

## Empowerment Through Nature

Past the gnarled tulip trees and grapevines, down the narrow gravel road, there is a rich verdant green hue surrounding the shady sanctum of Nature Camp. Under the dense deciduous trees, the call of a whippoorwill or zoom of a tiger dragonfly replaces text tones and notifications for those inhabiting its cabins. Nature Camp may seem like a typical sleep-away camp, but this refuge for promising intellectuals with an environmental passion is beloved by all who have driven through the canopied entrance. My time at Nature Camp has allowed me to determine the type of person I want to be and my manner of becoming her.

I began stumbling into my path through the encouragement to explore from this local paradise nestled between Mine and McClung Mountain. However, my first introduction was under duress. With time, Nature Camp slowly awakened in me an appreciation for the world, for the tall trees that are much older than I am, and for the mountains that lie silent yet beautiful. When most students think about summer vacation, they attempt to forget about academia until the week before classes start; however, I am not most students. I have persistently thrived, spending seven summers at this conservation camp in the-middle-of-nowhere, Virginia. Camp's boldly optimistic outlook contrary to today's pessimistic society creates a break from reality to reveal new paths and personal balance. I'll always remember my time within the realm of nature as it is on those hot days of Camp. I often resort to the boulder-strewn path of Big Mary's Creek to cool down. When searching the creek's brisk depths, signs of a healthy ecosystem are found in the abundance of clinging mayfly-larvae. Salamanders and newts reside under nearly every leaf-pile and moss hump. When a community of old and new growth, flora, fauna, and campers alike, flourish in the habitat's vitality, it's impossible not to be humbled. I find myself in sync with the environment and coming to terms with my own aspirations and future path.

During my invertebrate biology class, the counselors took the group on an excursion outside of our established paths. With no clue to what this journey held, I was happy to fetch my water shoes in the hope of knowledge to feed my curiosity. Arriving at our destination, I was captivated by a rustic mill accompanied by rolling hills. Looking beyond, I realized my true destination to be a murky, stagnant pond. Surrounded by murmurs of dismay, with a net in hand, I marched ahead to investigate the organisms loitering within this pungent habitat. Sinking deep in the muck, I found a profusion of larvae, scuds, worms, and leeches, all pollution-tolerant species unlike those in Camp. Once the class was content with our examinations, the next half-hour was devoted to pulling leeches off of our bodies, an adventure hailing itchy red marks and high-pitched screams. “Get it off!” was yelled several times, much to the amusement of those whose knee-high socks kept the critters repressed.

Even in less picture-perfect encounters, the environmentally proactive lifestyle of Nature Camp has taught me to admire nature’s immense beauty. Nature embraces its differences, like the contrast of the pristine creek and putrid pond, between silent reptiles and buzzing cicadas, or that of earth-bound plants and free-flying insects. Similarly, I, with my own unique trek, unite alongside my fellow campers in our shared involvement with the environment. While our differences are apparent, it is together that we can protect our surroundings.

Though I must leave Camp, its lessons are engraved in my heart, further defining my path. The mission of Nature Camp has become my own: to respect my ecosystem, no matter its location and no matter its contents. Deep within the river valley in that clear Nature Camp air, I have used the beaten and unbeaten paths to travel my own internal path, identifying who I am and where I will lead.