

Tara Solomon - 2016 scholarship winner

Dear Natural Education Network Team,

Thank you so much for the opportunity to attend the Natural Phenomena Conference as a scholarship student. The whole experience impacted me deeply and I'm still reflecting on the ways it has influenced and inspired me as a person, educator and mother.

Arriving at the wild woods I was in awe of the majestic feel of the venue, its beauty, its ruggedness and sense of something more. My first conversation as we set up camp was about the importance of equity not equality, I knew I was in the right place with the right people. One of the most invaluable things I gained from the conference is friendships and connections with like-minded people.

At the opening of the conference Rodney Ngawaka talked about opening new pathways, framing the conference as a journey. Each session revealed, strengthened and stretched my understandings of nature education. Wiremu Sarich workshop gave me practical tools and insightful wisdom that profoundly changed and enhanced the way I understood ako. Wiremu emphasised the important role of children not just in playing games but making games, highlighting communication, cooperation and contribution as key to the success of a game in stimulating learning and growing. It became clear that adults often limit games with the 'right way' and that it is more important for educators to observe than instruct. The session also emphasised an awareness of wairua inherent in nature, and that playing in nature connects us in deep spiritual ways to the environment and each other. The session energised and inspired me to incorporate games into our nature based Playcentre session and gave me the confidence to co-construct with the children, that I don't have to have all the answers that we can explore and discover together.

The evening video about the overnight hike with the children was very inspirational and I really hope we can do something like this with our families. It was great to see how the tamariki stretched themselves to do so much more than adults even thought possible.

Helle Nebelong enriched my understandings of nature in play spaces. Firstly, by highlighting the importance of nature as inspiration for the aesthetic of play spaces, and secondly the importance of nature in providing vital learning opportunities for children to navigate and access risk. In our 'safety conscious' world it is sometimes so hard to enable risky play in natural settings but Helle's talk is an encouragement that is both what children need and want.

Helle's workshop regarding opening the senses has made me engage with my environment in a whole new way. I find myself engaging in new sensory experiences with nature with a heightened awareness of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. Interestingly tamariki often lead the way with their acute attention to detail but I feel more in tune with the world around me.

I did not get to hear Franchelle due to Serena being unsettled but I had an interesting talk with one of the children about home schooling which is of great interest to me and she also shared her understanding of natural remedies such as healing properties of dew from the leaves being captured in essence. These are new concepts for me to understand but some I would like to explore.

Mark Jones & Omine Ivatt lead an interesting session on crafting to connect, giving practical tools to engage in natural sustainable sessions. I felt like the task of making rope may be challenging for the children at our Playcentre as it is a young group but it was incredible to see how in a short time with us all working together we were able to actually produce a rope, but what was also clear that it enabled us to build deeper connections with each other. I hope to apply this insight into my daily life focusing less on the product and more on the process, slowing down and being present with my children and other tamariki.

I had hoped to dance with Pennie Brownlee but instead my daughter needed me to slow down and spend some sleeping time with her. It was good for us to rest together and while she slept I lay with my head on the tent listening to the chanting. It was a good moment to reflect.

The evening celebration around the fire was magical, fun and great bonding. I met so many wonderful people from students, teachers and lectures. All had different stories, ideas and challenges to share.

David Trubridge talk on beauty matters was spectacular. Drawing on the wisdom of indigenous people he visually inspired me with the importance of creating things that we want to care for, and supporting the idea that children need to understand and be active participants in caring for the environment. I think this session was profound as it unpacked why beauty matters and that if we don't change the dominant mindset of cheapest is best to a more holistic sustainable outlook where things are built to last, then we as a human species might not survive.

The closing was a sad, scary and exciting moment. Leaving the conference, the beautiful setting of wild woods and new friends was sad, but new pathways had emerged to walk out from and now the challenge is to take this knowledge, to use and share it.

I think the conference has made me a better person, mother and educator. It has taught me to slow down, to engage all my senses, to listen and learn from nature, others and most importantly our tamariki. I'm so thankful for the unique experience of being with such wonderful people and in such a fabulous setting. The Natural Phenomena Conference was inspiring, enriching and thought provoking, and I hope that my experience will enhance my ability as an educator. I feel very passionate that nature is a crucial part of children's development and the conference has fuel and supported my vision to ensure all children have access to nature based learning.