm with nature. Our days were shaped by the sun and moon, the changing seasons, the warmth of firelight, the presence of plants, and the sound of birdsong.

You might say to students:

"Nature isn't separate from us—we're part of it. Our bodies and minds remember that connection, even if we don't always notice it."

Prompt: *"How do you feel when you're outside for a while? What happens when we pay attention to the natural world around us?"*

Nature and the Nervous System

Let students know that spending time in nature isn't just relaxing, it actually creates real changes in the body and brain:

- Being in forests or near water activates the parasympathetic nervous system—this is the body's "rest and restore" mode. It helps the body slow down and recover from stress.
- Even short walks in nature can lower cortisol (the stress hormone), reduce heart rate, and lower blood pressure. These effects happen even if the walk isn't especially enjoyable (like when it's cold or rainy).
- Time in nature also supports brain function. It has been shown to:
 - Increase creativity by up to 50%
 - Improve focus and concentration
 - Help the brain solve problems and make connections more easily by lowering background stress

You might say to students:

"Even if you don't notice it right away, your body and brain are responding to nature. You're calming your system and clearing space for new thoughts and ideas."

Prompt: *"Can you feel your body slowing down? Do you notice any changes in how you're thinking or feeling?"*

Nature Speaks Through the Senses

The medicine wheel reminds us that we are not just minds walking through the world. We are made up of spirit, mind, body, and heart. When we walk gently and notice with all our senses, we nourish all parts of ourselves.

Encourage students to reflect on:

- *What do you see that awakens your mind?*
- *What do you hear that touches your heart?*
- *What do you smell or feel that grounds your body?*
- *What do you sense that stirs your spirit?*

Use the following reflections and prompts to guide your group into deeper awareness:

Prompt: *“What are your senses noticing right now? Is anything calling your attention?”*

Sight – What do you see?

- Greenery has a calming effect on the nervous system (green is the easiest colour for our eyes to process).
- Looking at nature, even through a window or photograph, has been shown to support healing and reduce stress. Hospital patients with views of nature often recover faster.
- Invite participants to look closely:
 - Try viewing the forest from different angles (crouch low like a rabbit, or imagine seeing from the canopy like a bird).
 - What changes when you shift your perspective?

Sound – What do you hear?

- Birdsong signals safety to the nervous system. When birds go quiet, our bodies may become more alert or anxious.
- Prompt: *“Which sounds do you notice? Which ones feel pleasant or calming?”*

Note: While songbirds soothe us, scavenger birds may signal danger or loss in ecological terms.



Smell – What scents are present?

- Forest smells like earth, leaves, and rain can lower stress and ground us in the moment.
- Prompt: “Which smells stand out to you? How do they make you feel?”
- You might mention pinene—the compound responsible for the fresh scent of pine—which has been shown to reduce stress levels.

Touch – What does the forest feel like?

- Touching bark, soil, or leaves can help us reconnect with our bodies and the present moment.
- Encourage participants to find three distinct textures.
- Remind them: “If you’re unsure whether a plant is safe to touch, it’s okay to admire it visually. Be especially mindful of stinging nettle or poison ivy.”
- Note the health benefits of touching soil: Interacting with microbes in healthy earth supports healthy immune function.

Prompt: “Notice how your body feels as we walk. Are you breathing differently? Thinking differently?”

Taste – What can we taste from the land?

- *Nature also connects to us through flavour. Wild teas and natural foods carry memory, culture, and healing.*
- *Let participants know: “We’ll come back to this sense near the end of our walk with a taste of forest tea.”*

