



Unnatural Trail

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Activity Name: Unnatural Trail

Ages: 6-12 (also works for older students)

Activity Level: Low

Length of time: 20 to 30 min

Number of Participants: 10-15

Concept: This activity is great for practicing and strengthening observational skills in the natural environment. Participants walk the length of a forested trail looking for items that don't belong, that are not natural.

Materials Required: A number of man-made items (10-12) some should stand out brightly and others should blend in with the background. For example, our collection consists of a small round mirror, a tiny book, a small toy globe, a screwdriver, a coat hanger, a small paint brush and a rubber dish glove. (Items that have a different scale and texture than the vegetation along the trail).

Introduction: Leaders tell the participants that this activity is to strengthen their observational skills, so that they notice more and become more curious about what they are seeing. Participants are told that there are items ahead on the trail that don't belong.

Methods: Participants are told they need to stay on the trail, but should take note and remember the items that they are seeing. Participants go one at a time with some space between each. Some leaders make this a stealth activity and have individuals record in their journals the items that they observe that don't belong no one points out where the objects are. Then they debrief and compare who noticed which items. Others simply have participants record the number of items they notice that don't belong and challenge them to keep looking (from the trail) until they have discovered all of the items. The leader only reveals how many items are to be found after most or all have been found.

The group then debriefs the activity, discussing why the items stand out, how this activity might increase observation skills, and what things you might notice or discover if you used the same observational skills when walking along a trail or on a beach without unnatural items, what more might you observe around you?

Tips for Teachers:

- This improves observational skills by noticing things not part of the background. For example, this helps in birding, when detecting and noticing birds in vegetated habitats. It also provides a foundation for a discussion or further activities on how and why animals use camouflage as a survival strategy.
- This activity could be along a small section of trail or large (upwards of 100m). It is best to place the items just off the trail at eye level, on the ground, and up high to add variation.

Background facts and information: Experience has shown that this activity helps young people perceive and observe environments in a deeper way. They move away from just seeing unidimensional features to a more three dimensional view where features have structure, texture, depth and volume.

Literature Cited:

Adapted from: Sharing Nature with Children - A Parents' and Teachers' Nature-awareness Guidebook by Joseph Cornell, 1979. Ananda Publications.