

Sunflower Fields and Other



Journeys on foot.

A series of essays dedicated to walking.

by
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Mount Etna, Italy.

Prologue

Me and my sister weren't able to dillydally in childhood for too long. We were not languorously cultivated like English roses, a deft hand pruning and turning us with the passing sun. No, our upbringing was more akin to dandelions being tugged up from the ground, by the hand of a harried gardener, dealing with an unruly garden. Patience was a luxury in our household, as my mum raised me and my sister alone down in south England in rural Dorset, hundreds of miles away from her homeland in Scotland. She had grown up moving between homes, nestled between the mountains of Dumfries and the Dalveen Pass, the Lake District and the Pentlands in Edinburgh. We are a lineage of working-class women, persevering in such an unruly garden, trying to bloom and find our own patch of sky.

The Scottish Borders, an oft-overlooked place of outstanding beauty, the Southern Upland Way ran past her childhood home's front door. This bore a love of nature, particularly of Scotland in my mum that thrums through my veins too.

I always feel a sense of returning home whenever I am ducked beneath the mountains of heather, a smattering of misty rain bringing out the red curls in my hair. As though deep in my being there is a corporeal belonging to the wild.



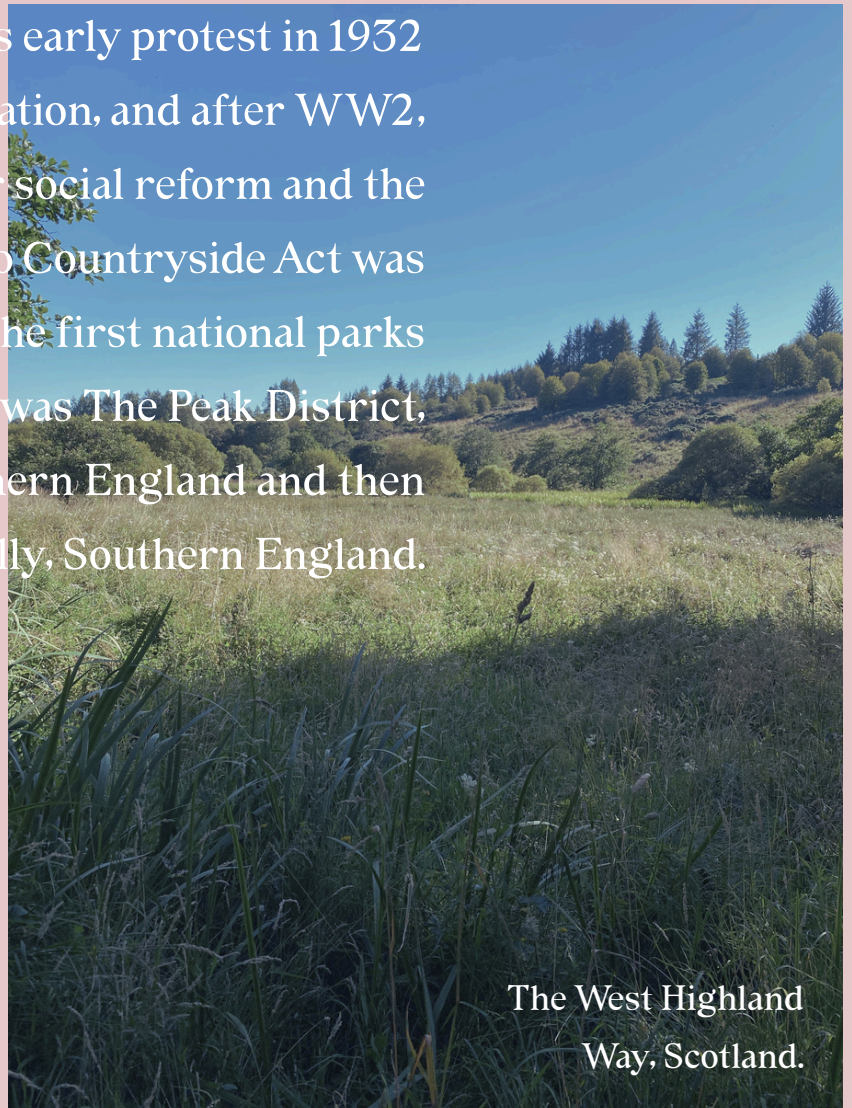
The Pentlands,
Edinburgh.

Writing to roam

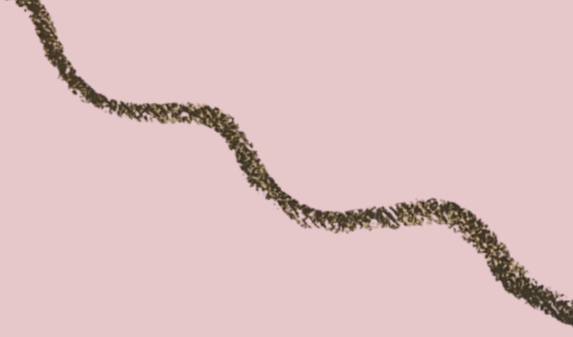
In Scotland, The Land Reform Act (2003) allows responsible use of most unenclosed land. This right enables everyone to freely access all areas of nature however they choose. Wild camping is allowed as long as the land is treated respectfully, while certain areas may be restricted for environmental reasons. In England, we have The Countryside's and Rights of Way Act (2000) which covers just 8% of land in the UK and allows a right to use linear paths, instead of open spaces. The remaining 90%+ is owned by the state, agriculture and farming industries, military and for private hunting estates.

When I began writing this piece, the intention was to accompany these essays with a walk along The Pennine Way through three national parks: The Yorkshire Dales, The Lake District and The Peak District. The purpose of this was to highlight the prescient history of the route cutting through these parks.

The Pennine Way was created in 1965 in response to The Kinder Scout movement in the 1930's which involved a mass trespassing event held by many young, working-class ramblers walking on private land in protest of privatisation. This birthed the very first National Trail in the UK, and was a victory for environmentalists ever since. This early protest in 1932 later created the Ramblers Association, and after WW2, there was significant pressure for social reform and the National Parks and Access to Countryside Act was created in 1949. Following this, the first national parks were founded in 1951. The first was The Peak District, followed by others in Northern England and then Scotland and Wales and finally, Southern England.



The West Highland
Way, Scotland.



In a patriarchal, white supremacist, capitalist society, we have been contending with the erosion of our rights for hundreds of years. Yet, that our access to nature is under attack is not only due to the extractive practices that are characteristic of our social structure. I would argue that we are disempowered and easier to manipulate when we are removed from our symbiosis with nature. Extracting us from our kinship with nature destroys the source of our resistance.

This can be exemplified by women being murdered en masse in the witch trials, many of whom used the commons' land to provide care for their communities. Today, this can be seen in how we are reduced to consumers, endlessly seeking fulfillment of fabricated needs, marketed products as solutions to the very structures of care they undermined.

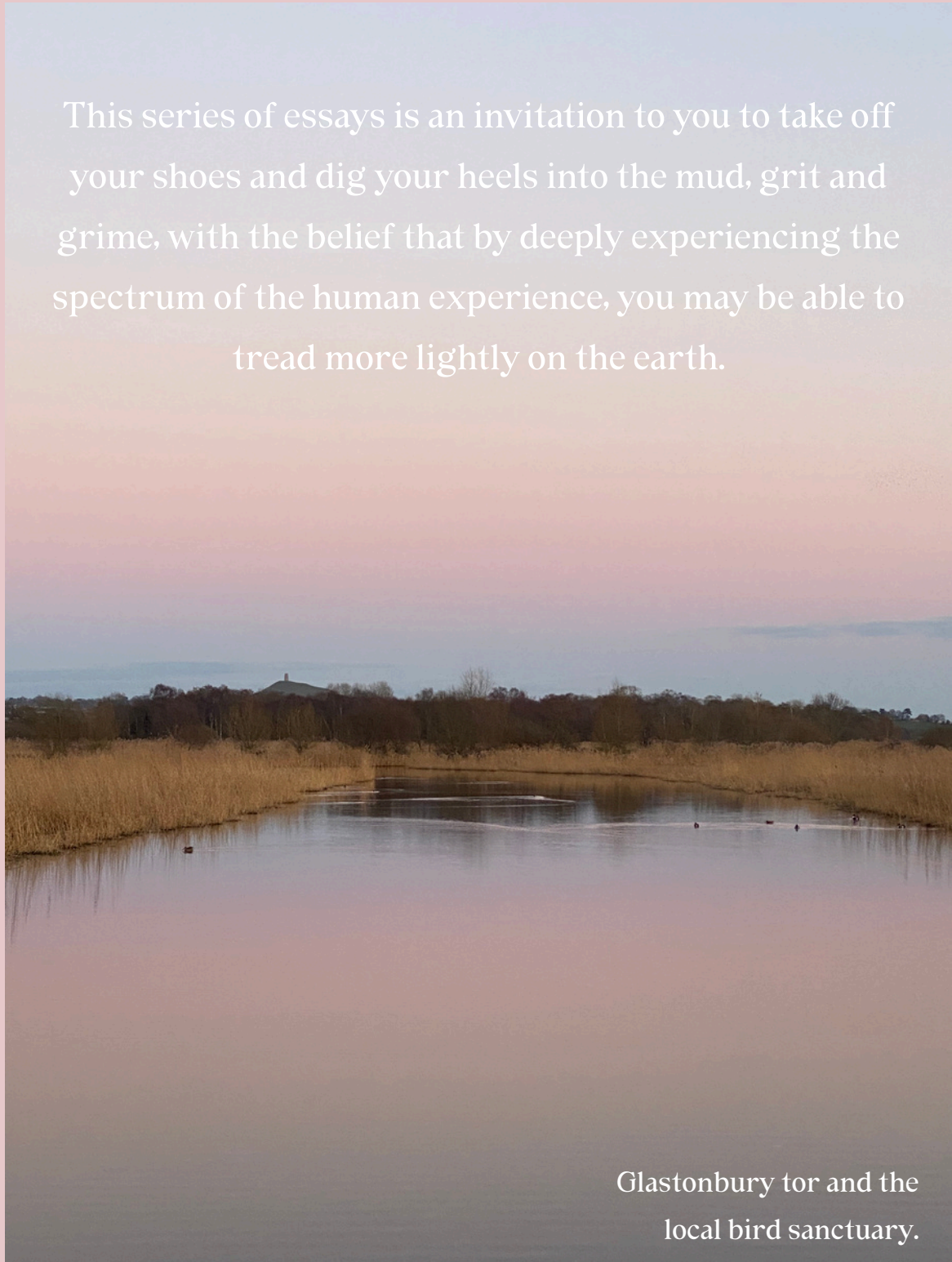
By destabilising communal care and reliance on our environment, this created a human need to exploit, rendering us dependent on the newly formed 'state' when the enclosures movement began. The eradication of women's and indigenous peoples' knowledge created the conditions for our commons' land to be privatised and sold back to us as we transitioned from Feudalism to Capitalism.

As I will explore and detail throughout these essays, I believe that finding our connection with nature empowers us to be better custodians of it. It is a fundamental law of nature to be abundant: waste is a resource that is recycled into nutritious soil, trees give away their nutrient stores to other weaker trees via their root systems, human beings can feed themselves and their communities through growing their own food. It is our very removal from nature that capitalism exploits. Yet, returning to it is also our greatest tool of resistance.



The West Highland
Way, Scotland.

This series of essays is an invitation to you to take off your shoes and dig your heels into the mud, grit and grime, with the belief that by deeply experiencing the spectrum of the human experience, you may be able to tread more lightly on the earth.



Glastonbury tor and the
local bird sanctuary.



Self: the joy of walking

Walking came to me at a joyous time of my life. At 20, I did a study abroad in Italy, leaving the gray of Britain behind for a life with a little more colour after waiting many years for this sort of adventure to come. This was before Brexit, in fact, I was one of the last cohorts to have a funded opportunity to live abroad during my degree. It was a time of tremendous freedom.

I arrived in Tuscany, spending a month learning Italian in Sienna, before moving to Bologna to study various arts, from illustration to life drawing. I had a group of friends that I hadn't really had before, and we would book planes and trains to traipse around the country, with little more than a backpack and a plan to sleep on the nearest beach. I had a sense of untetheredness I had never had before, the adventure of where just my own two feet and a few clothes could carry me.

While hiking the undulating hills and time-honoured paths connecting Cinque Terra, me and a friend hiked down the cliff behind the town on a disused path, along the cliff edge facing out toward the sea. We were engulfed by the darkest night, descending miles from any other people. Cars could certainly not reach us here, nestled deeply into the wild, rugged nature that surrounded us. Safely out of sight from any people, we slept on a rock about three meters above crashing waves battering the cliff edge. The stars shone down on us as we safely slept, tucked up in our sleeping bags.



Cinque Terre at golden hour.



It is obvious that different ways of life challenge the status quo of modern-day capitalism. Whether the witch burnings, or systematically blocking people from wild camping, these ways of living are deliberately undermined because with them, the structures that our patriarchal, white supremacist, capitalist system are built upon will crumble. The more we are able to come into relationship with our wildness and our inner nature, the more we are enabled to realise and influence change.

Weeks before, we had travelled to Sicily, it's ancient architecture and volatile landscape reeling us in. We decided to ignore the requirement to take a bus up Mount Etna, pitching a tent about 1000 meters up the volcano, our ears pressed to the ground as the rumblings of lava inside the volcano churned deep below.

Although it was planes, trains and cars that carried us to these places, it was our feet that immersed us amidst the great adventures that borne my love of walking and hiking. While I may have arrived by wheel, it was my feet that truly transported me to the depths of these adventures. The bus to the top of the Etna volcano in a pair of flip flops could not compare to hiking through the ashen landscape, our every step sinking beneath our backpacks. On your feet, you become fully immersed within nature, you are no longer simply a passerby. You are inherently engaging with the landscape, literally shaping it with your every footstep. Moreover, you are at once one with it, our most primal humanity realised. We escape the human machinations of a class system under capitalism, and become a living, breathing entity of the earth, as an ant or an elephant is.



A neighbouring crater to
Mount Etna's peak.



Walking out of Bologna, taking steps toward my future.

After months of travelling with friends, my sense of adventure was piqued, and I felt capable of anything. I decided to undertake Via Degli Dei, to celebrate the end of my time in Bologna. 'The Way of The Gods' is a 60 mile trail through countryside between Bologna and Florence, of disparate villages and small mountains. Many of the hills are named after women goddesses. To walk 'the way of the gods' with my mountainous sisters at my side felt like a celebration of what these adventures given me.

I will always hold so much admiration for this version of me that went out so bold and free. I had a determination to immerse myself so wholly within this natural world; with my own limitations and capabilities, and my own inherent humanness.



We are systematically discouraged from embodying our humanity, instead we are relegated to consumers, trapped in an endless cycle of dependence on capitalism. A women's ability to explore nature alone is a threat to our patriarchal society because feminine power is our oppressors greatest threat. Those who hold power realise that we find ours when we are able to find communion with nature.

*This is where we really
belong. And where our
deepest reserves of
strength, empathy and
resilience truly are.*

Self: Joyful emancipation

Before my great love of the outdoors bore a resilience in me, I had spent all my life so far with a constant sense of shrinking; if only I could disappear out the backdoor from where I did not belong. Growing up working-class meant I felt alienated by a lot of commonplace things: going into bookshops (we couldn't afford them) or sitting in a coffee shop. Yet, when we slip into wild spaces, we are transformed into a participating entity instead of an isolated consumer. The entire context of our identities and our bodies changes when we are no longer in relation to a space that is defined by class or gender, both of which fall away in natural environments. During these early experiences of my own relationship with nature, I discovered an interesting dichotomy between the working-class or middle-class experience of nature of how nature dissolves class boundaries.

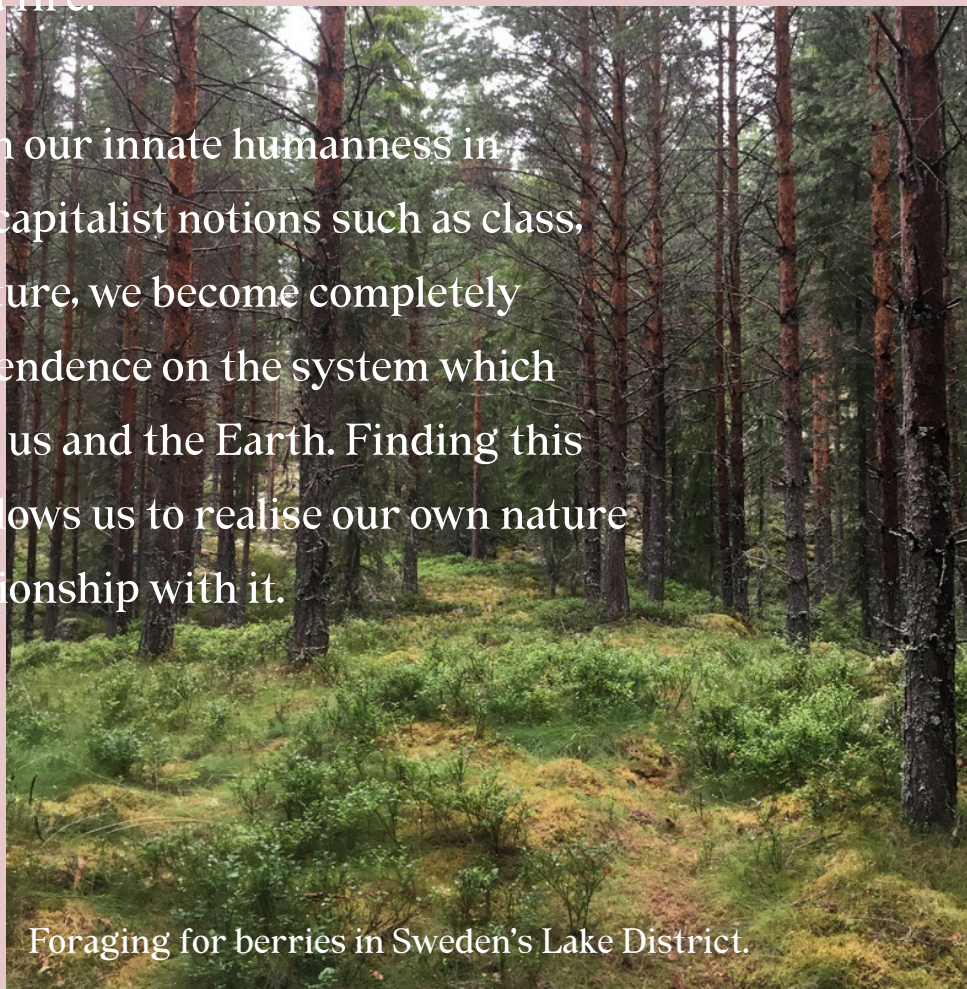


There is something unique about the working-class experience of nature. It is at once a space you are not entitled to under capitalism, with middle-aged, upper class white men shaping the narrative of cultivated gardens. Yet it is also the very place where such class definitions become meaningless. There is a suspension of class that makes it a place of true freedom. A freedom that because of the middle-class default, they are ironically unable to experience for themselves.

Meanwhile, oppressed groups are systematically disassociated from nature. How can a working-class single parent mother expect to go hiking at the weekends? Yet, groups for women, people of colour and LGBTQ+ people to walk and experience nature are becoming more and more commonplace. There is an untangling of the traditional, white, male, upper-class narrative of nature. It is being replaced with a rich tapestry of experiences, stories and histories that can create happier people, and more resourced people who can reclaim their own stories and impact on our worlds' future.

'Eat the Rich' films and TV shows often portray circumstances where having money and assets cannot change an unsavoury outcome for the wealthy, rendering the middle or upper classes as powerful or powerless as the lower classes. In the film 'Triangle of Sadness' the wealthy experience as much, if not more seasickness than the 'help' on a cruise ship caught in a violent storm. Nature is similar in that we are most humbled by our vulnerability and humanness in a way that money cannot change. Money can however, position you in these places such as warm hotels in skiing resorts, but then you are inadvertently distancing yourself from the environment you are trying to be immersed within. When living entirely from the land by camping, or foraging, aside from more equipment, there is little that money can offer, beside the ironic image of using banknotes as kindling for a fire.

We are able to connect with our innate humanness in nature, we are absolved of capitalist notions such as class, because when we are in nature, we become completely disentangled from the dependence on the system which exploits and extracts from us and the Earth. Finding this relationship with nature allows us to realise our own nature and therefore, our companionship with it.



Foraging for berries in Sweden's Lake District.

Relationship: Communion with nature

There is little that can compare to the transmutative power of being deeply immersed in nature, whether on your own two feet or otherwise. Being in green spaces reduces our cortisol, and walking activates the problem-solving parts of our brain. In a world that is hellbent on our dependence, caring for a garden, or even a house plant, is a radical act.



A cairn dedicated to loved ones we lost so they can live on by the Matterhorn, Switzerland.

I believe that when we are able to come into communion with nature in this way, we are actually returning to the inner knowing of our true humanity. Time in natural environments is inherently communal, situating ourselves outside of ourselves. When we are interacting with our natural world, we are at it's mercy for our own survival. This creates a powerful sense of protection, an awareness of our interdependence, our infallibility, our isolation and our community. In the 'normal world', these are undermined as these resources empower us and facilitate our own contributions back to nature. By developing our relationship with nature, we are unravelling our reliance on capitalism, protecting each other and Earth's future children.



When I returned from my time in Italy, my mum confirmed that she had been diagnosed with lung cancer. The weeks and months that preceded this news could scarcely be tolerated, but the resourcing of my recent joy gave me something to hold onto. By spending time in nature and thus, the source of our own resilience, we have a key to unlock the backdoor when we are suffering. This is true for the personal, but also the social: for every act of oppression hurled at us, we grow flowers to pass back.

Relationships in the Forest

The environmental catastrophe we are imminently facing is a patriarchal issue. The Earth is treated similarly to how women are treated: objectified, violated and disrespected. We exploit the Earth with the same entitlement that we treat women's bodies with. While women and working class people are systematically discouraged from our connection to the environment. We are alienated from nature with societal restrictions on our capabilities.

Hiking is not seen as a 'women's sport', and with wild camping, there will be no shortage of people ready to tell you how dangerous it is for a woman to camp alone. While, in our world, there is good reason for this, I would argue we are probably safer tucked away in a forest, than on the streets of London on any given evening. It is insidious, that today, for example, the hierarchical nature of nature sports is actually an example of women being 'kept in their place'. We have normalised these covert examples of violence against women, when the same forces see us being raped and murdered all over the world, throughout history.



Exploring Kent countryside with
woman ultramarathoner, Sophie
Summers (Moved Wmn).

We are deliberately dissuaded from the cultural capital to understand our synergy with nature and why it matters because empowered women will overthrow patriarchy. The protection of the environment is a feminist, class issue. We are disconnected from it in an effort to disempower us from our ability to shape the narrative of environmental protection. The ancestral heritage of women, working-class people and other oppressed groups as protectors and collaborators with the natural world is immemorial. A woman's rightful place is not 'in the kitchen'. It is being chained to a tree, non-violently protecting it from loggers.

Our own bodies echo the rhythms of the celestial ones.



Throughout the world, women have historically used herbalism to heal the sick, passing down ancestral knowledge about caring for the environment through indigenous wisdom. Many peasant and indigenous traditions ensured biodiversity and food abundance through seed sharing, storing and exchanging. Moon cycles, seasons and nature operate cyclically, instead of on a linear trajectory. This is inherently feminine, as our own bodies echo the rhythms of the celestial ones. Capitalism and patriarchy have dissociated us from these practices, preventative herbalism is widely considered to be snake oil, while the impact of the moon on our bodies and our plants is seen as ridiculous, particularly in the western world. Tracking ones' cycle a fringe and dangerous concept instead of relying on harmful and poorly researched birth control.

Throughout the 15th to 18th centuries, tens of thousands of women were murdered for being 'witches'. Herbalists, seed collectors, foragers, midwives and healers had knowledge that threatened the narrative of the rise in capitalism and the authoritarianism of the church. Their independence allowed communities to be less dependent on emergent market economies such as landlords, states and classes.

Reclamation: root systems

My experience with walking is not uncommon, it is as storied as there are footsteps to take. Yet, the erosion of our access to natural places is under constant threat, whether through privatisation and ownership, the removal of right to roam, or through the damage our environment is beginning to show.

Women's agency within the natural environment has been a protective force for time immemorial. Without access to nature, women are disempowered from being custodians of the Earth, and symbiotically, nature cannot thrive without the fierce allyship of women. There is a direct correlation between women's disenfranchisement with environmental custodianship, and increased fascism, patriarchy and capitalism. Today, we are experiencing the results of late stage capitalism, which were seeded during the witch burnings and enclosure movements. Resisting the erosion of our access to nature is more important than it has ever been.

It is understood in environmental discourse that indigenous people play an essential role in protecting the land. Land inhabited by tribal communities is proven to be the most well-protected in terms of biodiversity and wildlife. “Indigenous Peoples represent only about 5–6 percent of the global population yet safeguard around 80 percent of the planet’s biodiversity and manage significant shares of protected and intact lands.” As described by the United Nations University from their report *State of the World’s Indigenous Peoples, Volume VI: Climate Crisis*” (April 2025). Hundreds of millions of indigenous people across the world have been killed by colonialism from Europe, and the impact of this was found to be the first example of human-caused climate change by a study from UCL in 2019.

The destruction of our natural world, and the subjugation of oppressed people are the same forces. As tyrannical maniacs across the globe decimate our world, it is hard to believe in the good of humanity, or believe that there is any hope left for our futures.

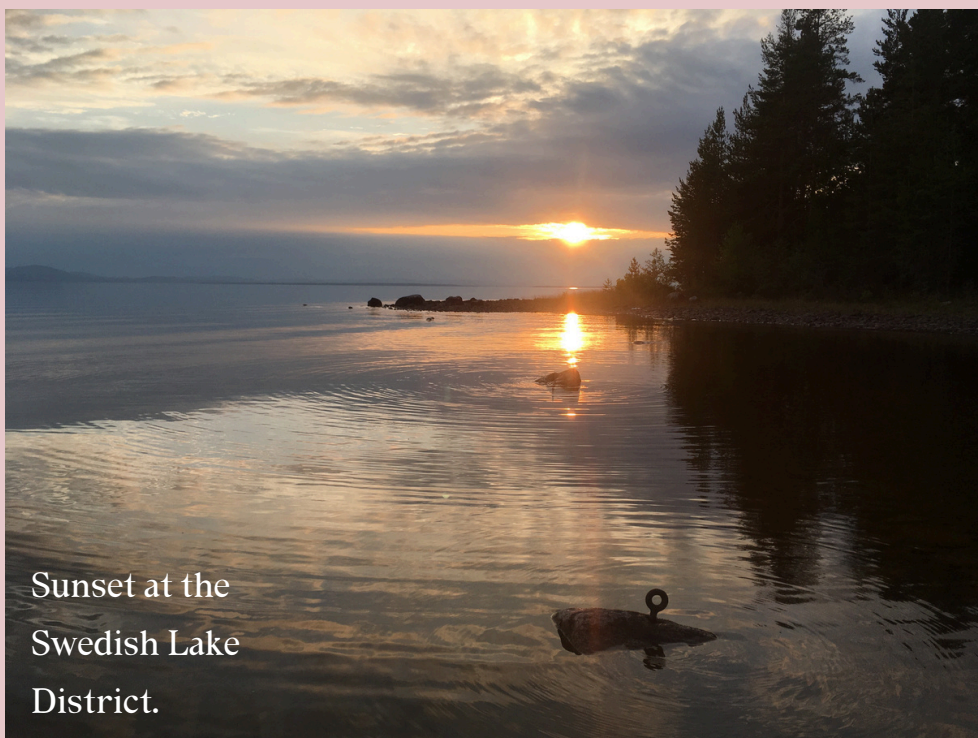
Yet, the profound impact of surviving indigenous people on our environment is incredible. It demonstrates the impact of grass-roots, community-led action. And that when our humanity, culture and lives are tightly interwoven with our environment, we can cause great change.



Reclamation: the haq within

For all of humanity's history, we have lived from the land, travelling slowly by foot or horse, immersed in one gigantic, universal home. One can imagine the feeling the globe experienced when NASA published Blue Dot in 1968. During a time of immense technological change that increasingly disconnects us, this photograph of Earth revealed a forgotten feeling of global kinship. An earlier photograph entitled 'Earthrise' birthed Earth Day. Seeing our enormously large world seem so small and simple puts things into perspective of how we want to live with one another. By witnessing our world and our global community in this way, we cannot help but feel enormous compassion for it. Have our global ancestors ever feel this sense of kinship with one another? Will they? A part of an ever-unravelling tapestry of people, animals, and trees that each live in harmonious relationship with one another. Can we achieve this by empowering women to take care of our natural world?

It is only within the last few hundred years that we have become so detached from our interdependence with nature, and, I believe, with our humanity. The human tendency toward power and greed comes from a deeply untended need within oneself. The billionaires of the world are in fact the poorest of all. Is the void deep in them empty simply of living at one with nature?



Sunset at the
Swedish Lake
District.

Those who hold power realise that we find ours when we are able to find communion with nature. There are countless examples of nature empowering resistance. During the Chipko Movement in the 1970's, women stopped loggers cutting down forests by hugging the trees that their livelihoods depended on. This form of non-violent resistance was where the derisive term 'tree-hugger' comes from, a powerful and maternal act of environmental protection that has become a phrase of contempt in popular culture. Or more recently, between 2016-2017, indigenous women resisted the Dakota Access Pipeline by holding prayer vigils, community organising and physically blocking construction at The Standing Rock Reservation. Not only was this an act of resistance against destroying a river that their lives depended on, it also became synonymous with resisting violence against indigenous people, women and culture.

These acts of resistance to protect our home will become more and more common as women are able to be more connected to the Earth. As in the 'tree-hugger' example, environmentalism, especially for women, has been ridiculed. Imagery such as Clueless's environmental protest relegates environmental activism to a cute college pastime, rather than a serious and deeply necessary form of resistance.



The impression that we have arrived at a glittery, high heeled, scantily-clad and prosecco-fueled feminist utopia undermines our true feminist advances, and, positions our pagan great grandmothers as antithetical to feminist progress. In actual fact, true female emancipation can be found in recognition of the witches that protected the land, cared for the sick and extended care throughout their communities.

To reclaim our relationship with the Earth is to bear witness to the unsanitised woman: she has dirt under her nails and blood on her knees, she's missing a tooth and her hair is matted as she fiercely protects her world.

Perhaps, you will find her in yourself on the trails, at a protest, or growing vegetables in your garden. This archetype represents communal care, resistance, and disentangling oneself from the machinations of capitalism in favour of each other, animals and our world.



Coming Full Circle

Birthing this piece of writing has been its own journey, one of traversing my own limitations, of accomplishing something of great joy, of things not turning out as expected, and having to change route many times due to forks in the road. I've found through writing these pieces that their purpose is in exploration of the idea that by living with nature, we are spending time with our most vulnerable selves. The self that may have to weather storms, may need to extend a hand to others, and may need to know when to fight and when to give in.

Wrestling with this piece throughout 2025, has, in fact, been extraordinarily similar to the central thesis of this story. Walking, solo hiking, and spending time in nature allows us to come into true communion, not only with nature, but with truest ourselves. In our modern world, we are so deeply removed from our humanity, and our animal nature. We are designated as consumers instead of people. But in nature, we come up against the infallibility of our ourselves. In writing these essays, I've discovered that writing, and likely many other activities, connect us with our humanity. This is the internal place where we source so much of our strength, resilience, empathy and compassion. And this is the place where our most impactful activism can come from.



As I wrote the pieces, I found that the writing process forced me get comfortable with my internal world, a place that we are so distracted from, and, where we often don't like being. I have had to mine deep inside of myself to complete this piece, revisiting my own, often painful; often joyful, history. And I've had to keep finding ways to take another step. The journey has been uncomfortable, messy and at times painful. However, in writing it, I have found that the central thesis is really that whether through time spent in nature, or through writing, or urban gardening, spending time with your cats or reading, we must seek opportunities to connect with our deepest, truest humanity. Through this, we will find the tools to protect our world, our environment, the people and other beings we share it with, and most importantly, the empathy and compassion to do so.

When we take a journey, we find a new strength. I have learned this on my solo, long-distance hikes, through my mum's cancer journey, and even while writing this project. Having worked on this project, I believe this to be true whether literally or metaphorically. I hope that this piece of work can encourage others to find a source of agency in our deeply troubling world. Because what separates us from those who seek to oppress us is the richness we find in this internal place. And this wealth of empathy, kindness, community and compassion can uplift others around us to co-create a world that is equitable for all.

Thank you so much to Campaign for National Parks for the opportunity to write these pieces. It has been an honour to share my perspective on how we can protect the natural world through connecting with our own common humanity. Thank you to the National Lottery for funding it.

