**Headline:** Can Humanity Repair Its Relationship With Nature? Weaving Earth Education Center Offers a Promising Path

**Teaser:** This all-ages education center reminds us that “we are a part of this earth, not apart from it.”

By Damon Orion

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**[Article Body:]**

[Disconnection from nature](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1745691616662473?journalCode=pps) is a catalyst for the present [environmental crisis](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11625-018-0542-9) and [several](https://e360.yale.edu/features/ecopsychology-how-immersion-in-nature-benefits-your-health) physical, mental, and emotional [illnesses](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/23/parenting/nature-health-benefits-coronavirus-outdoors.html). With mental health challenges [on the rise](https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/trend/archive/fall-2023/americas-mental-health-crisis) in the U.S. and climate change on the brink of becoming [irreversible](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/mar/20/ipcc-climate-crisis-report-delivers-final-warning-on-15c), there is an urgent need for educators who can help restore our sense of connection with nature.

That’s the mission of [Weaving Earth Center for Relational Education](https://weavingearth.org/about-us/), a nonprofit group that helps participants [remember](https://weavingearth.org/core-curriculum/) “that we are a part of this earth, not apart from it.” Located in the unincorporated town of Graton, California, Weaving Earth (WE) believes that various problems, such as climate change, bigotry, misogyny, colonialism, and religious persecution, stem from [supremacy culture](https://weavingearth.org/we-immersion/): “cultural systems that value separation and domination.” The organization’s leaders feel that nature immersion can help break that mindset.

David Hage, who co-founded Weaving Earth with his wife Lauren and their longtime friend Will Scott in 2013, says their organization is dedicated to “disrupting and helping unlearn inherited structures of belief and philosophies that are causing ecological, social, and personal harm.” Its primary means of achieving this is “Relational Education”: nature-based learning driven by curiosity and experience.

Woods, meadows, and creeks in Northern California’s Sonoma County are the “classrooms” for children, teens, and adults partaking in WE’s nature immersion programs. Participants in summer camps, teen backpacking trips, one-week events, and one-year intensive programs learn skills such as ecosystem restoration, fire tending, animal tracking, gardening, and sustainable plant harvesting.

Hage explains WE’s Relational Education approach by describing how students learn to build fires. The first step is “knowing the plants and the type of soil and ecosystem they grow in. Which plants are better suited to make fire, and what kind of fire do they make? How do they like to be tended? What do they need to thrive? When is it best to harvest them for fire-making? Then that leads to: How do we tend the fire? What does that look like on a small scale, [for instance,] a campfire, and what does that look like on a broad scale, [for instance,] a prescribed burn?”

He adds that the safe and successful execution of a prescribed burn requires interactions “with our human family, ideally including the First Nations, but also [needs] policies, certifications, governmental institutions, etc. So you can see how a deep relationship with fire, and truly with *anything*, [extends to] our relationship with all life.”

Relational Education fosters what WE calls “Earth Intimacy.” Hage describes this as a “feeling of knowing [nature] like you would know a loved one.”

Hage, a Wilderness First Responder, explains that one aspect of Earth Intimacy is a heightened awareness of qualities specific to individual animals and plants. “We can make broad generalizations about humans: We eat food; we breathe air… but then my *mom* loves *tacos*,” he notes. These kinds of “subtleties of relationship that exist between us and [other] humans” can also exist “between me and a bird—not just a species of bird, but *a* bird.”

**Fields of Study**

WE instills an appreciation for nature in young people through programs like Wild Tenders, a nine-month “learning journey” for adventurers between the ages of four and 14. Participants absorb the organization’s core teachings through activities such as storytelling, food preparation, arts and crafts, and natural dyeing.

“We believe our future depends on understanding and embodying our interdependent place in the ecological web,” the group’s website [states](https://weavingearth.org/wild-tenders-afterschool/). “The younger we cultivate that embodied understanding, the more likely it will influence values and actions throughout one’s lifetime.”

In programs such as Teen Backpacking, adolescents and young adults aged 15-18 engage in hiking, mapping, journaling, aidless navigation, and other activities that help them connect with nature. A curriculum designed for teens who are about to graduate from high school includes an option to spend 24 hours alone. To help these adventurers honor what Hage describes as “the crossing of the threshold from high school senior into adulthood,” facilitators encourage participants to ask themselves if they’re leaving any loose ends as they part ways with relatives and friends. “So many of them are taking that time to do the healing work that’s needed between them and a friend, write that letter to mom or dad about how thankful they are, or maybe [do] some repair work that was needed,” Hage notes.

WE’s primary program for adults, the [Weaving Earth Immersion](https://weavingearth.org/we-immersion/), offers options to spend one, two, or three years learning about ecosystem regeneration, somatic awareness, bird language, and other experiential and nature-based fields of study. According to the organization’s [website](https://weavingearth.org/we-immersion/), this program attracts “activists, educators, entrepreneurs, naturalists, systems thinkers, and changemakers” aged 18 and above.

**Ripples of Change**

In addition to pursuing careers in sustainable agriculture and the healing arts, graduates of WE’s programs have founded bird language and tracking clubs, nature-based education programs for adults, consulting services for other educational institutes, youth programs, and forest schools such as [Nature Connect Alabama](https://www.natureconnectalabama.org/), [Flying Deer Nature Center](https://flyingdeernaturecenter.org/), and [Sonoma Earth School](https://www.earthschool.org/).

Weaving Earth is a fiscal sponsor for [Walking Water](https://walking-water.org/), an organization striving to help repair humanity’s relationship with water. This group leads walks and holds gatherings to raise awareness about water-related issues.

WE also runs the youth leadership program at the annual [Bioneers Conference](https://bioneers.org/about/purpose/the-bioneers-conference/), a forum seeking solutions to environmental issues. One of Hage’s functions at Bioneers is to [hold](https://weavingearth.org/building-bridges-with-bioneers) small youth circles with presenters at the event.

“It’s a chance for young folks to get more access to these leaders and sit with them in more of a conversational style versus just sitting in a didactic lecture,” he notes. “We’re always looking for ways we can interrupt and disrupt the ‘expert’ model and instead create opportunities to be in a circle. We find more often than not that the experts leave the room having received as much from the young folks in the room as [the youth] did in return.”

As a social justice-focused group, WE strives to cultivate awareness and understanding of crises such as climate change, war, racism, and the wealth gap. “That takes time, patience, and relationship,” Hage says. “Some of these gaps are so wide. Defensiveness, anger, shame, and [other] blocks to compassion and empathy can come up. So we have to have tools and systems in place to be ready for that, get ahead of it, and even make it okay. That’s part of the process: feeling the pain, moving through that together, and staying together. That’s hard work. We do not claim to have that figured out. What we do have is a committed team of loving, caring, and deeply invested leaders who are willing to stay with it.”