

WHY “CREATION SAFARIS”?

by David F. Coppedge

“Great are the works of the Lord; they are studied by all who delight in them . . . He has made His wonders to be remembered.” (Psalm 111:2, 4)

Just as it is one thing to know *about* God and quite another to *know* God, it is one thing to know about the creation and another, thrilling thing to know the creation. If your Christian life has become stale armchair intellectualism and needs a boost, I have an excellent idea. Go on a Creation Safari!

What’s Wrong with This Picture?

A few years ago, sitting in my Sunday School class at a solid, Bible-believing church, I observed an anomaly, a sort of disconnect between theory and practice. We had just sung the familiar words of “How Great Thou Art”—*O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder consider all the worlds thy hands have made...*” But now, the teacher was going over all the upcoming social events on the calendar: you know, the usual bowling or racquetball nights, luaus, parties, shows, concerts, and amusement parks. (In our city, nature is something you shut outside as you run from the car to the townhouse with your arms loaded down with shopping bags.) Noticing that these were all city-bound events, I thought to myself, *What makes any of these activities distinctively Christian? And why are we entertaining ourselves with the works of man? Can’t God put on a better show?*

A Sudden Urge to Break Tradition

On the spur of the moment—without any forethought—I decided to do something positive about this apparent contradiction. I organized two outdoor nature trips, which I dubbed “Creation Safaris,” for our Sunday School class. It was such a novel idea, just a few came at first (not many people these days consider themselves the “outdoor type”). But when they began to look at fossils, and galaxies, and animals, and wildflowers, and mountains and stars and canyons and caves and trees, birds, fish, rainbows, sunsets, snowflakes and more—and learned how these things argued against evolution and supported the Bible’s account of creation—they were amazed! Not only that, they were having fun! Before long, my serendipitous idea was “off and hiking.” Now, over three decades later, Creation Safaris are a legend! Hundreds of people relive unforgettable memories at the name: memories of adventure, beauty, fellowship, learning and worship. Many have become excited about creation science by having experienced it up close and personal. I’ll have to admit, I have been the chief beneficiary. I never knew ministry could be so rewarding and fun!

Escaping to Reality

From our hyper-civilized base in Los Angeles, we have launched out in all directions to behold the wonders of God's world. We have climbed mountains. We have spotted whales. We have slithered through caves, observed galaxies, comets and meteors, swum in rivers, and dived into deep pools. We have rolled down sand dunes, bicycled through redwoods, reclined in flower-strewn meadows, fished for golden rainbow trout, photographed wildlife, and felt the spray of crashing waves. We have held prayer time in the total darkness of a lava tube. We have camped in pouring rain, and hiked in searing heat. We have stood in awe of magnificent sunsets and rainbows. We have marveled at ice crystals and miniature wildflowers through magnifying glasses. We have sung praises late into the night around campfires, rafted mighty rivers, hiked over high passes, scrambled up eroded cliffs, skidded on frozen springs in the desert, showered under waterfalls, observed sleeping bats, chimneyed through narrow canyons, climbed giant oaks, listened to the howls of coyotes in the early hours of a chilly morning, carved fossils out of the rock, chatted with native Americans, and climbed volcanoes. Does your spiritual life need a boost? Mine needs a sedative!

But I Don't Have the Time...

If you're thinking you couldn't find the time for such things, keep in mind this writer had a full-time job, was working on a physics degree part time, led a local chapter of the Bible-Science Association, was speaking and giving multi-media presentations once or twice a month, and still found embarrassing amounts of wasted time that could have been better used enjoying God's creation. And no, he didn't get more vacation time than others. Most of these outings were quick and easy, fitting into a day or afternoon or a weekend or paid holiday, once or twice a month at most. Rather than impacting my schedule negatively, they provided an escape from the artificial pressures of civilization—an escape to reality—that my Creation Safari friends and I really looked forward to. After all, should we work all the time making a living and never spend time living? Believe me, if you could see some of the thousands of adventure photographs I've collected over the past two decades, you'd see a lot of living! And most of it was packed into just a short trip here or there. The problem is usually not time, but willingness to change old habits.

But I Don't Have the Money...

Nor are these excursions necessarily costly. Hiking and camping can be among the cheapest forms of recreation. Some local walks cost no more than a brown bag lunch and the gas to get to a park or local trail head. It's possible, of course, to get carried away with expensive high-tech camping and mountaineering gear and clothing, but it isn't necessary. Pioneers made do without Patagonia jackets and Jansport packs. And with so many people today shelling out \$200 or more for a ski trip, Creation Safaris can be an attractively economical idea.

But I'm Out of Shape...

What creation miracles are nearby for you to experience? Start with one really close to home, perhaps the most wondrous of all: the very body you inhabit! This marvel of complexities and capabilities, when imprisoned in the city, often gets little of its intended exercise other than breathing and eating. The conveniences that centuries of progress have brought have become our crutches. Without some motivation, we can easily succumb to convenience addiction and miss out on a world of holy pleasures and experiences that God has provided. We should soar like eagles in these incredible machines God has given us for our earthly experience! But to do so, we must first break out of the civilized mindset and remember that our bodies, the Fall notwithstanding, were originally designed to be quite at home in the natural environment.

I'm Just Not the Outdoor Type...

City folk today mistakenly think they need air conditioning, hot and cold running water, and flush toilets when most of these things are relatively recent inventions. The fact is, believers of all ages (and many in poorer countries today) have lived spiritually stalwart lives with far fewer domestic comforts. Our Russian brethren have of necessity worshipped in the forests for years, and I dare say their faith puts to shame that of the average American pew potato.

Mr. Average American Christian

Jesus Christ did much of his ministering out of doors, and often climbed mountains for prayer and respite. John the Baptist was basically a wilderness survivalist! Today's Christian? He leaves his artificial house, gets into his artificial car, drives down an artificial highway to an artificial church building and sings,

O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder (*I wonder if I set the timer on my DVR?*)
Consider all the worlds Thy hands have made;
I see the stars (*I hope this service gets over in time for the Academy Awards*)
I hear the rolling thunder (*is that a Ferrari I hear driving by?*)

For shame. Christians, believers that God created the mountains, just as hung up on the vanity fare of city materialism as the world is. Well, here's a proven cure: tell 'em to go take a hike! Believe me, they'll learn quickly to be content with less when they have to carry it all on their backs. And as they watch a golden trout jump from a royal-blue lake under majestic peaks and the late afternoon light fades into a vermilion sunset, they'll learn that true riches surround us, and don't cost a dime.

My Idea of Roughing It...

When God created Adam and Eve, He didn't put them in a city; He put them in a garden. Strange, isn't it: we call what they lived in "paradise," but by today's standards, this lifestyle

with no shoes, no clothes, no escalators, no TV, no air conditioning, no refrigerator, and no BMW would be called by the mildly derogatory term “roughing it.” People sometimes recoil at the idea of camping, saying, “My idea of roughing it is the Holiday Inn instead of the Marriott,” or, “My idea of roughing it is room service instead of dining out.” But many times, I’ve found, they would really like to try hiking and camping if they just knew how. If someone would just show them what they need, allay their fears about outdoor risks, and provide an opportunity, they would go for it. We’re not talking just rugged sportsmen here. I’ve seen sophisticated ladies go on trips that would give sober men pause. And they loved it!

Not Just a Guy Thing

One lady for example, upon signing up for a Creation Safari to Great Basin National Park, was really worried about having to sleep in the cold. After surviving a 15-degree night without harm, complete with Thanksgiving dinner outside, she began to realize that if she could handle that, she could handle other challenges, too. Her confidence in her God-given abilities began to grow, and without losing her femininity, she went on to tackle cave exploring, backpacking and many other things. The confidence that people gain by outdoor adventures spills over into other areas of life, increasing their sense of what they can do, their “margin” for being content. Those of us that spent that cold night now chuckle about people who complain if the thermostat drops below 69 or climbs above 71.

Flowers and Butterflies and...Skeletons

Now we’re not being naive about the natural world. It’s not all pretty out there. I mean, get real! It’s not the Garden of Eden anymore. There’s a lot of suffering, and disease, and death in the world today. But this is another important lesson about God: He is the righteous Judge, and He has judged this earth because of sin. God’s greatest judgment on this earth was the great Flood of Noah’s day. Now if the Bible is not just telling stories, but is revealing the true history of the world, we would expect to find evidence of this event in nature. And that’s exactly what we do find! All over in our travels on Creation Safaris, we see evidence for flooding and erosion on monumental scales, far more than what is happening in the world today. This is another confirmation of the veracity of God’s word. Seeing it with your own eyes can increase your fear of God. (But that, remember, is the beginning of wisdom.)

Beauty for Ashes

In spite of the great Flood, the earth is still a beautiful place. Just as a potter might smash his work because of flaws and make something else good out of it, God has made something beautiful out of the remains of judgment. Is the Grand Canyon a graveyard of catastrophe, or a photographer’s paradise? Both! There is still ample evidence of the goodness of God, there and everywhere else on this amazing planet. As Paul told the Gentiles in Lystra (Acts 14), God continues to do good to all nations by sending rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying

our hearts with food and gladness. He does this so that men might turn away from vain things to serve the living and true God. It's out among the wonders of nature where the goodness of God is clearly on display.

Where Should I Go?

Now, there's no need to begin pushing your envelope with a sixty-mile mountain trek. Start easy. Is there a comfortable museum or planetarium near home that you have never seen? Maybe your city has an IMAX theater showing outstanding nature photography. Short and easy activities like this can begin to get your eyes off the artificial and onto God's created world. Day hikes can be pleasant strolls through the trees suitable for children as well as the elderly. Just think of all the wonders—from pond life to galaxies—that lie conveniently within sight of your own home. Even if your friends are low on the fitness scale now, you can give them a hand up to new levels of wonder and appreciation. And as they begin to stretch themselves into new capabilities, and as they eagerly show their color photos from the most recent Creation Safari to their friends, their appetites for bigger and better adventures will grow.

Creation Safaris Have Something for Every Body

Outings can be tailored to a group's age level, abilities, and needs. Parents with small children, obviously, have different needs than college-age hunks. The growing ranks of home schooling families are prime markets, incidentally; they're eager for field trips that contribute to their children's education and can be justified as school activity. College and career singles have a great need for wholesome fellowship that such outings can provide. Don't overlook the disabled, whose sharp minds are eager to soar beyond their physical limitations. With some creativity and planning, your church could have a real ministry to our physically challenged brothers and sisters, helping them to experience some of the beauty and variety of creation so often denied them. No matter the age or ability level, there are creation activities available that can open the windows of the soul to the omniscience and omnipotence of our Creator God. Everybody needs a touch of the nearness to God that creation can bring. I've taken macho backpackers over 13,000-foot mountain passes and little old ladies out to the country to see Halley's Comet before dawn. The reactions are the same: Hallelujah!

The Top Priorities

Worship and education in the outdoors is, as it should be, what Creation Safaris are all about. Creation provides a vivid environment for communicating Biblical truth, like the time we studied Hebrews 11:38 while deep inside a limestone cave. It's important that creation outings not be allowed to degenerate into just recreation, lest they draw people away from church; Creation Safaris should augment the teaching of a good church, not compete with it. We've all heard the sportsman's excuse for skipping church, "My cathedral is the mountains," while he spends his time fishing, not meditating on God. That's not at all what I'm talking about. It makes sense to

hold church services in the city most of the time, because that's where most of the people are. But I think pastors would do well to give their congregations an occasional "Sermon on the Mount" once in a while, and let the sheep actually see some green pastures and still waters instead of just hearing about them. Just as Jesus Christ drew lessons from flowers, birds, seeds, trees, and the weather, there's no end of material from nature and Scripture you can draw from and illustrate in living color. If you're a creative Sunday School teacher or Bible study leader, you can have a tremendously fruitful time teaching and leading Bible lessons in the out-of-doors. Think of nature as an inexhaustible audio-visual resource, a big-screen surround-sound classroom!

The World Is Not the World

Scripture commands us to "Love not the world, nor the things in the world" (I John 2:15-17). What does this mean? This is not talking about nature, but about fallen human society: in other words, all the evil stuff that concentrates in the city: "the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life, which is not from the Father, but is from the world." The natural world, on the other hand, is from the Father: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (Psalm 24:1). If we love God, we can and should love this world, because it is a tangible expression of the wisdom and almighty power of God.

Neither Were Thankful...

Thankfulness is important in the Bible. We are commanded to be thankful. One of the characteristics of the ungodly is a lack of thankfulness. Paul said in Romans 1:18-20 that the ungodly, even though surrounded by inexcusable evidence for God's existence visible in the things he made, "did not glorify God as God, neither were thankful."

What does it mean to be thankful? I believe it means far more than just saying "Thank you." It includes observing and studying what God has made. If a great artist handed you a masterpiece, would you just say "Thank you" and set it down? I hope not; that would not be thankful, it would be rude. To really honor the artist, and to really appreciate the work, you would look carefully at it, and study all its creative nuances. You would express specific admiration for the genius in the details.

Thanksgiving for God's creation can be expressed in scientific investigation. The people of God should be the world's best scientists and naturalists, because they know the Wisdom behind the work. James Prescott Joule was one of the world's greatest physicists in the 19th century; he discovered the law of conservation of energy and avidly performed experiments on chemistry, electricity and magnetism as a hobby. He said it best: "After the knowledge of, and obedience to, the will of God, the next aim must be to know something of His attributes of wisdom, power and goodness as evidenced by His handiwork... It is evident that an acquaintance with natural laws

means no less than an acquaintance with the mind of God therein expressed.” The *next aim*, he said... hmmm... he puts the study of creation pretty high on the list.

Battle-Weary?

With so many demands on our time these days, and so many pressing issues in the world, can we really justify taking groups of people on hikes or camping trips? Remember the admonition of Nehemiah, “the joy of the Lord is your strength” (Neh. 8:10b). Which of us could not profit from more joy, and more strength? Any pause to increase our joy is, in effect, a pause to recharge our batteries and re-orient our priorities. That in itself is a good investment of time. But even more important, I feel that a brief escape from human civilization, not “from” reality but “to” it – the world God made – can help disentangle us from society’s false values, and can bring us back home with a broader, more godly perspective. Therefore, it’s not just worthwhile to get out into the creation once in a while, it’s almost essential for our world view and spiritual vitality. I’ve watched people grow in joy and thankfulness as a result of participating in Creation Safaris. And the new-found freedom they gain from overcoming fears and perceived limitations gives them a greater confidence in God and ability to face problems at home.

Context and Perspective

Most important, studying the Creation sharpens our concept of its Creator. I sometimes wonder whether it’s even possible for city-bound Christians today to have a right view of God when 24 hours a day, seven days a week, they are surrounded by smog and concrete. And if all they find entertaining are the works of men, are they not displeasing the Lord, whose works far surpass in artistry anything that man is capable of conceiving (Psalm 111:1-4)?

The writers of Psalms like 19 and 104 were people who took time to look at the skies, the wildlife, the oceans, and the land around them. Would David have penned those magnificent words in Psalm 8:3-4 from an office building? The author of the perennially-favorite hymn *This Is My Father’s World*, a well-respected preacher of his day, was a man fond of walking into the country to get closer to God. Think over those familiar lines and let them convince you of the spiritual value of spending time in the outdoors:

*This is my Father’s world, and to my listening ears
All nature sings and ’round me rings the music of the spheres.
This is my Father’s world; I rest me in the thought
Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas,
His hand the wonders wrought.
This is my Father’s world; the birds their carols raise,
The morning light, the lily white declare their Maker’s praise.
This is my Father’s world; He shines in all that’s fair.
In the rustling grass I hear Him pass,
He speaks to me everywhere.*

*This is my Father's world; O let me never forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong God is the Ruler yet.
This is my Father's world; the battle is not done.
Jesus Who died shall be satisfied
And earth and heaven be one.*
—Rev. Maltbie Babcock

Start Practicing Your Eternal Calling

A well-known catechism asks the first and foremost question, “What is the chief end of man?” and answers, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.” Since this is what we will be doing for eternity, it makes good sense to spend time practicing it now. A key part of enjoying God, expressed so often in the Psalms, is to praise Him for what He has made. Look at a wildflower. Listen to a bird’s song. Exercise your incredible body machine. Watch a sunset. Gaze at the night sky. Spend a little more time and energy on your chief end—glorifying and enjoying God—and not only will life’s other priorities fall into place, you will be a stronger, more motivated, more grateful person to fulfill God’s will for your life.

