

A forest epiphany: the power of immersive environmental education

She wasn't dressed for the outing! A beautiful young Zulu lady got into my pickup truck: her form fitting ankle length dress and high heels were hardly the appropriate attire for exploring the Ferncliffe Forest where A Rocha South Africa has, for the last decade, run a forest rehabilitation project. As we entered the forest, I engaged my vehicle's full 4x4 capability and started navigating the deep muddy ruts that barely passed for a road. I tried making conversation with my passenger, but soon realized that she was mesmerized by the beauty of the mist-cloaked cliffs and towering forest canopy and so I let her absorb the beauty in silence. Finally, we made it to our destination and our small group began exploring the forest we had planted. My new friend's heeled shoes sank into the mud and her dress snagged on the wet vegetation, but she kept going: this was a wondrous experience for her.



In the Ferncliffe Reserve

The time came for our departure and she got back into the vehicle, wet, dishevelled but beaming: and a whole lot more talkative. She told me that she was a second-year student at the local university, studying environmental management. 'Most of the other students doing my course only do it to get the necessary credits,' she said. 'They're really not interested in the subject, but I'm enjoying it.'

She tells me a little about her background, how she grew up in the townships and went to school in the city. I tell her a bit about the project and how the part of natural forest she had just walked through was completely man made, planted by A Rocha on land that was once an exotic timber plantation. She has many questions and I'm able to help her understand the importance of the project in terms of biodiversity conservation and climate action. By now we have driven out of the forest and were heading back into the city when she quietly tells me something that stunned me into silence. She tells me that this short visit to the forest was only the second time in her life that she had been in nature. Her entire life experience was of township or city living, except for this brief encounter with a forest on the outskirts of the city, and a field trip her class once went on when she was in primary school.

The best education is a visceral encounter with knowledge that leaves the student transformed. Psalm 19:1 says, 'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.' The natural world has a lot to teach us. If we can take people out of their familiar contexts and sharpen their senses to the beauty of what God has made, issues of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution will go from abstract to grounded in lived reality, from academic to personal. My new friend has gone back to her studies with a new understanding, and our encounter has deepened mine too.