

24 Hours OF NATURE

Wandering through nature, from sunrise to sundown, with no plan, no telephone and no watch. That, in short, is a Muir Trek. Journalist Caroline Buijs went on one, and shares her experience.

“Hi. I’m Caroline.” It’s a rather strange round of introductions that takes place one spring Saturday evening at the beginning of our Muir Trek. We, the eight participants, introduce ourselves with first names only. Caroline, that’s all. On a Muir Trek, that’s the norm, because one of its defining features is that you don’t talk about the past or future: for 24 hours, all that counts is “now.”

A Muir Trek—named after Scottish-American nature preservationist John Muir—is a walk across a nature reserve. From sunrise to sunset, you wander around without a plan or a map, and off the official paths—for which we have received permission from a state organization that manages most nature reserves in the Netherlands.

After the introduction round, our guide, Femke, quickly briefs us on the ground rules once again, and then the Muir Trek officially begins. Not because we start off on our walk, but because we hand in our telephones and watches, and go find a place for

our sleeping mats in a cabin on the edge of the nature reserve. As of that moment—8:03 p.m. according to my phone’s display—I’ll have no idea what time it is for the next 24 hours.

180-DEGREE TURN

When Femke wakes us up in the morning, it’s still dark. After a cup of tea, we step out into the morning fog, dressed in thick layers. I don’t think I’ve ever worn so many clothes, not even when I was a teenager and traveled in the freezing cold to Franeker, in the north of the Netherlands, to cheer on the skaters in the Dutch Eleven Cities Tour (the world’s biggest skating competition on natural ice, which is only held in the coldest of winters).

I count five layers, including my coat, and over the course of the whole day, I only take off one. Because you are wandering about and standing still a lot, your own body heat is all you have. When we have walked down the path for a while, we all stand in a circle.

At Femke’s signal, we all make a 180-degree turn and are now no longer ➔

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looking at each other, but at the nature around us: the woody, heathy Dutch Veluwe, and its ridge of forested hills.

I see an overwhelming mass of bushes and trees, with leaves on the verge of unfolding. They are that particular color of green that you only see for one or two weeks in the springtime. It feels like the 180-degree turn has made the penny drop in my head: Today, I am not about other people; today, I’m all about what I am seeing, feeling, smelling and hearing, all around me. Because you only know each other’s first names and there are no connections to yesterday or tomorrow, there are no subgroups in the group. I don’t feel any thoughts bubbling up, like, “Am I fitting in?” Or, “Shouldn’t I be trying to connect?” It doesn’t feel awkward to walk “on my own” without someone next to me.

Of course we do talk now and then, and there is a lot of laughter. But only about the things we are seeing around us. I notice immediately how much

more I’m seeing than when I go on a walk with a friend. Then, the focus is usually on our conversation; I really enjoy talking and walking. But now I realize that I do miss out on about half of all the natural beauty around me. That’s okay, because a good talk is worth more than gold, but it’s also nice to experience what it’s like to be alone in nature, too.

AMBLING OFF TRACK

We take turns to determine which way to go on our ramble, and the best part is that during a Muir Trek you don’t have to stay on the path. You’re actually *supposed* to go off the beaten track. John Muir never walked on paths. So, all of a sudden, I am walking right through the woods. It takes some getting used to, and I’m constantly trampling on blueberries, but apparently, they are quite resilient. We hold on to branches for each other, the same way you hold a door open for someone in the civilized

world, to prevent them from snapping back into their faces.

By leaving the paths, we get much closer to other living creatures; we even run into a family of wild boars before breakfast. We can see them sliding down a hillside from a little way off; they don’t seem to notice we’re there. During a Muir Trek, you can also stay put in one place if you like it. Suddenly I find myself, following the lead of the other group members, investigating a half-dead tree whose bark is loose, and when you look under it, huge numbers of insects are living there. Next I am studying in detail a yellow-flecked mushroom that I’ve never seen before. I don’t look up its name, because we left our field guides at home, and I have to admit this helps me look at it more closely. We barely run into anyone on our walk, and now and then it feels like we are all alone in the forest.

I’m not too keen to be the one who decides which way we walk next, but after

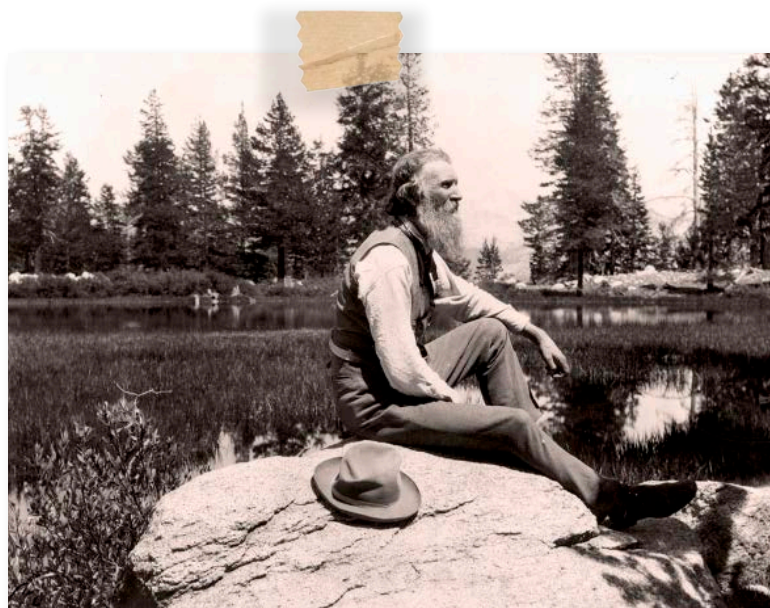
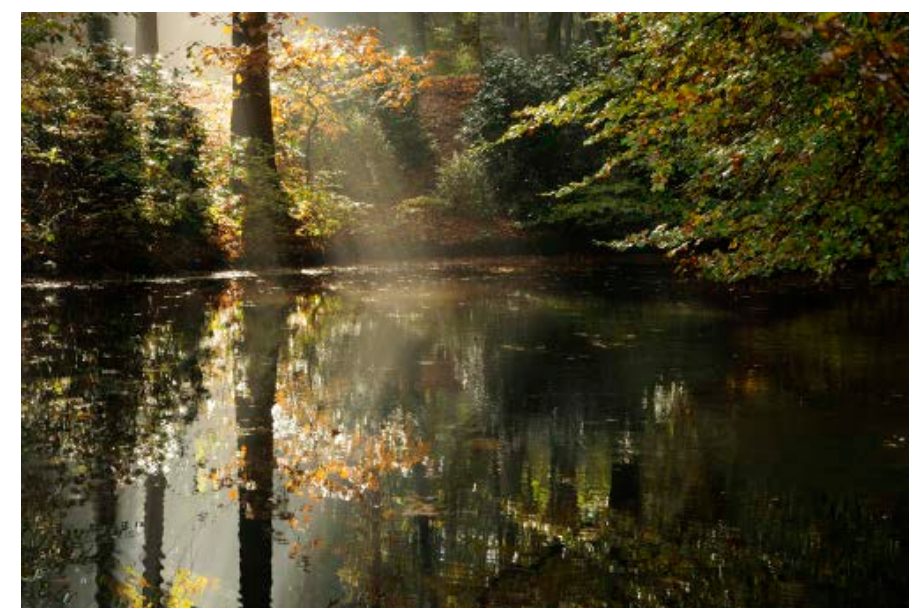
lunch it’s my turn and it actually comes naturally. It’s funny to realize how something as minor as taking the lead confronts me with myself, because halfway through my turn, I start feeling doubts: Do the others also enjoy walking on the heath? Shouldn’t I be going the other way? Shouldn’t we go back into the woods? I stop and stand still, but Femke encourages me: “You’re in charge now.” I decide that this is something I could do more of in my daily life, listening to what I want and not always worrying about what other people may think about my decisions.

A BRIEF ESCAPE

The Muir Trek was conceived more than 40 years ago, but these types of nature experiences are now attracting a great deal of interest all over the world. Some of it has to do with the popularity of movies such as *Wild*, in which Reese Witherspoon plays Cheryl Strayed, a writer trying to rediscover herself during a 1,100-mile hike over the Pacific Crest Trail in the US.

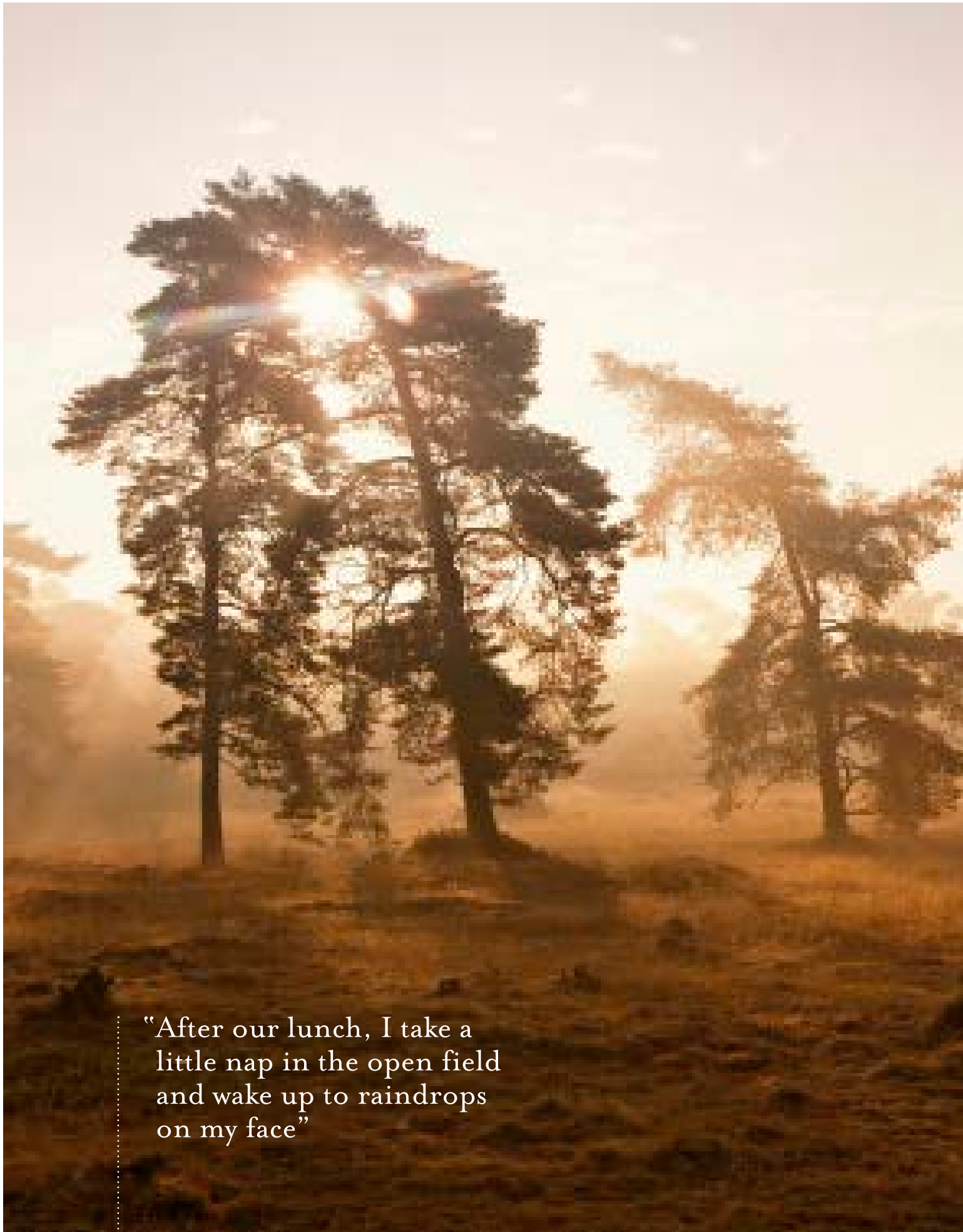
“Our day-to-day life is so full and is so strictly governed by the clock and our schedules—both work and private—that it’s nice to escape it all, however briefly,” says Femke. “Also, we are living in cities more and more, drifting away from nature. We no longer know how good it is to feel like we are part of something larger, to experience where we come from as human beings.”

There are not many moments in a day that you are really alone, without having to do anything, because your telephone or tablet is always there to distract you. Being alone for a bit in a natural environment for just a little while can help you find yourself again. Or, as nature perception professor Agnes van den Berg explains: ➔➔



WHO WAS JOHN MUIR?

“As long as I live, I’ll hear waterfalls and birds and winds sing. I’ll interpret the rocks, learn the language of flood, storm and the avalanche. I’ll acquaint myself with the glaciers and wild gardens, and get as near the heart of the world as I can.” John Muir (1838-1914) was a Scottish-born American naturalist, writer and environmentalist. Muir walked alone through the great outdoors and was driven by enormous curiosity. He didn’t think twice about going into the woods, especially in storms with thunder and lightning, and watching the forces of nature from the top of a tree. Muir also loved small patches of nature, like his backyard, and he was convinced that a person could find peace and inspiration in nature. He was one of the first to actively plead for preservation of the natural areas in the American wilderness. His letters, books and essays about nature are read by an international audience of millions.



“After our lunch, I take a little nap in the open field and wake up to raindrops on my face”

TEXT CAROLINE BUIJUS PHOTOGRAPHY GETTY IMAGES, HOLLANDSE HOOGTE, BENDIKS WESTERINK

“Repetitive patterns are easy to process for our brains. They don’t place many demands on your attention, and you don’t need to strain your eyes for them either. Nature has a fractal structure that repeats itself. I am starting to think that is why it makes us feel at peace.”

A DAY WITHOUT TIME

The Muir Trek is not a walk from point A to point B. That means there is no fuss about reading a map or following color-coded poles or arrows. As a result, I find I am not preoccupied throughout the day with questions like, “How far do we still need to go?” Or, “When will we get there?” There is no plan and no ultimate objective. Nothing “has to” be done. You stop when you see something worth looking at, you sit down when you are tired and you eat when you are hungry. After our lunch, I take a little nap in the open field and wake up to raindrops on my face. A lovely sensation, and the first time that I’ve ever felt anything like it.

A Muir Trek basically takes you out of the “doing mode” for a day. During a normal walk, I tend to think, “When do we start again?” when I’m resting on a bench, or, “It’s seven more miles and I still have the shopping to do.” Oh, life without keeping time, what bliss. At home I do try (I’ve taped over the screen clock on my laptop so I don’t look at the time when I’m writing), but the clock does still determine most of my day: taking kids to school, catching a train, getting to a movie on time. What if I start trying to live one day a week without keeping track of time, I wonder, as I stare at a pine tree. After all, Muir did say: “Between every two pine trees there is a door leading to a new way of life.” Then at the end of the day I could stay for a little chat

with a colleague, instead of saying, “Oh I’ve got to run now, don’t want to miss my train.” Because chatting a bit at the end of the day can be so valuable, I think, to check in with each other, but also to show a different side of yourself. How bad is it anyway to wait ten extra minutes at the station if I miss my scheduled train?

Another benefit of not watching time, I notice on the trek, is that I stop anticipating all kinds of things. All day long, I have had no idea what time I got up that morning. Later I find out it was 5.15 a.m., and I am sure that, had I known, I would have spent the whole day thinking, “I feel so tired.” But I didn’t. Well, I was yawning a bit, but I didn’t really give it any thought.

RAIN OR SHINE

Not wanting to change something, accepting the situation as it is: I was given that advice at a mindfulness class once, and the lesson resurfaces during the Muir Trek in the guise of “the weather.” For days prior to the Trek, I had been checking my weather app incessantly. I kept seeing the same little icon: a cloud and three raindrops, and I would think, “What a pity! I’ll be

walking around in the rain from early morning to late at night. How much fun will that be?” But when I stepped out into the rain that morning before sunrise, with my five layers of clothing under my rain trousers, I understood it again: experience life as you encounter it and accept it as it is. The rain doesn’t hurt me and, as usual, it actually isn’t that bad. The rain clouds blow away now and then, and if it really starts to pour down, we tie a tarp to some tree branches and shelter under it.

After a long day of meandering, Femke brings us back to our starting point in 30 minutes flat. I can’t believe it, but, then again, she does know the area inside out. (Although she later tells us we had walked in areas she had never seen before.) It turns out to be 8:30 p.m. when we get back, and I can’t remember ever being outdoors for so long. But I am going to do it more often. As John Muir said: “I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in.” ●

INSTITUTE FOR EARTH EDUCATION

The Muir Trek was conceived by the Institute for Earth Education, an American non-profit organization that was founded more than 40 years ago. It teaches people to view Earth and the way they engage with it in different ways. Today, the organization has departments all over the world. Trek guide Femke Vergeest, who is featured in this story (she has a day job as a process manager), was part of the team that translated the complete Muir Trek guide, as well as the John Muir quotes, and has been guiding Muir Treks in the Netherlands for five years now, as well as training others to be Muir Trek guides.

FANCY GOING ON A MUIR TREK YOURSELF?

The Muir Trek described in this article took place in the Netherlands, and was offered via Staatsbosbeheer. In the UK, you can find information about Muir Treks at eartheducation.org.uk/programmes/muirtrek.html. For international information, check the website eartheducation.org/ or simply search “Muir Trek” online with the name of your location, and find out if there are any treks offered near you.