



Magic

We saw a bobcat on our very first trip, at Vasco Caves, which has been, and remains, a sacred and powerful spot for native people. Our guide told us about how the territories of three distinct language groups — Ohlone, Bay Miwok and Northern Valley Yokut — converged there, and how pictographs give us a glimpse of the use of this sacred place by spiritual leaders. In the beginning, I was a little skeptical about some of the spiritual aspects of the program — how having a sense of place can lead you to commune with the environment. My initial attitude was, I'm just here for the information. But in the end I had to agree with them: magic happens when 12 of you every month go on a trip and have these incredible guides along. That's part of why I liked the program so much.

LINE MIKKELSEN
CLOSE TO HOME
OAKLAND

Beginning

You don't need to be an expert on your bioregion to launch a Sense of Place program where you live. You just need curiosity and a willingness to connect with your own home. Whether you live in an adobe, skyscraper or ranchette, by the sea, desert or mountains, anyone with an interest in digging deeper into the spirit and nature of the place where they live can start a program. All you need to do is find the storytellers who know and love your bioregion; discover the heroes who have preserved and restored its natural places; and gather up a foundation of ideas, volunteers and materials to help you begin a serious exploration of your backyard. You'll soon find you don't need to visit a faraway national park or tropical rainforest to experience "wilderness" or "nature."

To help you get started, we offer this guidebook. It summarizes how we, a group of like-minded individuals from a place like yours, created the first Exploring a Sense of Place program in Palo Alto, California, in

the year 2001. Inspired by Wendell Berry's observation that "you can't know who you are until you know where you are," and by the growing disconnect between our human culture and the natural world it overlies, we created a yearlong program of exploration that has now lasted five years, enlightened 150 people in our community and inspired three other groups to start similar programs — one in Chesapeake Bay, one in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina and another here in the San Francisco Bay Area.



Western Labrador-tea, *Ledum glandulosum*

This program is designed to help you come home to your place in the natural world. While most of us recognize where we live by the cities, buildings, supermarkets or sports teams around us, far fewer of us iden-

tify with and understand the natural ecosystem that supports us, and of which we are a part. You may be new to a place or have lived there all your life, but there is probably much to discover within a few miles of home.

The Exploring a Sense of Place program provides a series of readings, walks and encounters designed to build a “rootedness in place” and to reconnect our spirits and souls to nature. It seeks to help us establish new patterns in our lives, and experience a shift in our perception. Through regular immersion in nature over a period

of time, and guided by the stories and experience of dedicated naturalists and elders, we find ourselves opening up to the true nature of the place where we live and experiencing increased respect and awareness of kinship. As we all gain a “sense of place,” we begin a deeper relationship with place, planet and each other.

In more practical terms, we’ve designed our program as a course of enrichment evenings and Saturday explorations (visits to forests, overlooks, creeks, farms and other key features of the natural world in our

backyard). Every month we focus on a different theme — from geology and climate to wildlife and stories of the indigenous peoples — and conclude the year together with a homecoming emphasizing restoration and preservation. Though on the surface it may seem like we’re learning about rocks or flowers or birds, the ultimate result is much deeper — an experience of place. By using different lenses, we develop skill in using all of our senses. And by experiencing this together, we form community with those around us.



California Pinefoot, *Pityopus californicus*

Now you may be thinking about creating your own new connection to place. This guidebook should provide inspiration, as well as practical information on how to start this kind



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you are until you
know where you are.

WENDELL BERRY