Enchanting Children With Nature: A Teacher's Tale, With Mary Ann Beauchemin

(Houston and Nature Episode 9)

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Nivien Saleh

What's the best way of teaching young Houstonians about the natural world?

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I'm Nivien Saleh, with Houston and Nature.

My guest today is Mary Ann Beauchemin. Mary Ann is an outdoor educator. That means she brings nature to children and youth. In this episode she shares with us how she got into this line of work, why exposure to nature is so important for young people and how she gets the next generation of Houstonians excited about the outdoors.

And now a bit about Mary's background: She hails from Russ Pitman Park, which is a small park in Bellaire. In 1979 an enterprising woman by the name of Hana Ginzbarg determined that the children of Bellaire needed more time in nature. To make it happen she mobilized the community, raised money to buy a plot of land and created Russ Pitman Park.

Here's what the park is like: There is a woodland with East Texas trees, a pocket prairie with a small wetland, a pond and a playground for small children. Then there is a house, which is the park's Nature Discovery Center. That's where the community – and especially the community's children – congregate to learn about birds, plant biology, insects, amphibians, you name it. And it's the starting point for exploring the park.

In the early 1980s Hana Ginzbarg hired her very first staff member. And that was Mary Ann.

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Welcome to the show, Mary Ann.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Well, thank you for having me, Nivien.

Nivien Saleh

You worked for over 30 years, I think 32 years, for the Nature Discovery Center at Russ Pitman Park. How did you get to Russ Pitman Park? Because my understanding is that you are not originally from Texas?

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Oh, yeah. So I actually was born and grew up in Rhode Island, where I grew up camping with my family. And so I played outside all the time, and there were woods near our house. I was always investigating. well I got an undergraduate degree and then moved to Oregon to get a masters in what was then called outdoor education. But it was environmental education basically. And it was also not offered in an education department, but it was offered by the Science Department of Southern Oregon University.

All the professors that I had were scientists. I got a masters degree there and then worked for the Oregon Dunes National Recreation Area as a naturalist and then an environmental educator, then I worked at another nature center in Oregon called Sun River Nature Center on the east side of the Cascades - which is God's country, it was just beautiful. And, then I had met the person who was soon to become my husband, he came to grad school in Austin, Texas, to get a Ph.D. And so I moved to Austin, worked at the Austin Nature Center. And he got a job in Houston. So I moved with him to Houston, first volunteered at the Houston Arboretum and Nature Center for a little while. Then someone there told me, since I lived in Bellaire, I needed to meet Hana Ginzbarg. They introduced me, and she wanted me to come volunteer there. And soon it turned into a career.

Nivien Saleh

And you loved it so much that you just still there.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

I love my job. One of the advantages I had working for Hana and at the Nature Discovery Center is that it was right at the beginning. The nature center wasn't even open yet when I started volunteering there. T hey had a big need for a lot of input. And I got to use my creative side and put a lot of input into how the furniture for the building was designed, for example. They had already made one large bookcase that would be impossible to move to any other wall because it was so long. I said, hey, you want things that we can constantly be changing the size of. So let's make smaller modular things so that we can turn them around different ways. If we have the same people coming here all the time from the community, we want to change the place up so that they won't get tired of seeing everything in the same place. Hana's husband, who made, along with some other people, most of the furniture for the place, took that information, and that's what they did. They made kind of modular things so that we could create separate little spaces to use in different ways in different months of the year. We had things like toy chests, and we put displays on top of them that were down-low for young kids to touch. Hana and her husband Arthur, were fantastic people with a great commitment to nature and conservation and the education of young children in nature.

How Did You Get Into Educating Children About Nature?

Nivien Saleh

You enjoyed nature for pretty much your entire life.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Yeah.

Nivien Saleh

I wonder, how did you get into educating about nature? When when did you discover that that was important to you and that that's what you wanted to do?

Mary Ann Beauchemin

When I was in undergraduate school, I was doing a major in biology. I love biology. But then I started volunteering at a daycare center, in my spare time. And I really enjoyed working with the kids; they would ask me questions about nature, and I really enjoyed that. So I thought, wouldn't it be good to combine those things? And I just went ahead and graduated from school and got a job for a couple of years, but always thought that I'd like to go back to school and get a master's. So I just searched. I just searched for grad schools that did that kind of thing. And I happened upon a fantastic program in Oregon, what is now called Southern Oregon University. It was taught in the science department with a really great scientist who had taught previously at places like Berkeley or other well-known schools. But they left California to get out of the rat race of California and just moved up across the border slightly 15 miles north of the border into Oregon and taught there. And so I had exceptional professors there. They were really exciting. When they taught science or environmental education, it was all hands-on which I really believed in, in learning with children as a hands-on activity. It was wonderful. I mean, I went on field trips, probably ... weekend-long field trips almost every weekend.

Nivien Saleh

Wow.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Yeah. When I was there, it was a great ... It was an inspiring program.

Nivien Saleh

So then you came to Houston, and you came to the park, and you started out as a volunteer, became a staff member, and you had all these ideas about education and environment. And I'm sure you were just really excited to apply them.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

I had a lot of experience before I came to Houston. And I volunteered at the Arboretum, and then got started volunteering for Hana and the friends of Bellaire Parks at the Nature Discovery Center. And then I was the first employee there. They hired me as the first employee there when they were ready finally to open the building to visitors.

Nivien Saleh

And in a way, it's cool being the first employee, because you were probably able to write your own job description.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

I did write my own job description. I got to do really whatever I wanted. I'd get to create programs there and I love doing that.

Creating a Nature Center for Kids

Nivien Saleh

Tell me: How did you take the freedom that you have and shape it into something concrete?

Mary Ann Beauchemin

When my children were very young, I worked while-they-were-in-preschool-hours only. And I did a lot of teacher workshops on weekends. But that's weekends when my husband was home to take care of the kids. Originally, I started teaching the preschool programs there and opening the Discovery's rooms to the public on some weekends.

All my experience from the classes I took in environmental education to the experience I had working at other nature centers, I drew up on that. The Internet didn't exist back then. So I didn't get my ideas from Internet, but I did get my ideas from books. I was always searching for new and different ideas, craft activities and et cetera. I started teaching with preschool programs.

Those were pretty popular. Then I introduced the idea of having school programs, offering school programs at the Nature Discovery Center. But we needed more than just myself because I couldn't handle a busload of kids all myself and do a quality program. It's very important to break a large groups of kids who come in school buses into smaller groups. Otherwise you just wouldn't have an effective program for hands-on education in nature. So we hired another person to work there, and she and I kind of split up busloads of kids, and then we got some volunteers sometimes to help us with them. And I did the first training for volunteers there. I made a volunteer manual for the park. Actually several of our first volunteers were from the Junior League of Houston because they had given us a grant. And so I trained them to be volunteers at the Nature Discovery Center both in the Discovery rooms and then to work with groups of kids when we had them.

Nivien Saleh

I never thought of the Junior League as interested in the environment.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Well, the Junior League gave us great funding for all our discovery boxes that we have ... we developed after we got funding for them from them. And twhen they give you funding, they also then offered the use of their volunteers.

Nivien Saleh

That was great.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Junior League people are a wide variety of people, and they get to sign up for whichever volunteer projects they want to sign up for. And the volunteers that signed up at the nature center really enjoyed doing that.

Russ Pitman Park Exists Thanks To Community Effort

Nivien Saleh

The park exists inside a community, and I believe it was meant or designed to complement the local community that immediately surrounded it. And it's a fairly small park, and it's right next to a playground that is being used by families in that area. So there must be a strong relationship between the community and the park. And I wonder: What's the community like?

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Well, actually, the park wouldn't exist without the community. It was the inspiration and brainchild of Hana Ginzbarg to raise the money, buy the park and create the Nature Discovery Center. But she couldn't do that alone, so she started a group of people in Bellaire called the "Friends of Bellaire Parks." They together raised all the money to buy the property and create the Nature Discovery Center. Many, many, many people got together not just to raise the money, but to come out and pull up poison ivy and make the park safe for children. They also built a toddler playground in the south end of the Nature Discovery Center with all natural materials. The whole creation of the park was made with community effort.

Kids From All Over Houston Come to Learn About Nature

Nivien Saleh

Has the community changed over time?

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Yes. Back when I first started working at the Nature Discovery Center, the houses in the surrounding area of Bellaire itself and even the larger southwest Houston area were small houses on fairly big lots.Over time, those small old houses built just after the war - mostly two, maybe three bedrooms and one bath - were torn down. And now they are much bigger houses, a lot of two-storey houses on the same lots, but they take up a lot more space on the lot. So there are a lot less trees and vegetation in the whole area than there used to be. And that's had an effect on the

wildlife in the park because a bird or animals don't look at just that little park. They look at the whole aerial view of Southwest Houston. It used to be a lot greener in southwest Houston. That's had an effect on ... We have less species of birds now than when I first started working there.

Birds that like more heavily wooded areas don't nest there anymore as much. But we still have a lot of birds there. And it's still one of the best spots for birding in migration inside the loop in Houston.

The community has also changed. In the immediate walking distance close to the park itself, people of higher income, I think, live there now because they own the bigger houses. But the nature center draws from a much larger community than just Bellaire. Probably the biggest percentage Is from all of Southwest Houston. We have people from all economic backgrounds and all ethnic backgrounds and all religious backgrounds who come there. And a lot of people come from Sugar Land to our programs there.

Nivien Saleh

Wow.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Schools from all over the greater Houston area would come there - even from Lake Conroe. I had one family that would come from Conroe every single week,

Nivien Saleh

Wow

Mary Ann Beauchemin

They'd make a day of it. They'd come to my morning class at 10:00 a.m. and then they go have lunch with Dad, who works somewhere in Houston. And in the afternoon they would go to the museum - one of the museums like the Children's Museum or the Natural History Museum of Houston and then head home before rush hour traffic.

Nivien Saleh

They must have been exhausted at night.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

They did it once a week, every week and loved it. I mean, and they weren't the only ones. I had several people who did it: people who came from the Woodlands, Clear Lake, Sugar Land and of course, people from all over the inner city of Houston.

You know, once they find a teacher who teaches especially preschool kids, you know, that they like, they usually stick with that teacher. And we've had some good preschool teachers there at the nature center, like our current preschool teacher is Eric Duran, and he is a wonderful teacher. I think once things catch on, word of mouth spreads the programs. And people really liked it.

Nivien Saleh

Yeah.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

We all teach in a hands-on experiential way, having kids explore nature themselves in person and make a personal connection with nature at an early age. And I think that is really important.

Nivien Saleh

I want to say that Eric is good not only at teaching preschoolers, but also teaching grown-ups, because I was in a class taught by him once about frogs and toads. And it was a lot of fun.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

That's right.

The Majority of Nature Visitors at Russ Pitman Park Are Children

Nivien Saleh

Hmm. But your primary target group is children. I saw on your website that, um you guys reach 40,000 plus people every year, and about 75 percent of them are children, is that correct?

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Well, that is correct, pre-COVID. But yes, that's correct. A lot of that is done through our outreach program. But why we have such big numbers, I think, is because we used to do a lot of outreaches before COVID, and we would go to libraries in the summer time and summer schools and summer camps and take the program to large groups of kids. And we also did programs for schools during the school year where we'd take the programs to the kids. And then, of course, we had a huge number of schools that came to the Nature Discovery Center before COVID. Once they have a budget again to go on field trips, that ... we will probably start those again. (If) they don't have a budget to go on field trips, we will certainly do outreach programs for them where we go to them. We also have done programs where we've gone to schools not just doing an outreach presentation, but where we've used the school grounds to take kids outside onto their school grounds and do the same kind of programs we do at the nature center.

Bringing Nature Programs To Houston Schools

Nivien Saleh

How do you do that? You don't have the plants there.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Well, you know ... There's always something. One of us would go and scout out the school yard first. And then we could do programs: If they had trees, we could do programs on trees. We could do programs on insects. There are always some insects around. There are usually squirrels. So a whole staff of us would go, four of us would go. We'd divide the kids into four groups. So we'd have groups of 10 or 12 kids each, and we would bring our bug boxes and have the kids

collect bugs. And we'd take a look at them and do our insect program with them, where they do spreadsheets, where they'd have to look at how many legs their creepy crawly had. If maybe it was a worm and it had no legs, or maybe it was an insect that had six legs, or maybe it was a spider that had eight legs.

Nivien Saleh

Hmmm And when you say bug boxes, bug boxes, I think I know what you mean. They're like tiny little things maybe with a loupe in it. So you put the insect into the box, and then you can look at the insect through the loupe. And then maybe there is a mirror so that you can look what's at the underside of the insect.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

I think what you mean by loupe is a magnifying glass. And so, yes,

Nivien Saleh

Yes

Mary Ann Beauchemin

They are small little boxes that have a magnifying glass lens top. They're just made out of plastic.The kids can put a little insect inside of them and look at that insect through them and use it to count how many legs they have, look at their antennae and see if they have wings or not. We had worksheets that we would use, and the kids would classify them We always use in our school programs the scientific method. So we start with a question: What kind of critters do you have living in this area? Are they an insect or not? And then we had a spreadsheet that the kids would fill out with how many legs they have. Did they have antennae? If ... How many wings did they have? How many body parts did they have? And then they would work through that horizontally so that if they looked at, let's say, an ant, they would say, "Oh, it has three body parts, two antennae, it has six legs." And then the last question was: Is this an insect, yes or no? Of course, we went over in our introduction what makes an insect? Almost always in our

introductions, we asked the kids the questions first. We don't tell them the answers. We don't lecture to them.

Nivien Saleh

Yeah

Instead of Lecturing Children, Ask Them About Nature

Mary Ann Beauchemin

We ask the kids first, what can you tell me about insects? Do you know how many body parts they have? And if they have no idea, then we'd go ahead and teach them. If they already know that they have three body parts, we let them tell us because it's really exciting for them to ... to share their knowledge.

Nivien Saleh

Yeah.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

And so our approach to teaching nature to any children and to most adults is: Ask them questions first, gather where they're at and then add to it. Let's say they knew there were three body parts. Then we'd say, "Well, do you know what those three body parts are called?" And if they did, they would tell us. And if not, we would tell them. We draw on a little board, you know, the three body parts. And we tell them, "Well, this is the head, this is the thorax and this is the abdomen." And we get them to repeat those names. So we do all that introduction ahead of time. Then when they go out, they started looking for those things. They would keep track of it on their on their worksheet. And then the very last question says, "Is this an insect, yes or no?" So if it had three body parts, six legs and zero, two or four wings, it was an insect. If it was something like a worm, sometimes that stumped the kids, they'd say, "I can't tell how many legs it has." We'd say, "Do you see any legs?" They go, "No." And I said, "Well, what would you write down

in your sheet if it had no legs?" They'd write "Oh, zero!" That was one of the hardest questions for them.

So right away they knew that insects have to have six legs. But we'd make them fill out the whole sheet: Did it have wings? You know, how many body parts did it have, et cetera? And at the very end, they'd say, "No, it's not an insect." Which is also a really hard concept for young kids. They always want to say: yes: Yes, it's an insect. But they they learn to discriminate that some things that crawl on the ground are insects, and some are not.

Nivien Saleh

Like spiders.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Yeah, like spiders and rolly pollies. I mean, rolly pollies have 14 legs. What does that make them? There are great discoveries. And what we always try to do is ask the kids questions so they can make their own discoveries. More importantly, so that they can ask their own questions. That's one of the most important things for children to learn to do when they want to learn about anything, really, but especially about biology and nature.

Nivien Saleh

Yes. I think pedagogical science has established that you learn a lot better when you are emotionally connected to the subject you're learning about. So when you're excited and when you're in the discovery, that is when memory can form, as opposed to when you're sitting in a classroom and you do get a lecture.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

That is exactly right.

Nivien Saleh

This is something that our listeners won't be able to see, but I can testify that as soon as I asked you about teaching children, your eyes lit up.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Well I love teaching children. I love most of all that they get excited by making their own discoveries in nature. Because what you're saying is really true, They learn more and they retain more information when they are making their own discoveries, when they're excited and when they are asking questions they want answered, not just when people are lecturing to them, They don't really care sometimes, especially the older children. They don't care as much if they're not really interested in the topic. You have to give them a reason to be interested, really. Take them outside and turn them loose in the real world of nature. That is the easiest way to get them excited about nature, especially young children.

Use Excitement About Nature To Help School Kids Do Their Writing Assignments

Nivien Saleh

I love watching the show “Alaska the Last Frontier." Do you know that show?

Mary Ann Beauchemin

No, I don't.

Nivien Saleh

So this is about an Alaskan family. A guy emigrated from Switzerland, I think in the 1940s, and he founded a homestead in Alaska, and now that family is at least in a third generation. One of the family members is the singer Jewel, whom you might have heard of.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Aaaah. Yeah.

Nivien Saleh

Her siblings and her father and uncles, they are in that show. And that show shows their life on the homestead, how they make things work. A couple from that family, they have small children, and now with COVID they have to home school. So in a few episodes I saw them take those children out to a hunt or to a beehive or collecting fruit or tapping a tree for sap, and the kids are so excited. And then during COVID, the wife now has to teach the children what they usually learn in school, which is reading and writing. And so how does she do that? She said, "All right now, Findlay, would you please sit down and write this?" "Oh, I don't want to do it" "Now please sit down and write it. Sit down and ...." You know, and I'm like: When she's out with her children, she never talks to them like that. She says, "Oh, look at how exciting this is." And the children are so excited. And of course, when Findlay has to read and write, well, he doesn't want to do it because she's not excited. She can't convey it, and he's not ...

Mary Ann Beauchemin

And he's not excited about whatever it is he has to write. I know. It's true! One of the things I've done a lot is use nature as the segway or the impetus to have kids do many multidisciplinary things. Not just look at the biology, but maybe draw pictures of what they saw or write a paragraph or even a sentence if they're young, about what they saw. When we do our "nature at your doorstep," which is our basic school program, where we follow the scientific method, they go through their worksheets. And if they're slightly older kids, they have to write sentences about the results. And with the older kids conclusions. Because really young kids don't understand the concept of conclusions-versus-results. They think that's one and the same. But older kids can begin to draw conclusions. So we have them write those sentences out, too. It's kind of a multidisciplinary approach in terms of subjects that we use: Not just biology or science, but we use all those skills. The scientific study is the starting point. You know, going outside looking at nature and investigating insects or investigating habitats or whatever is the start of it. And then they use skills from many different disciplines.

Nivien Saleh

And they develop those skills in many disciplines. And by studying nature, they can learn about art or writing, as you said, or ...

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Poetry, all kinds of things. We encourage that all the time. And kids, once they they've gone out and they've done this insect study or this habitat study or studied about plant and animal communities,they're interested, they're excited, and it's easy for them to write a paragraph or a sentence if they're young or a few sentences if they're in that middle elementary school age. It's easy for them to do because they've just discovered so much, and they want to tell people about it. So they just write it down.

Nivien Saleh

Aaaah

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Yeah.

Nivien Saleh

Aaaah. You have to connect the writing to the discovery.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Exactly.

Nivien Saleh

See? That's what I should tell the mother at that show that I am watching.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

That's right.

Nivien Saleh

Tell her go to the beehive, and then have your son write something down.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

That's right. Have him observe something, ask him questions about it, get him thinking about it, have him start asking his own questions. And then go back and write it all down.

Why It's Important To Introduce Children To Nature When They Are Young

Nivien Saleh

Brilliant. Your personal philosophy is that you need to reach children when they are very young. Tell me more about that.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Everybody I know who's developed a relationship with nature usually develops it when they're young. They make an emotional connection long before people tell them not to do things - like "Don't touch that or don't lift up that log or don't do this and don't do that." When they're young children, if you allow them to do all those things, if you say, "Hey, let's look under this log, let's touch this, see what it feels like, does it feel soft or is it scratchy? Is it fuzzy? Is it whatever?" Ask them to use all their senses or as many as they can use on that particular object - you wouldn't want to put a honeybee in your mouth, for example. But ..

Nivien Saleh

yeah

Mary Ann Beauchemin

But if you use as many senses as you can and ask them to make discoveries and show them that it's OK to investigate nature, they will carry that with them for the rest of their lives. And as they grow older, if they continue their connection with nature, they'll look back on those memories

and probably want to conserve and protect the natural world. And I think that's a really important thing. One time when I was taking a workshop, somebody who was leading the workshop said, "Your sixth-graders will be voters in six years." Think about that.

Nivien Saleh

Yeah

Mary Ann Beauchemin

People often look at their sixth graders and think, oh, they're just kids. But they are kids that are soon going to be able to vote and make decisions for their future. Making those connections with nature early on in their life will help them understand why it's important to support politicians who care about the Earth and who want to take care of it.

School and Summer Camp Are Not Enough

Nivien Saleh

Mm. Yeah, absolutely. When you told me that the Nature Discovery Center draws people from all over Houston even as far as Conroe, that gives me the sense that there's a dearth of these programs. Is that something that you would say?

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Yes, I would. People send their kids to school. And they send them to summer camps. And they are doing a good job by sending them to school and summer camps. But they think that's all of it. But there's a lot that doesn't get covered and can't get covered in a school day. And summer camps vary. And if you want your kids to learn more about the natural world, find your closest nature center and see what kind of programs that they offer. It's really the hands-on personal experiences where kids make the emotional connection and learn to appreciate and investigate nature and learn to ask a lot of questions about nature. Even if they grow up to have a job that

has nothing to do with the natural world, if they've learned to ask questions, that process carries through to whatever field that they work in. And that's a really important thing.

Teaching To the Test Stifles Desire To Ask Questions

Mary Ann Beauchemin

I have heard from many, many parents of the kids I've taught that in school they don't get to ask that many questions because teachers are pressed for time. They have so much material they have to cover in a certain amount of time.

Nivien Saleh

Yeah.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

They have to teach to the test. So they have to get ready for these standardized tests that they take. They don't have the time to be interrupted by students with lots of questions. And that to me is very sad because the lifelong process of learning is dependent upon kids knowing that they should be asking questions and the thoughts they have, the questions they have, are good questions, not dumb questions. You know, there's really no such thing as a dumb question. If you're asking it, you really don't know and you want to learn. It's important that we encourage that.

What Questions Do Young Children Have About Nature?

Nivien Saleh

Yes, Yes. So what are the questions that young children ask very often as opposed to older children?

Mary Ann Beauchemin

The most the most common question they ask is: What is that? Like, we'll roll over a log and they'll point to something and say, "What is that?" And I'll say, "Well, what can you tell me about it?" I answer them usually with another question.

Nivien Saleh

You're a little Socrates, aren't you?

Mary Ann Beauchemin

I'll say, what can you tell me about it? What does it look like? Let's say we're looking at a grub and they don't know what a grub is. They'll say, "Oh, it looks kind of like a worm, but it's all mostly white." And I'll say, "Yeah!" I'll pick it up in my hand and hold it and say, "Let's take a closer look. Does it have any legs?" "Oh yeah, it has some legs." - "Do worms have legs?" - "No, worms don't have legs." - "So do you still think it's a worm?" - "No it's not a worm." - "Oh. How many legs are there? Well let's count them!" They count the legs, and they'll say, "It has six legs." I'll say, "What kind of animals do you know have six legs?" - They'll go, "Insects have six legs." Eventually I'll tell them it's a grub. But I didn't just tell them right off and dismiss it. I let them learn about it through a series of questions and answers on their part.

Nivien Saleh

And they walk away with three things: Number one, they have the answer to their question. Number two, they have developed, with your help, a skill to get to the answer of the question. And number three, they have developed self-confidence as a result of having discovered something on their own.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Yes, exactly. Exactly.

What Nature Questions Do Older Children Have?

Nivien Saleh

So now the older children. The young children ask, "What is this?" The older?

Mary Ann Beauchemin

That's probably the most common question they have. They certainly have other questions, too. A lot of "why" questions: Why can birds fly? Why do birds have feathers? Some of them are answerable and easily answerable and some of them are harder to say. It's important, I think, for naturalists to not always have to know. There are questions I don't know the answers to.It's OK to know that some questions aren't answerable or that people are still studying some questions. That's another thing that I come up with. I know that people are studying this and they haven't come up with the answer yet, but maybe they will someday. Or maybe you'll go study it someday and you'll come up with the answer. That's something I like to tell children. Empower their future.

And Teenagers?

Nivien Saleh

So you have young children and older older children. Do you also deal with teenagers?

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Yes. Let me mention that as children get older, they become a little shyer about asking questions in front of other kids. And that's just, I think, social interaction and a lot of it interaction from their classrooms and school, when teachers in school are telling them, "I don't have time for these questions, don't ask questions, let's not raise our hands now." And then teenagers are even more affected by what their peers think.

Nivien Saleh

Yeah.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

That's very important for teenagers - especially girls. Girls are more affected by this than boys. Sometimes boys will just blurt out answers to things if you ask a question, or they'll blurt out an answer, and they don't care as much if they're wrong. Girls are a little more reticent.

Nivien Saleh

And how do you address that?

Mary Ann Beauchemin

If girls raise their hand, I, I tend to call on them more often because the boys are always answering the questions and then I start calling on the girls to answer questions. And if they raise their hands, I'm fairly confident that they might be close or have a good idea, and when they get it right, I'll go, "Yeah, that's exactly right." I always give positive reinforcement to their answer even if it's a way offbeat answer. And I'll say, "That's an interesting answer. But really, I think ..." And lead them close to the answer. I tell them “That’s interesting.” I want to encourage them, but I don't want to let them think that birds have six legs.

The Art of Enchanting Troublemakers

Mary Ann Beauchemin

I also try to get the troublemakers of any age to be my assistants. I first learned this early on right after I was out of grad school and working for the Oregon Dunes National Recreation Area. I designed a three-week program for teenagers to study the Oregon dunes. They lived right next to them. But they didn't understand the biology or the geology or the hydrology of them at all. So I designed a three week program where we looked at the physical features, the plant features and then the animal features in each of those weeks.

There was one kid in the class who was from the first lecture I gave there kind of a troublemaker. And I immediately hooked him in. By the time we went out on field trips, he was telling the other kids, "Hey, you guys, come over here, listen! Pay attention to this!" The main teacher of the class - this was a biology class - said to me, "I don't know how you did that, because he has been my troublemaker the whole year. And you in just a couple of weeks have got him so interested in things and he's never been interested in things before." I said, "Well, my secret is: I pick out the troublemakers and try to give them a job and make them my assistant and give them some status because that's what they're looking for."

Nivien Saleh

Status, yeah.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Once I did it with him, then it was a tool in the toolbox forever.

Nivien Saleh

Wow.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Yeah.

Nivien Saleh

I think that's pretty that's pretty cool.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Well, it works well still.

Does Technology Separate Kids From Nature?

Nivien Saleh

It seems to me that when you give a child an iPhone or iPods or headphones, that you encourage it to separate itself from its context, from its environment, so that, for example, when you're on a nature walk, you don't really pay attention to what's going on around you. Is that something that you've encountered?

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Yes, unfortunately, I do. One of the saddest things I have noticed sin e the advent of c ell phones, is: It starts really young. I see people pushing their strollers with not infants, but slightly larger kids. When I used to take my kids out in strollers, when they were like six months, eight months, a year old, 18 months old, I would be talking to them. I would be pointing out things along the way and say, "Oh, look at that dog barking! Or “Oh, that's a bird!" talking to them, getting them to talk back to me, starting to speak and all that stuff. But I noticed in the park parents pushing their kids in circles around the park, talking to someone else on their iPhone, and they never talk to their kids. And that really bothered me. I I thought, how can they do that? This is their time with their kid. You know, the kid's awake, they should be interacting with them. They should be talking to them about the world around them, where they are putting them in the sandbox and letting them play, not just pushing them around while they're talking to somebody else on their phone. That really hit me. So it's modeled to children very young. Four and five year olds, they don't have phones. They're fine, But as kids get older, when they get to be teenagers, We've had a good volunteer teenage program for our summer camps. So we'd have usually four teens that volunteer in our summer camps. They'd help when we broke the summer camps - which were usually 20 kids - into smaller groups. They'd help lead the smaller groups. But as iPhones became a thing, they started getting on their phones, paying less attention. We had to tell them, "Your phones have to be shut off during this time." And then all of a sudden the teenagers would disappear to the bathrooms. And they'd be gone for like 15 minutes.

Nivien Saleh

Mmm.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

And I realized: They're on their phones in the bathroom! And so then we'd have to talk to them about that. And it was constant because they want to connect with their friends. That was a little hard. But we thought, well, it's important. If they ever get jobs, they have to know they can't spend all their time communicating with their friends while they're in ... During work time.

Nivien Saleh

Yeah.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

So we laid down the law and said during this work time, they had to do that. But during their lunch break, or before camp started and after camp ended, they can communicate with their friends. And I know kids, school-age kids do a lot on computers or iPads at home and et cetera. And the kids would want to bring their games to camp, in summer camps. We we said no. We said "Yes, you can use it if you stay for aftercare." And after care was kind of a kind of easy time. There was no education really going on. We'd go out and play games and stuff. And if a kid wanted to opt out and sit down where everybody was playing games and spend a little time on their iPad, they could. But usually once we started playing games. All the school-age kids opted into playing the games. For the most part. So I have seen a change. And it worries me. It worries me because I'm afraid all the kids that aren't coming to the Nature Center for camps or classes and are on their electronic items ...

Nivien Saleh

Yeah

Mary Ann Beauchemin

... no matter what they are, are missing a chance to connect with the real world in any real personal way. So they are not developing that personal connection with nature. And if they don't

develop a personal connection with nature, they won't see the importance of the environment when they become adults ...

Nivien Saleh

Yeah.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

... and voters. And they won't understand the importance of protecting our earth and slowing down the changes that our growing population are making on the earth.

Nivien Saleh

Yes, I agree.

I'm of the generation that was grown up when the Internet and all of that just started to be grown up. I have obviously a different relationship than the young people who are born into the Internet age.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Yeah.

Nivien Saleh

But I've noticed that I like technology a lot. I've discovered that for me personally, it is easier to pay attention to the natural world when I can do it through my camera. My camera makes me focus. I can point my camera at something, and I have to get a good shot and create a beautiful image. And then I bring that back to the computer, and I want to know, "Well, what did I just take a picture of?" Maybe there is a way of of appeasing the technology need of young kids, but leverage it as an advantage.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Or as a tool. Absolutely. I know a young eight year old boy who was really interested in birds and he started coming to bird walks when he wasn't in school. He's so enthusiastic. He started coming when he was six. He told me the first time I met him that he was writing a book about hawks. He was six years old. He's an amazing child.

Nivien Saleh

Good!

Mary Ann Beauchemin

And his mom is very supportive. He now has his own blog. He doesn't have a phone of his own, but he uses his mom's phone, and he takes pictures of insects, and he finds out what they are. And he writes about them on his blog.

Nivien Saleh

Wonderful!

Mary Ann Beauchemin

And actually any living animal. He hasn't gotten to plants yet, but I bet he will. I think that use of technology is really good because it's in balance. I mean, he's using technology as a tool like you use your camera as a tool to focus yourself. The same way I use my binoculars. I use those to help me. I use my iPhone for: Let's say I come across an insect I don't know, and I'll take out my phone, and I'll take a picture of it, and I'll use a wonderful app called INaturalist and put it in this app. And it comes up with suggestions of things that it could possibly be. That's a great app.

Nivien Saleh

It's a way of turning a problem into an opportunity.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

That's right. It's using them as ... using technology as a tool to learning, but not as your only pastime ...

How Did Harvey Impact Young Houstonians?

Nivien Saleh

In 2017, the Bellaire community was hit hard by Harvey, there were many homes that got flooded and. Water everywhere. How has that disaster influenced the community's relationship with nature in especially children?

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Children follow their parents. So if parents were really upset or if they took it in stride, children usually took on the same attitudes their parents had - young children. And then with older children, they follow both their parents' and their peers' attitudes. I s aw all kinds of reactions. For the most part, the younger the children were, the quicker the problems went away. They didn't really dwell on them because they didn't have to deal with them personally. They didn't have to deal with the repairs in the house, et cetera. Teenagers .... I was working with the Eagle Scouts and I couldn't get in touch with some of them. And they said, "Oh, well, yeah, I'm sorry I gave you my home number, but that was before the flood. And now we've moved, and that home number isn't working because our house is being rebuilt" But they would just explain it away and still had a pretty positive attitude, I thought. In all things children follow the example that they see in front of them, whether it's their parents or as they get older, their parents and peers. For example, when my children were really young, we got the opportunity to move to Australia. And my husband and I thought this was a fantastic opportunity. We got to live there for over a year, about a year and a half. We're both interested in the natural world. We're both birdwatchers. It was like: "Fantastic, we're moving to Australia!" And our kids just thought it was the most fantastic thing going. And people here would ask me all the time, "Oh, do your kids want to leave their school? What are they going to do about making new friends? Won't that be really hard?" And I went, "Oh, my kids are A-OK with it." You know, kids make friends immediately.

Nivien Saleh

Yeah

Mary Ann Beauchemin

It's, you know, that's what they do. And they just followed our attitudes.

Strategies for Countering Eco-Anxiety in Kids

Nivien Saleh

You have given me a good idea here. Because what I wanted to ask you is a topic called eco-anxiety. When you put in Google eco-anxiety, what you learn is that this is anxiety in young children as a result of climate change. Maybe it's Vogue that has coined the term, I'm not sure. But you find it in The Washington Post and other sources. Regardless of what it's termed, "eco-anxiety or something else", there is apparently, an increase in young children of anxiety about the future, climate change and global warming. And what you just suggested is really, that the children take the cues from their parents.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

And teachers. Parents and teachers. Perhaps their parents talk about climate change at home a lot and appear worried about it, but also teachers in school. I think it depends on how you present it. Do you present it as something to really just worry about? Or do you present it as something that we need to take positive action to do something about it? Children, like all people, feel if there's something they can do, even if it's little things that they can do on their part, they're less anxious than, if they can't do anything and they just have to worry about it. So being able to take some steps toward doing something, even if it's as simple as starting your family to recycle waste products or plant a native garden or pick up trash on the beach. That gives them something they feel they're doing towards helping out. And it is actually helping out.

Nivien Saleh

So parents themselves are worried - you know, they're worried about climate change, and as a result, that worry gets passed on to children. So what you would advise for those parents is: Deal with your own fears by taking positive action, because that positive action, number one, makes you less afraid. And number two, it gives your children the feeling that something is being done. And perhaps involve your children in that action. And this way, the children are less fearful.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Yeah, I think ... I think that's right.

The Proud Moments of a Nature Educator

Nivien Saleh

That was good advice. Thank you. What are some of your proudest moments?

Mary Ann Beauchemin

When I had preschool classes, several times, I'd have parents call me up ahead of time and say, "Look, I want to sign my child up for this class. But they are really, really shy. They never participate in classes. And so can I just sign them up for one class instead of a whole series and see what it's like?" And I'd say, "Sure." And I never put their chid on the spot in the beginning. One of the things I'm proudest of is that to a person, every parent who told me that - and it wasn't, you know, that many parents, but it was several parents who told me their kids were extremely shy. Every one of them called back and said, "I want to sign my children up for the whole series because they really loved your class."

Advice for Introducing Children To Nature

Nivien Saleh

That shows that you're a really passionate educator. What is your advice to Houstonians who want to introduce young people to nature?

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Well, to every parent I would say take your kids out into the natural world. Don't be afraid of the natural world yourself. Don't model being afraid of turning over a log. Learn how to do it properly so if there is a snake under that log, nobody will get hurt. Learn what areas would be safe for the age children you have. At the nature center I worked in ... work in, for all these years I have never seen a venomous snake. So it's a great place to start turning over logs because you're not going to meet a venomous snake there. Let's say you're in the southwest ... Southwest and there are rattlesnakes or any area where there's venomous animals, use your best judgment and teach your kids how to make the decisions on what they should do. But take your kids out and get them emotionally connected to nature, even if it's just building a little native plant garden in your yard that they are helping plant and watering the plants and taking care of the plants. Even just a vegetable garden, because vegetable gardens attract insects and all kinds of other things. You can do things in your backyard. You could put up a bird feeder or a bird bath in your backyard to attract birds. Have a muddy area in your backyard that the kids can just play in the mud, make mud pies and stuff like that. Don't mind if your kids get dirty.

Sometimes in the park, I'll see parents that have their kids in the playground. And their parents will say, "Oh, that's all muddy there. Don't go over there." And then they'll have other parents who, like the kids, wander into the mud, take off their shoes and socks, start playing in it and they're fine with it. Well, which one do you think is going to like to be outside more in nature? You know, the one who's always being told not to touch anything? Or the kid that is led to play in it?

Nivien Saleh

What you pointed out is that nature is a really great laboratory for children to develop their skills, not just as naturalists, but also their motor skills, their research skills. Their, perhaps poetry skills, discovery skills. It allows them to develop many, many different skills. And my hope is that as Houston develops more, as we get more people coming to Houston, as our city gets bigger, we will preserve those nature spots so that young children can continue to have those experiences.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Yeah, that's very important.

Nivien Saleh

Thank you, Mary Ann.

Mary Ann Beauchemin

Oh, you're welcome. I enjoyed this.

Nivien Saleh

And this is it for today. If you liked this show, please share it with friends. And if you want me to update you on new episodes, sign up for the nature memo at https://HoustonNature.com. For Houston and Nature, I'm Nivien Saleh.