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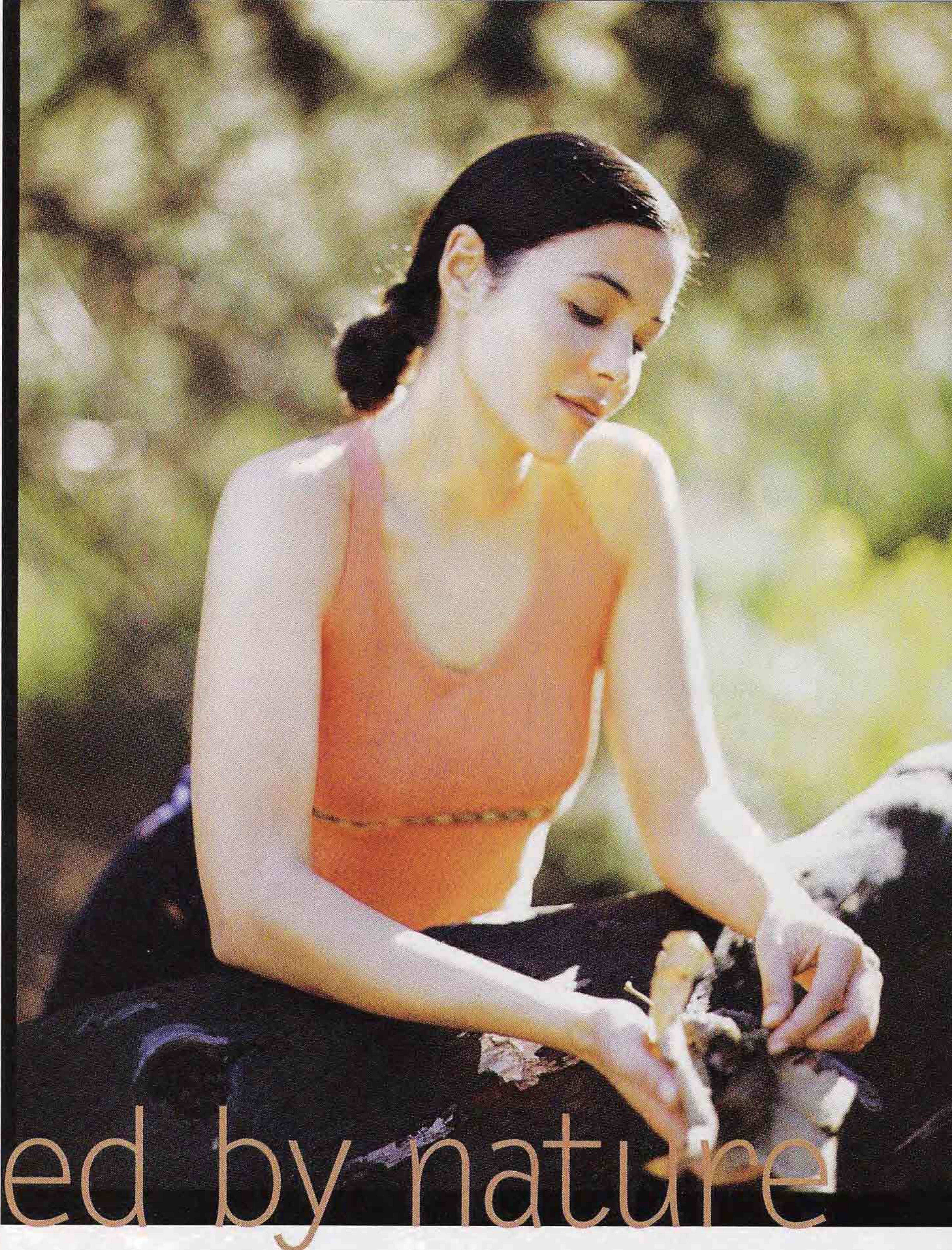


Spring Travel: Calorie-burning camps

inner shape

Rather than lying on a couch and talking about her problems, Jessalyn Nash decided to lie on a bed of moss. She went out into nature as part of a wilderness program and when she returned, Nash, 37, of Sebastopol, Calif., had a new perspective on her life and her marriage of 10 years. She realized she had played the nurturer for too long — she was the emotional support in the relationship, the one to raise the red flag when things got tense, and she took full responsibility for her son's upbringing.

Out in the wilderness, Nash re-examined her beliefs about her role as a woman and began to see that she'd put her own desires on the back burner. "I



nurtured by nature

A new movement called ecopsychology claims the environment can nourish and heal us. By Laurie Tarkan

felt safe getting in touch with deeper emotions because it was a comforting environment. After shedding old memories and pains, I'd walk in the forest and feel replenished," she says.

Moving Out

Turning to nature for emotional solace and guidance is far from a new idea. But in the last six years there has been a surge of interest in the healing effects of the outdoors, fueled, in part, by the growing awareness of worldwide environmental degradation.

Some ecologists claim that alienation from nature accounts for our ability to destroy it without conscience. Psychol-

ogists are interested in how nature can relieve depression, anxiety and loneliness for the individual. Put the two disciplines together and you get *ecopsychology*, roughly defined as the study of the relationship between the human psyche and the natural environment. "It's a hot field," says Robert Greenway, founder of the Olympic Ecopsychology Institute in Port Townsend, Wash., who has led psychologically oriented wilderness trips for more than 25 years. "In the last three years there have been over a dozen conferences on ecopsychology around the country." He says the subject is also regularly discussed on the Internet.

Ecopsychologists believe that humans need nature. "Nature is hardwired in us. It's part of who we are," says Randy Pitstick, Ph.D., assistant professor of health, physical education and leisure services at the University of South Alabama. Yet we've learned to see ourselves as isolated, separate from nature, if not superior to it. This thinking, say ecopsychologists, is at the root of many psychological and environmental problems.

Nature's Healing Nature

The solution, say ecopsychologists, is to reconnect with nature. And to that end, many therapists now take groups into the wilderness for one- or two-week courses — structured programs

that allow for both solitude in nature and a supportive group experience. Many include hiking in silence, camping with minimal equipment, meditation, yoga, readings from books by naturalists and simple lessons on plants and animals. No certification training exists for ecopsychology wilderness leaders, but many have been educated in psychology, ecology or both. (Deep-seated psychological problems should be addressed with a licensed psychotherapist or clinical psychologist.)

For Nash's 5-day wilderness experience, she and 25 others stayed in a forest in Northern California. Each morning she awoke at 7 and went for a walk or a swim in a nearby river — alone. Then she joined the group for breakfast and exercise and meditation sessions guided by four facilitators. "I realized that not since childhood had I spent so much time outside," says Nash. "I was hungry for it. It was a way to find calm and balance."

The benefits of an extended stay in the natural world are many, say ecopsychologists. Based on modest research and hundreds of anecdotes, here are some they've found:

- Nearly 90 percent of participants in a two-week wilderness trip described an increased sense of vitality and energy upon returning home, says Greenway.
- 77 percent of the same group made a major life change when they returned.
- Psychologist Allen Kanner, Ph.D., in Berkeley, Calif., has found that his patients' most positive memories occur in nature. He inquires about patients' "nature history," asking about memories in nature. "It reveals a dimension that we'd never get to in regular psy-

chotherapy," says Kanner. "People remember how peaceful, serene and deeply satisfied they felt in nature, feelings that are now lost to them."

- Therapists working with abuse victims report that the soothing aspect of nature helps them deal with issues of trust and invasion, and exercising outside lets them enjoy their bodies again.

Coming to our Senses

Ecopsychologists report a predictable sequence of behavior among groups that venture into the back country. In the first few days, participants chatter about jobs, life back home, all the trappings of culture, says Greenway. By the third day, though, the chatter ceases as they become more conscious of the surroundings — the light breaking through the leaves, the smell of the earth, the babble of a creek. "You literally come to your senses," says Steven Harper, M.A., a counselor who holds wilderness workshops in Northern California. Social defenses melt away and a trust in the group builds, which can enhance the sense of safety.

Returning to society after a wilderness trip and finding ways to integrate what one has found into work, relationships, family and community is often difficult, Greenway says. Some participants report noticing the unpleasant dynamics of our culture. It helps to stay in touch with group members and to practice some form of meditation, he says. "It's important not to dwell on the dichotomy of nature vs. culture," he adds. "You can find nature anywhere. Just getting in touch with your breathing can connect you to the nature in yourself."

inner shape

Nash agrees, and explains how her life has changed since her trip. "When I came home, I told my husband that I couldn't do everything. He realized that my being depleted of energy wasn't serving our partnership or family," she says. She now seeks out nature to get centered. "I spend more time at the ocean or in state parks. I try to find a quiet place to be alone and reassess what I'm doing." Her trip remains a vivid, positive memory. Would she like to go on another wilderness adventure? "In a second," she says.

Laurie Tarkan is a free-lance writer in New York City.

do-it-yourself nature experience

It's important to incorporate experiences of being in nature into your day-to-day life. For instance, care for plants, take a walk in a park, allow time for contemplation.

Explore the history of your relationship with nature by answering the following questions. Try to imagine the sights, smells and sounds of the places that come to mind, as well as how you felt and what those places meant to you. Keep your responses in a journal where you can refer to them.

- What are your earliest, best and worst memories of nature?
- What type of nature (water, mountains, sky) are you drawn to?
- Does your first nature site still exist?



eco-psychology wilderness trips

The Colorado Institute for a Sustainable Future conducts four- and five-day ecopsychology courses. For details: P.O. Box 17904, Boulder, CO 80308 or call (303) 440-4153.

Wilderness Transitions Inc. conducts weeklong wilderness retreats in California. For details: 70 Rodeo Ave., Sausalito, CA 94965 or call (415) 332-9558.

The Sierra Institute offers backpacking ecopsychology trips. For details: 740 Front St., Suite 155, Santa Cruz, CA 95060, attn: Walker Abel, or call (408) 427-6618.

Earthways Wilderness Journeys organizes trips throughout the year in Northern California. For details: P.O. Box 303, Big Sur, CA 93920.

Esalen Institute offers ecopsychology trips year-round. For details: (408) 667-3000, or subscribe to *The Ecopsychology Newsletter*, P.O. Box 7487, Berkeley, CA 94707.