



SUMMER / FALL 2006

S I E R R A T U C S O N

P R O G R E S S

Guided Nature Experience: Nature as Healer

By James MacAdam

Sierra Tucson's international reputation for successfully treating coexisting addictions and psychiatric disorders is well known. The multiple approaches that work independently and collaboratively to initiate and continue the process of healing are complex and continually evolving. Sierra Tucson remains true to its Vision to "...maintain a clear focus, remain open-minded and unbounded by old ideologies, and to be receptive to new ideas and concepts in treating substance abuse and mental illnesses, steadfastly committed to the Twelve-Step philosophy, holistic approaches, and respect for the individual and family who still suffer..." Therefore, Sierra Tucson utilizes traditional, experiential, and integrative therapies that are proven to offer significant insight toward change and recovery. In this issue of the "Progress" Newsletter, we introduce an emerging therapeutic process that is somewhat unique to Sierra Tucson: Guided Nature Experience. Sierra Tucson may be the only treatment center in the country that provides the therapeutic benefits of a naturalist. The following article by James MacAdam offers a glimpse at how nature can impart awareness and a sense of connection, assisting with the process of transformation.

Psychological research indicates that contact with nature leads to recovery from stress (Herzog et al., 2002; Kaplan, 1995; Korpela and Hartig, 1996; Ulrich et al., 1991), increased attention and awareness (Davis, 2004; Kuo and Faber Taylor, 2004), experiences of trust and reduced need for control (Talbot and Kaplan, 1986), and is one of the most common triggers for peak spiritual experiences (Davis, 2004; Frederickson and Anderson, 1999). Considerable anecdotal evidence, as well as our own intuition, tells us that these are just a few of the psychological, physical, and spiritual benefits of connecting with nature.

Sierra Tucson's spectacular natural setting is an important factor contributing to the center's healing environment. The facility lies on 160 acres of open, cactus- and mesquite-studded desert grassland at the foot of the 9,000-foot Santa Catalina Mountains. Patients often report having powerful experiences in relation to nature during their treatment—witnessing a full moon rising over

the Catalinas, watching deer browse in early morning light, or being joined by a songbird 30 feet up on the ropes course. These experiences play an integrative and enhancing role in the treatment process and provide a sense of common experience and interconnection with the greater world.

As Sierra Tucson's first naturalist, I have been working for the past 18 months to consciously incorporate a natural/environmental component into our application of the holistic Sierra Model®. I now offer guided, on-campus nature walks to all patients who are physically capable at least once during treatment. I also write a regular newsletter that describes local natural happenings and offers insight into parallels and connections between the natural world and the recovery process. Rather than adding to a "potpourri" of treatment options at Sierra Tucson, nature-based activities address the fundamental relationship of the patient to their environment and can provide patients with a grounding sensory and spatial context for treatment.

During the hour-long nature walks, patients are oriented and familiarized with the native flora, fauna, and climate, which helps them feel safe, comfortable, and grounded in and connected to their environment. Patients usually have a number of questions, especially about poisonous and potentially dangerous creatures, and about natural lore they have heard from others. There is usually a fair amount of "myth-busting" that goes on during these discussions; for example, "are there really 'jumping cactus?'" I will sometimes invite patients to consider the symbolism that different animals possess and offer examples of my own and others' interpretations.

(Continued on page 2)

In this Issue

Page

Guided Nature Experience	1
Letter from the Executive Director	2
Quality of Life Workshops	3
Summit for Clinical Excellence	3
Meet James MacAdam	4



(Continued from page 1)

Here is an example from the August 2005 Nature Newsletter:

“... Coyotes are animals rich in symbolism and metaphor. Coyotes are among the most persecuted animals in North America, being shot, trapped, poisoned, and deprived of their native habitat throughout the continent for various reasons. In spite of this constant stress to their populations, coyotes are actually increasing in number in many areas. They do this by producing more young and by adapting to live in human-altered habitats. Like a weed growing up through a crack in the sidewalk or a bird singing in a snow storm, coyotes respond to obstacles by expanding and adapting, giving and growing with utter disregard for what the future might hold. In this light, coyotes can be a powerful reminder that it is in our nature as well to live, thrive, and grow no matter what challenges we face. Coyotes also remind us that when we live in the present moment, creativity and abundance naturally spring forth.”

I attempt to create opportunities for each patient to connect with nature at whatever level is most appropriate for them, be it purely practical (“what’s out here?”), intellectual/metaphorical, emotional, or physical. Each of these paths can lead to a sense of direct spiritual connection with nature. One simple exercise I use on the walks is leading patients through connection with their senses one by one (hearing, touch, smell, vision). This can provide a simple restorative experience, or it may also function as a behavioral tool for an anxious or depressed patient. Patients often report a decreased sense of isolation, where natural elements seem more “alive” and less separate from their own person. This exercise turned into a profoundly spiritual one with a men’s group last winter, when, after opening our eyes (the other senses are explored with the eyes closed), a line of six impressive bucks (male deer) climbed over the ridge in front of us. This synchronistic experience created

a tangible sense of bonding between the men in the group, and provided a window into the spiritual connection that exists between the human and natural realms.

Another exercise involves observing a single natural element (shrub, rock, piece of ground, etc.) for five minutes without interruption. With the removal of distractions, profound insights often come bubbling out of the patients during this exercise. For some, the exercise provides an exploration of the concept of mindfulness, which is requisite for a program of spiritual recovery. Just having the volume turned up on one’s inner “chatter” in a safe and peaceful environment can spark a desire for increased self-awareness. Others notice metaphors for their own lives in the land, its inhabitants, and natural cycles. I explored one such metaphor in a newsletter this June, as a wildfire burned nearby in the Catalina Mountains (in many western forests, human suppression of natural wildfires has caused a dangerous buildup of underbrush and small trees, making today’s wildfires much more dangerous than those of 100 years ago):

“... Our culture’s relationship to fire powerfully mirrors the relationship that many of us have with our own feelings. As a culture, families, and individuals, we suppress our true emotions, be they anger, despair, or joy. Each time an unpleasant emotion bubbles up, we send in our own internal “hotshot” crews of food, sex, chemicals, codependence, or outright suppression (a.k.a. depression) to keep it at bay. But the lightning strikes of life continue to come, and nature demands that these emotions be expressed. Inevitably, it happens that at some point our defenses are down, we’re too emotionally dry and brittle to cope, or the winds of circumstance are just too wild—and the fire explodes into an inferno of rage, acting out, hopelessness, self-hatred, or violence. If you are a human being in this

(Continued on page 3)

Letter from the Executive Director Keith P. Arnold

Dear Friend,

What a privilege to serve as the new Executive Director! For the past 11 years I have put my heart and soul into this organization, as have many others. I am filled with gratitude to those of you who have supported Sierra Tucson year after year. Without your confidence, support, and care for clients, we would not be here. This gratitude extends to many, many people—you, the professionals who trust us; our patients; our staff; Bill O’Donnell, who founded this incredible place; CRC, for fortifying and supporting us; Dr. David Anderson, for the wonderful job he did here and for passing the reigns over to me... the list goes on and on. Please know that I will do everything I can to continue to make Sierra Tucson an amazing place for healing and clinical excellence.

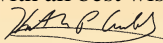
In my previous role as Senior Director of Marketing and Intake, I always appreciated the helpful comments I received. So, I welcome your feedback, suggestions, and ideas.

In this edition of the “Progress” Newsletter, we continue to describe aspects of treatment that make Sierra Tucson so unique. The comprehensiveness of what we do extends far beyond what most people think of in a treatment center. This issue highlights one of those subtle but important aspects. Please enjoy the newsletter.



Looking forward to working with you.

With all best wishes,


Keith P. Arnold
Executive Director

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(Continued from page 2)

culture, chances are you've been in one of these fires—your own or somebody else's. Indeed, at times you may have felt that your whole life has burnt to the ground. But here's the good news: life keeps going. A stand of young aspens sprouts where giant pines once stood. We rebuild houses and lives; we give each other a second chance. And like today's forest managers, we find we have some “prescribed” (intentional) burning to do—that is, to let some fires burn, or even set some of our own when the conditions are right. We have a choice *now* to finally allow life to express itself through the full range of our emotions, to find healthy ways to let the internal fires get hot. For it is the very heat of those emotions that burns away all that holds us back—old patterns and beliefs—and allows a new life to emerge.”

At the metaphorical level, nature can offer powerful insight into the recovery process. Beyond this level, however, my goal for any interaction with or interpretation of nature at Sierra Tucson is to create opportunities for unitive experience. Most of us recognize intellectually that we are not separate from nature: it is the very ground from which we spring and to which we eventually return. However, the profound sense of isolation and separateness that so many modern people (both in and out of recovery) feel—from nature and from each other—speaks to the fact that most of us do not feel this connection in our hearts. At Sierra Tucson, I use simple

explanation, journaling, and contemplative/meditative exercises with patients in a natural environment to foster a direct experience of unity with nature. For the patient at Sierra Tucson, guided nature experience offers opportunities to recover from the stress and intensity of the treatment process, cultivate personal connection with one's Higher Power, and integrate elements of one's recovery in the gentle power of the natural environment. For anyone who has been awestruck by a sunset, calmed by a creek, or inspired by an eagle, the benefits of such an experience are self-evident.

By James MacAdam

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Meet James MacAdam, Naturalist

In February 2005, James MacAdam became Sierra Tucson’s first Naturalist. With a bachelor’s degree in Environmental Studies and Conservation from Prescott College, Arizona, James has worked as a botanist/plant biologist for the University of Arizona and National Park Service and has done freelance research. He gained experience in treatment and recovery while working at Outward Bound and a wilderness treatment center in Montana, and he worked three years in practice groups of Non-Violent Communication, as created by Marshall Rosenberg. James believes that his love of nature and practice of non-violent communication fosters emotional and spiritual connection between people. His desire to work with people to integrate these experiences toward character development and healing has been fulfilled in his current position at Sierra Tucson. “I feel most rewarded when I do what I really love, and people light up and benefit from it,” reflects James.

In the Therapeutic and Recreational Activities Program (TRAP), James teaches meditation, leads yoga for the Eating Disorders Program, and co-facilitates adventure therapy on the Climbing Wall and High Ropes Course. As a liaison between the natural world and the Sierra Tucson community, James guides patients on nature walks. This offers individuals an opportunity to learn about and experience nature, feel comfortable in their environment, and discover new emotional and spiritual connections. “I try to integrate a spiritual perspective in everything I do at Sierra Tucson,” James explains. “I focus on direct, sensory, immediate connection with the land. Patients often

become grounded in the present moment and gain insight into self-soothing behaviors. There is a direct healing experience from not feeling separate from nature and each other.”

James enjoys writing and uses writing exercises as a creative method to help patients find acceptance and explore their passions. Patients and staff look forward to reading James’ newsletters and poetry. The following excerpt from his October 2005 Nature Newsletter displays a sample of deeper meaning that can be found in nature:

“... The way we notice these things is through *being here*, again and again. Though I’ve gazed to the top of the Catalinas hundreds of times from Sierra Tucson, only today did I first notice the aspens... Each time I notice a change, the natural surroundings seem less inert and more alive. This is exactly what we ask the patients to do: *show up*, again and again—what do you feel? *Pay attention*—what’s going on inside you? At first, in nature and our inner world, the view can seem boring, cloudy, even scary. Instead of staying in one place, we’d much rather plan a trip to some exotic locale or grasp for the emotional escape of our choosing. But when we do stay, little by little, we start to notice that what we thought was dead is very alive. And being human, we have a natural affinity for that which is alive—we *care* about it... When inner drives tell me it’s time to numb out again, I’ll do everything I can to protect this growing, living heart inside of me.”

