

# Healing In Nature



A collection of inspirational stories from our community.



STATE OF THE  
**ENVIRONMENT**

• BERKS COUNTY, PA •

# The State of the Environment in Berks

Twelve years ago, Berks Nature initiated a first of its kind report for this community – State of the Environment in Berks. Since that time, we have remained committed to publishing new reports each year to garner the attention of diverse audiences while covering a variety of environmental topics.

This series of State of the Environment (SOTE) in Berks publications contain concrete, measurable data that have inspired members of this community to make lifestyle choices that improve our impact on the environment as a community, and position Berks as a leader in the green movement. The program has been developed by measuring indicators within the following focus areas: Air, Energy, Land, Waste, and Water. Since its debut, the report has been distributed widely in Berks (in digital and print formats) and welcomed by the community. School districts have utilized the reports in the classroom as a supplement to standard curriculum; institutions have made significant changes to processes and procedures to benefit the environment; and individuals have learned ways to change their behavior to lead more sustainable lifestyles.

Berks Nature and local experts in the areas of air, energy, land, waste and water will continue to measure 25 different indicators and provide routine updates to the community. Overall, what effects do our actions related to these indicators have on our health? On our children's health? On our natural resources? Moreover, what can we do as a community to improve it? Now is the time to address these issues, and support our efforts to protect the environment.

The collection of the 12 State of the Environment publications can be downloaded FREE at [berksnature.org](http://berksnature.org).



# Healing In Nature



There are endless environmental topics that our State of the Environment program could have focused on this year. *Why Healing in Nature?*

During the spring months of this unusual and challenging year, it became evident that people were focused on their health and safety during the pandemic. Our trails and nature preserves realized a significant increase in visitors; our virtual nature programs were in-demand; and our land and water protection work did not stop. Throughout this time, our team listened to many different stories of how our members and friends found solace in nature, and thanked us for the work we do.

*Nature is good for you!* The work that Berks Nature completes to protect these special places is important. We have heard this loud and clear in 2020.

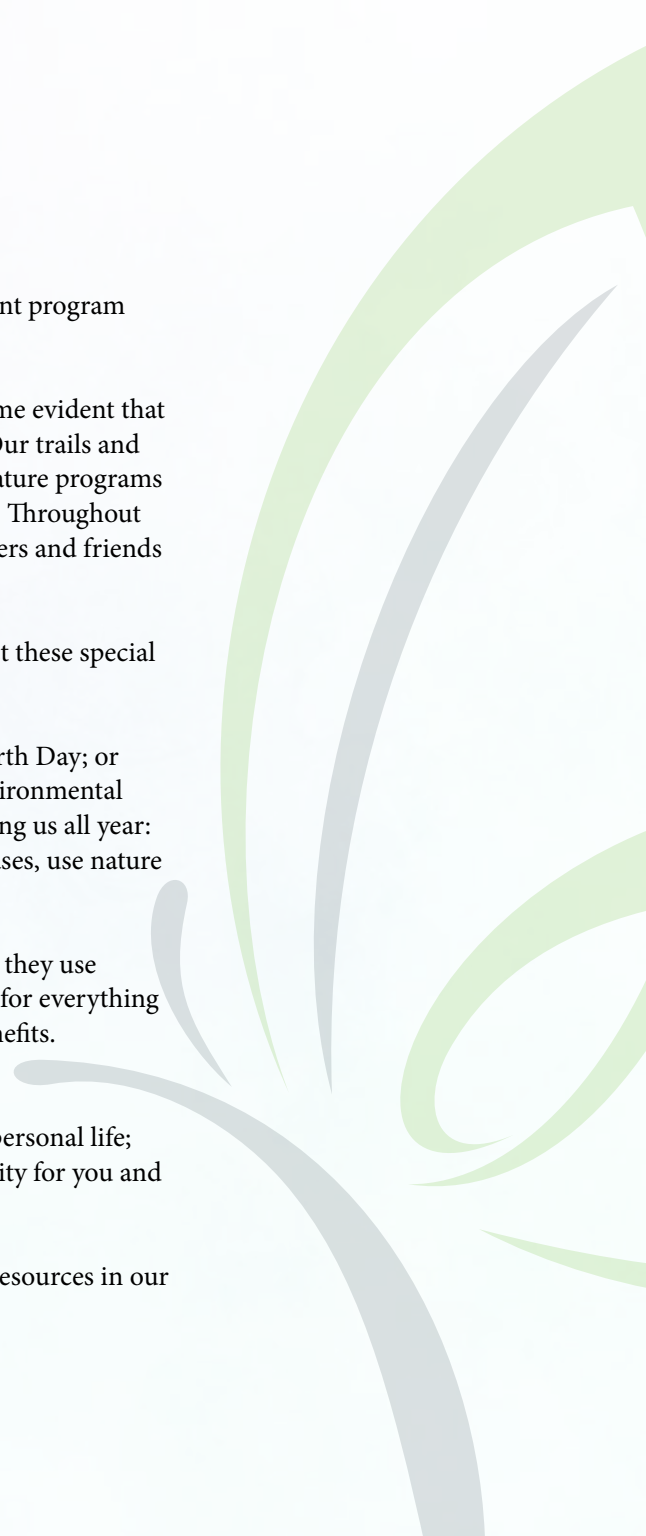
So, instead of celebrating the much-anticipated 50th Anniversary of Earth Day; or educating Berks on how to better recycle; or publishing 25 updated environmental indicators – we decided to highlight what the community has been telling us all year: they have found ways to heal in nature, find inspiration, and in some cases, use nature to overcome life's challenging obstacles.

The following pages share the stories of nine local individuals, and how they use nature to maintain a balanced life. Spending time in nature isn't a cure for everything that ails us, but it sure does offer some preventative and therapeutic benefits.

We hope you

- Connect to at least one of these stories and find similarity in your personal life;
- Initiate change in your life to make spending time outdoors a priority for you and your family;
- Inspire others to spend more time in nature; and
- Support the work of Berks Nature to help us protect more natural resources in our community.

Enjoy Healing in Nature!





*Nature, and the calming effect it had on me, truly helped my mental health during the lockdown. It allowed me to recoup and recover from, mentally, one of the most stressful periods of my life.*

# Amaya Shah

**W**hen the pandemic hit, and the governor issued lockdown orders, I was stuck at home in front of a screen doing school work and studying almost every day. During this time, there was no in-person social interaction and my mind definitely declined; I was stressed over schoolwork and I missed seeing my friends and going out.

However, as the weather warmed, I started to do my schoolwork outside. I would take an old beach towel, lay it on the lawn, and sit outside with my notebooks and laptop. At first, I did not think much of my time outdoors, but as I spent more time in my backyard, enjoying the sounds of birds chirping and feeling the sun shine on my face, my mental health started to improve.

Every day, I looked forward to watching the butterflies fly to and from the flowers and the bunnies hop across the lawn. If I was lucky, I was sometimes able to spot this beautiful goldfinch. After spending a couple of weeks outside, I became noticeably less stressed, and honestly, I started to smile and laugh more.

Nature, and the calming effect it had on me, truly helped my mental health during the lockdown. It allowed me to recoup and recover from, mentally, one of the most stressful periods of my life. It is clear to me that Nature and human health are inextricably linked, and in order to protect ourselves, we need to protect nature.






# Jane deGruchy

**M**y interest in nature started when I was a child, spending a lot of time outdoors and exploring the world around me. Those early years were formative for me. When children are provided the opportunity to interact with the environment, they learn to value it, shaping their attitudes that continue into adulthood.

My personal fascination with nature continued through high school, into college, and ultimately led me to a job in a laboratory setting. Throughout this time, I craved time outdoors, spending my free time hiking, biking and gardening. For me, hiking and biking outdoors are like meditation in motion. Being outdoors has a calming effect, but paradoxically, can be energizing too. Perhaps this is because our senses become more engaged? Observing the changing of the seasons is reassuring; the world has a predictable order and rhythm that suggests something larger than ourselves. There is a no end of things to explore and learn.

In the early 2000s, my interest in nature and art converged when I enrolled in my first painting class. It may seem an unexpected life trajectory. However, I look at science and art not as opposites but rather as different sides of the same coin. They both involve careful observation and reducing complicated subjects to their fundamental elements. It just seems instinctive for me to use plants, animals and natural landscapes as subjects for my art. It is very satisfying connecting with others through my paintings because of a shared interest in nature.

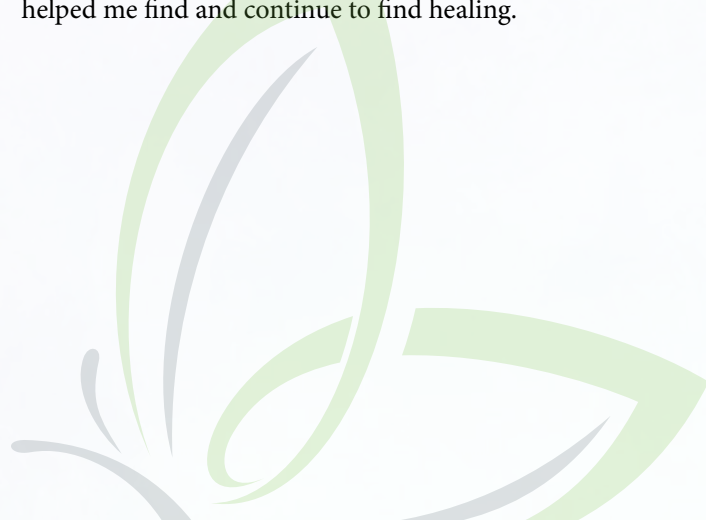
A person with long blonde hair, seen from behind, is sitting on a black metal bench. They are looking out over a lush green landscape with various trees and a sky filled with white and grey clouds. The scene is bright and natural.

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# Tiana Lopez

**T**here was a time in college when I absolutely hated being in school. I wanted to drop out of college and give up not only on school but also just life. I was seeing the school's counselor which was helping but I felt I needed something else. Luckily for me our school was located near state parks and had a farm on site. I sat under trees to think and I learned to forage wild healing medicine. I found densely hidden areas to cry in and be alone. The forest was a refuge. I volunteered on the farm and learned about the healing powers of the herbs and the joy in growing food. I learned to confront death compassionately through raising chickens.

Ultimately, I learned that nature was a wild but safe space if you take the time to dive in deeply and learn. You have to take trails and life one step, one day at a time and as it simple as it sounds there is a beauty to it. The more time you spend in nature, the more time you will confront and be connected with your own humanity. You will wonder and learn about your role in this world and to me that helped me find and continue to find healing.





*“You were the first thing outside  
of myself that I looked at and felt  
connected to, do you understand this?”  
- Upile Chisala, soft magic.*






*John Pacharis*

I've always found the woods to be my sanctuary my whole life. I was an avid cyclist, mountain and road, but then on March 4, 2012, I was involved in a dirt biking accident which resulted in a multi-ligament knee injury; I tore my ACL, PCL and MCL. My knee has had two major rebuilds on it and several other smaller surgeries which has left me with a lot of instability and limited range of motion. After the second rebuild on my knee my range of motion never fully came back and I was unable to pedal a bicycle.

For years, I was unable to access trails and be in the woods due to my injury, until I took up the sport of handcycling, which gave me the freedom to return to the woods on wheels once more, to be back in my sanctuary. I am at peace in the woods – sometimes it's so quiet you can hear the quiet. Especially now, after working through a life-altering injury, I really appreciate my wooded sanctuary.

We are so blessed to be surrounded by such natural beauty here in Berks County. I hope we can preserve our beautiful area for generations and generations to enjoy.





*“Every child needs nature. Not just the ones whose parents appreciate nature. Not only those of a certain economic class or culture or gender or sexual identity or set of abilities. Every child.”*

*-Richard Louv*

# Linda Bloom

It is a fact that a majority of children in the United States are spending only 1% of their time participating in unstructured outdoor play. As a Pediatrician this is a great area of concern. Taking unstructured playtime from children is damaging. We are seeing increasing levels of childhood obesity, childhood depression, attention disorders. While outdoor play certainly isn't a panacea, the lack of being outdoors can play an important role in these and many other ailments.

Our son Ari has some sensory difficulties and would constantly get in trouble at preschool for "wild" behavior. Then we gave Berks Nature's Nature Preschool a try and almost immediately Ari began doing 80-90% better. Being outdoors, able to explore, use his body, and engage his four senses (we try to discourage tasting!) brought a balance to him that we had not seen before. Studies have shown that "nature exposure" can decrease biomarkers for stress, increase unstructured play, and decrease mental health symptoms. For Ari, nature fills his constant desire for sensory input while moving and climbing throughout the day productively releases his energy and has helped him to work on cooperative play, problem solving, and independence.

I hope Ari has developed a lifelong love of the outdoors, as it is clear what an asset it is to his (and our) well-being.

Being in nature became even more important to us this year with the pandemic. Once schools closed down, we committed to taking Ari on a hike nearly every day. This was a gift for our entire family. When so much else felt out of control, we could celebrate victories as we "conquered" new trails, challenging ourselves for steeper, longer, higher hikes. Emotionally, Ari fared quite well during the pandemic, thanks in large part to his joy of the outdoors.

Frequently, Ari himself has reminded me that that even though so many things are different, "outside is always open."



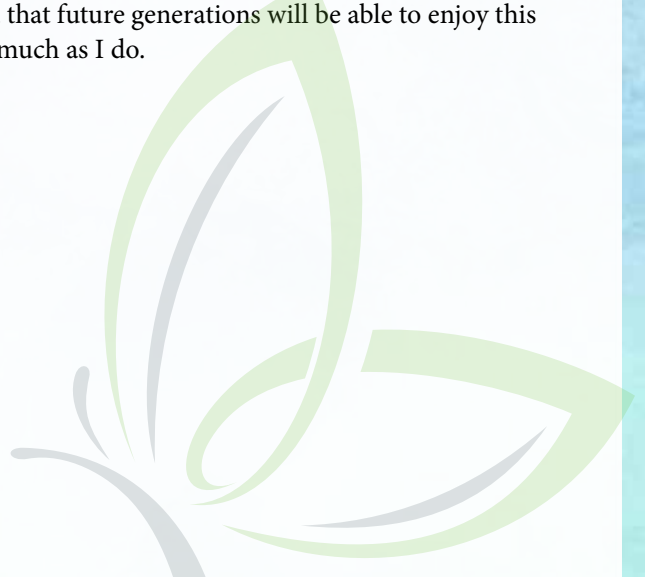


# David Uslar

Open space has always been important to me. I feel so fortunate to be surrounded by 300 acres of open space around my home. Every morning before my coffee, I take a moment to enjoy one of the best views of the land and am thankful for my surroundings.

I didn't want to worry about the future of this important open space, even long after my time. So, I made the decision to permanently protect the land with Berks Nature by using a conservation easement. Now I know that this property will remain open space, forever.

The emotional connection to this land and surrounding open space provides a significant return on investment! I plant a variety of trees every year and enjoy the birds and other wildlife that visit me often – including the bears! I am glad that future generations will be able to enjoy this land as much as I do.



*The emotional connection to this land  
and surrounding open space provides a  
significant return on investment!*



# Sarah Chudnovsky


This past spring, I was removing invasive species along a creek with Berks Nature's Senior Ecologist, Larry Lloyd. It was rough but rewarding work - pulling and cutting vines and clipping honeysuckle branches. After spending the first few weeks of the pandemic entirely in my home, it was a relief to be working outside again on a brisk but sunny morning. Then, I heard what I thought was a wood thrush. But, what's so distinctive to me about the wood thrush is the second half of its song and I had only heard the first half, so I was unsure. I asked Larry, to which he said, this bird can't be ready to sing their entire song yet- it needs to rest first! And it's true- the wood thrush is a very small, migratory bird who flies across the entire Gulf of Mexico in a single night! How incredible to me that a wood thrush will make such an impressive and harrowing journey to come back to the forests of Berks County, PA. Reflecting on this instilled a sense of awe in me.

What would it look like for us to value our own forests here on that same level?

In those initial months of the pandemic, the wood thrush re-grounded me in my commitment to restoring our forests and reminded me to seek rest – that we can slow down, rest, and respond to change, upheaval, or loss with intention, presence, and care. This is required of us as we continue to build a future that includes healthy forests and healthy communities.







*...we can slow down, rest, and respond to change, upheaval, or loss with intention, presence, and care. This is required of us as we continue to build a future that includes healthy forests and healthy communities.*



*“In every walk with  
nature one receives far  
more than he seeks.”*

*- John Muir*

# Sharon Hussar

**A**s a pediatric speech and language pathologist working with families and their children in the early intervention program here in Berks county, I see first-hand the trend in the decline of unstructured outdoor play. It is so important for our children to get outside, play in nature, and move their bodies! Children learn best during 3-dimensional play, incorporating the use of all their senses, yet more and more children are spending so much of their day in front of a screen with limited sensory experiences, despite the American Academy of Pediatrics' (AAP) recommendations to limit screen time in children. Our children are doing a lot of watching and not doing ... observing more than they are actively participating.

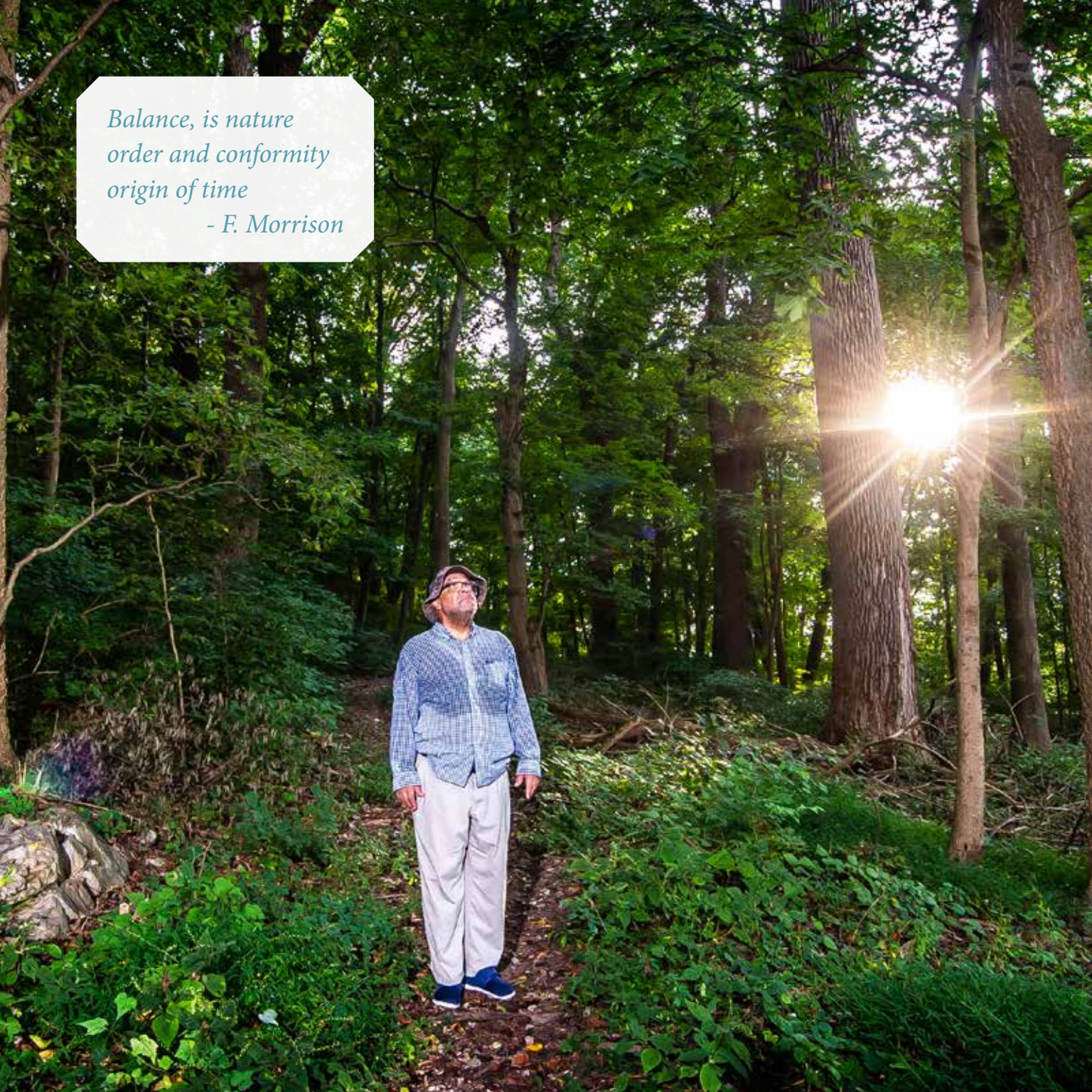
Exploring, moving and playing outside offers a sensory rich experience where all our senses can be activated and true learning can take place. As a society, we need to emphasize and promote opportunities for nature play. We need to educate and inform families about how important it is for their children to get outside and play on a daily basis.

During this time of transition during the global pandemic, even I spent more time in nature than I ever have in my entire life. Spending time in nature takes me back to what is important - back to a life of simplicity and enjoying God's beautiful creation. A time and place where I can reflect on all the things I am grateful for and forget about all the worries of the world and appreciate the beauty of my surroundings.



*Balance, is nature  
order and conformity  
origin of time*

*- F. Morrison*





# Francis Morrison

The residents of Berks County, and the City of Reading, PA are blessed with an abundance of parks and playgrounds nestled in a valley at the bases of Neversink Mountain and Mount Penn.

As one of many children growing up in the Southeastern section of Reading, PA, Neversink Mountain was our source of refuge and exploration; whether hiking up the 10th & South Fire Trail for a family outing among the short grass of a natural reservoir, or walking with a group of play mates along its main trail to drink the sweet water from the Lion's Mouth, a natural mountain spring, to escape the scorching heat of Summer.

Those of us who were fortunate enough to have grown up among this natural enclave know, and can attest to, the healing properties of nature.

For me, a walk along a mountain trail the day after a summer storm, is both refreshing and restorative.



# Thank You

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# Join our county-wide SCAVENGER HUNT!

We're going on a Goose Chase! Ok, we're not really chasing Geese, but, we'd love for you to join our virtual scavenger hunt for any age with awesome prizes.

Download the [GooseChase app](#) from the [App store](#).

Search for Berks Nature games. You can find more detailed instructions and sign-up for our Berks Nature Rx program at [berksnaturerx.com!](#)

There will be several games launched over the course of the year. Each game will have a specific time frame. Prizes will be awarded for our mission leaders.





Become a **Berks Nature** member today!

**[BerksNature.org](https://www.BerksNature.org)**

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