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# The Force of Nature

A prime mover of productivity, Mother Nature may quite possibly be your most under-utilized team member.

By Emily Carrus

There is an old Zen saying: “You should sit in nature for 20 minutes a day... unless you’re busy. Then you should sit for an hour.” Today’s business climate certainly dictates that most people should probably do the latter—but what’s ideal and what’s realistic are not always one and the same.

Luckily, science has good news for those of us who only have 20 or 30 minutes to spare. According to a study published earlier this year in the *Frontiers in Psychology* journal, being outdoors for just that amount of time has been shown to reduce levels of cortisol—the stress hormone—by over 20 percent

That’s just the beginning of what a little sunshine and scenery can do on any given day. “They are finding that 20 minutes of mindfulness in nature leads to relaxation of the stress responses, less fatigue, better cognitive functioning, improved immune systems, and so on and so forth,” enthuses Eva Selhub, MD, resilience expert and consultant, speaker, executive coach and author of *Your Brain on Nature*, among other books. “There is improved ability to concentrate—students do better in school. Exposure to nature allows for

more alertness and better ability to focus.”

Meeting planners, take note: A quick stroll around the block may sound like an indulgence, but it’s actually an investment not only in yourself—but in your work, too. You may come back from it better able to handle budget reductions, difficult contract negotiations, people management problems—or, on some days, all three.

That’s just one person. Imagine the collective effect that nature can have on a 100-person conference or 10,000-person convention. Nature boosts cognitive capacity, energy, creativity and more; on the ROI front, incorporating it into programs is a no-brainer.

## Navigating the Landscape

Understanding the nuances of nature on the mind and body isn’t easy, though. “As meeting planners, none of us are neuroscientists—and we don’t want to be. What we have to do is filter out how this information is going to be useful and how to fit it into a program’s budget,” says Janet Sperstad, veteran of the industry and program director for the event management degree at Madison College. “We have to help people have a better experience—which is, in the end, about performance. Figuring out how to feed your groups with healthy and good food, making them comfortable, etc... this nature thing is equally important.”

Partnering with people in the industry who are especially in tune with the power of nature is a smart idea. Cindy Present is one of them. “When you talk about mental wellness, you talk about fiscal wellness—but most companies don’t think to do much about getting outside for strategic purposes. They think: ‘Well, it would be a luxury to get out on the water,’” says the activities and fitness director at the Lake Austin Spa Resort. And, to some extent, they’re right. “But there is actually a cognitive purpose to doing that with respect to the business agenda.”

Present spends a lot of effort educating the meeting planners

she works with on this topic and then helping them maximize the group's experience so that nature is utilized in a most effective way during their stays. "When we have businesses come in, we strategize with them," she says. "We ask: 'What are you working on? How can we get you outside so that the results are increased?'"

DMCs can be valuable partners on this front, too. Not only can they craft team-building activities outside or lead excursions into nature, but many can also assist with the intermingling of nature into meetings themselves. Summit Events in Park City, Utah, is one of them, and president and owner Rob Walsh is especially excited about the connection between the outdoors and out-of-the-box thinking.

Simply put: "People think differently," he says about the effect nature can have. "People get a little more open to other thoughts and ideas, which drives creativity and makes for more meaningful conversation."

### Something in the Air

That's just what Cindy Present witnessed from a unique breakout session she helped put together for a recent group program; that the weather made a turn for the worse was an unexpectedly spectacular surprise. Just as the small group of colleagues was about to climb aboard an oversized stand-up paddleboard for a meeting in the middle of the lake, grey clouds rolled in and a light misting blanketed the property with rain that seemed suspended in the air.

"The lake became extremely magical, and the group embraced this childlike spirit and continued with the breakout session as planned," says Present. "It ended up being this amazing communication- and relationship-building experience because they all just turned into kids, with a 'we're out here floating on the lake in the rain,' kind of enjoyment."

But aside from the experience being simply joyful, Present says it was—as she would expect—also a boon to business. Months later, she's still receiving messages from participants enthusing about the meeting. "They'll say, 'Not only was I touched by being in nature and on the water, but I have created a stronger bond with the people in my breakout. We started talking about things that we probably wouldn't have talked about, business-wise, because the guards were down and our minds were in a whole different place.'"

Indeed, those special moments are what meeting-goers remember, and when nature is the maker it's all the more special. "Experience continues to be at the heart of the meeting. Attendees want to connect, share, and—most of all—feel," says Jill Vance, director of sales for The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel in Southwest Florida. "There is a craving for more immersive experiences, and what better way to do this than surrounded by nature."

Places such as The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel, among a myriad of others around the country, are especially fortunate with stunning landscapes—and a climate that supports outdoor activity all year long. Its no wonder people flock to them, and then use them as muse. "Thomas Edison, who built his winter retreat in Fort Myers in 1885, found so much inspiration in natural beauty that he wound up with over 1,000 patents on his inventions," says Vance. Edison's former home, as well as that of Henry Ford, have sprawling landscapes and gardens—and can be made available to groups to use as muse themselves. "That is inspiration at its best."

## GOOD AND READY

### Properly Prepare Your Attendees for Outdoor Plans

Whether you're planning a walking meeting in city center, sunrise hot-air balloon ride, or afternoon of horse-back riding—nothing will be a success if attendees don't feel physically comfortable and emotionally ready. "It's all about getting them dressed appropriately and mentally prepared for what is ahead—whether it's a 20-minute hike or four-hour excursion," says Summit Events' Rob Walsh.

Keep tabs on weather forecasts in the days leading up to an event, and keep attendees apprised of what you learn. In addition, gather information from all activity partners about what attendees need to bring themselves versus what will or can be made available to them. "We offer some information on the idea of 'know before you go' and are very careful about having clear communication with planners before a group



comes," says Walsh. "We can make so much available for rent when they are here: ski gear, ski pants, ski jacket, snowshoes, etc."

No one wants to be caught without a swimsuit for a meeting on the water, but even if the clothing requirements are less specific, it's important to communicate: Suits and ties don't always suit outdoor meetings. "Our property is very casual, for example, and when groups sit on the dock in shorts and a t-shirt for a meeting, they can let their guard down in a new way," says Cindy Present.

If possible, leave a little room for amazement and wonder when it comes to nature-immersive experiences. "I don't always like participants to overthink certain things," says Present. "There is a little bit about the element of surprise, though, and that's good."

# PLANT IT HERE

## Basic Booking Considerations



### ◀ Destination: Opt For “Outdoorsy”

“Do you know where nature is?” asks Janet Sperstad, somewhat facetiously. “Nature is everywhere.” She’s right: Even urban areas studded with skyscrapers can have sprawling parks, tree-line streets, and grass-lined riverfronts. But for experiences that are the most immersive of nature, consider choosing a destination that’s utterly defined by it.

“When nature is allowed to run its course, a beach’s individual character shines through,” says Jill Vance of The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel. There, things like shell hunts on the beach and lunch on a shaded patio can be magical interactions with nature that can transpire, well, naturally.

“Every place has its own identity,” says Rob Walsh. “But some have, as a big part of theirs, outdoor recreation and outdoor sport at the center of it—Salt Lake

City being a former Olympics host, for example. What’s important about that, really, is that you see that in the layout and design of meeting venues. When everything brings the outdoors in, that’s a big part of the puzzle.”

### Host Facility: “Al Fresco” Ambiance ▶

Picking a host facility that blurs the line between indoors and out makes things much easier for the meeting planner. An easy ask: Are there views of the surrounding area from the facility? They may be from the ballroom, and that’s great, but don’t forget to ask about less formal gathering spaces, too. Teri Orton, the general manager of the Hawaii Convention Center (HCC), advises that planners should inquire if there is “a space to network and connect with colleagues during breaks or even enjoy a cup of coffee or a meal while overlooking a scenic view.”

Take time to learn if there are other elements of nature incorporated into a building’s design. The HCC, for example, features an open-air layout that allows ocean breezes to pass through public spaces and corridors; is landscaped both indoors and out; and has sprawling panes of glass that let in lots of natural light. It also has an event space on its roof that is adorned by a fishpond and soothing waterfalls.

“Each thoughtful detail promotes this unique sense of place and encourages the free flow of people and ideas,” says Orton. “Planners often say that their members tend to be more relaxed while meeting at the Hawaii Convention Center because of the unique features and landscaping of the facility.”



### ◀ Season: The Light of Day

Is there a rainy season? Will humidity be high? Outdoor brainstorming sessions or dinner under the stars may not be possible or enjoyable when there’s a foot of snow on the ground—so weather patterns, seasons, and climate are all something to inquire about.

Less obvious but equally important is a consideration of daylight hours. “Being on the western edge of the mountain time zone and also pretty far north, Park City, for example, sees the sun go down at 9:45 pm in mid-June—but, conversely, in early- and mid-December, it sets at 4:30 pm,” says Rob Walsh. “That’s a pretty extreme swing. What’s possible as far as outdoor events and nature-based activities go would really be dictated by the time of year that you book.”



# Peace and Quiet

## Tips for Taking Business, Itself, Outside

“If you think of it, the best deals are made on the golf course. There is a reason for that,” says author and consultant Eva Selhub. “People are together and communicating; there’s play; and there’s nature. That is where the most money is often being made—not in the office, but on the golf greens.”

Golf may not always be the answer, but the point is clear: “If you ‘go outside to go inside’, you can quiet the mind from the noise of emails and looming deadlines,” says Jill Vance of The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel. “As a result, nature sparks new ideas, new connections, and an affinity for inspiration.”

Vance touches upon another benefit to outdoor meetings about which Cindy Present elaborates. She’s seen groups

hover over laptops while gathering outside but advises open-air meetings to be as “unplugged” as possible. “There is some value to getting away from technology. You have to actually talk and communicate and strategize—and, well, be human,” she says. Glares from sun positioning or shadows on screens can affect visibility, to boot.

Rob Walsh is of the same mindset. “In some places, you don’t have to go far to lose your cell service—and, especially these days, that can be a draw,” he says. “We have had guests choose those ranches and mountaintop venues because of that reason.”

If total technology escape is not possible, consider scaling it down and succumbing to the stillness of nature for just a little bit. Walsh has helped many groups take advantage of the fact that most hotels in his region have sprawling forests right out their back doors. “We will have the groups do a five- or 15-minute hike out to a vista or clearing where they can then sit in a circle and do a breakout,” he says. “It’s a very quiet space, and it gets them out of the hotel in the middle of a long day of meetings and thus thinking differently.”

### Breathing Space

Should high-quality sound and video equipment be necessary, outdoor meetings need not be totally shelved. Many open-air amphithe-

# OUT-OF-THE- (INDOOR)-BOX

## Ideas for Where to Hold Outdoor Meetings

### ▼ On a dock or wharf



- ▶ In a clearing in the woods
- ▶ Aboard a glass-enclosed gondola while it travels up and down the mountain
  - ▶ On a golf course
  - ▶ Inside a beachfront or lakefront gazebo
  - ▶ On a terrace or patio
  - ▶ Under a tent on the lawn
  - ▶ In an amphitheater
- ▼ In a garden



- ▶ Aboard stand-up paddleboards on a lake
- ▶ In motion during a walking meeting through park trails
- ▶ In an interior courtyard
- ▶ In a sports stadium
- ▼ In a kayak along a mangrove forest



aters, arenas, and concert venues are well equipped with both.

But meetings under the big, blue sky do require a reworking of things, says Janet Sperstad. “We can’t do outdoors what we did indoors. There will be more pain points, and we really need to rethink what we are doing,” she says. “The view outdoors, for example, is 180 degrees—but when someone is on a stage, the audience is required to focus dead center on only about two percent of their view. Our brains are geared to look for distractions, because that’s what keeps us safe, and outdoors there can be many. When we see something moving—a bird in the sky, for example—we lose focus and attention. There are nuances and complexities like that and, as a planner, it really takes building experience and learning what to do in that new environment to compensate.”

One way to do that is to rethink presentations and advise speakers to make adjustments. Sperstad has found that outdoor presentations go much better if they are delivered in bite-sized pieces. Instead of an hour-long speech at the podium, ask presenters to break it into 10- to 15-minute-long sections with intermissions that give the audience a chance to ease up on concentration and succumb to their environment. “In between each, I would do a check in and let them talk about each topic in small groups,” she says. “When I take things outdoors, it has required a reconstruction of the experience.”

Preparing attendees can also serve to increase the effect of nature-immersive meetings, too. “I think it’s good to salt-and-pepper it with: ‘Here’s where we are going, and here’s why,’” says Cindy Present. “Setting that intention of why they are going into nature or down to the water plants the seed of purpose.”





# Interior-Exterior Design

## Ideas for Bringing the Outdoors In

**B**asement ballroom? No problem. When open-air meetings aren't a possibility, nature need not be completely neglected. Strategic incorporation of natural elements into interior décor and design can still serve to stimulate creativity, facilitate focus, moderate stress, and promote productivity.

**Bring in greenery.** “We’ve filled rooms with trees and shrubs—even brought in panels made of Aspen trees,” says Rob Walsh. “Use plants that are indicative of or natural to your destination to replicate the outdoor ambiance of the area.” Luckily for budgets, the brain is easily fooled: “Something I learned when I was studying the neuroscience is that the brain has the same reaction to plants that are real and fake,” says Janet Sperstad. “It has the same innate connection to seeing nature either way.”

**Focus on the view.** When there's a view, let it shine. “Put the speaker in front of that whole wall of windows, so that attendees are also looking at the view of a lake and trees,” says Eva Selhub. Atriums are also great venues for bringing the outdoors in.

**Set the tablescapes.** Use table décor and centerpieces reflective of the destination: pieces of driftwood, glass containers full of sand and shells, cedar wood shavings, or whole fruits such as apples, lemons, and pineapples. It's especially powerful if things are arranged in a way that allows attendees to not only see, but also touch.

**Turn screens “green.”** Sperstad suggests replacing basic presentation slides—title slides, or those that say “welcome” or “questions,” for example—with images of nature. “When people walk in, or in between speakers, you are decreasing their cortisol and increasing their dopamine by just doing that,” she says.

**Engage with speakers.** Eva Selhub recommends bringing in a speaker to lead meditations or nature-based visualizations in between business sessions.



**Tailor entertainment.** Get creative with performers: Rob Walsh has arranged for guests to be welcomed by drum circles or the sounding of an alpenhorn and brought aerial ski jumpers into meeting rooms to do indoor performances. “These are normally experiences that make you think of the outside, but we bring them into the ballroom to create that ambiance there, instead,” he says.

**Use aromas.** “One of the most powerful senses we have is sense of smell, and some really resonate with us in the natural environment,” says Sperstad. Diffusers (of reeds or for essential oils) can be used at registration desks, for example. But smell sensitivities can be an issue, so any concerns about adverse reactions should be taken into account, and nothing should be too potent.

**Feed the mind.** Being more aware of where something is grown, encourages Selhub, is a connection to nature, too. Use a farm-to-table approach for food, and educate attendees by way of signage or photos about the local farms from which each meal’s ingredients came

**Create vignettes.** If you’re meeting in Florida, set up a beach scene; in snowy parts of the world, bring in fake snow. “We’ve taken a chair lift inside and used that and greenery to create a photo op that simulates being outdoors,” says Walsh.



## THE CREATURE COMPONENT

**Don't forget that animal encounters bring attendees in touch with nature, too.**

Lucky attendees at a Caribbean program may see an iguana scurry up a palm tree by the swimming pool. In wooded locales, the spotting of a white-tailed deer lingering at the tree line may lend even more awe to an already gorgeous view. And scenes of horse-studded hills make a sumptuous business retreat feel all the more tranquil.

There’s a reason animals have become incorporated into various kinds of healing therapies, and research is heavy on the effects of animals on health, cognitive functioning, and emotional wellbeing. Staging an interaction with or exposure to a feathered- or four-legged friend is a great way to bring nature into group programs—and some locales lend themselves especially well to it.

“You can tell a lot about a destination based on how they treat their animals,” says Jill Vance of The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel in Florida. Here, Vance shares some ways that groups can celebrate the area’s rich wildlife world and come away with an experience that moves them.

**Manatee Excursions:** “Most people never forget their first experi-



ence with these gentle giants,” says Vance.

**Dolphin Cruises:** “More common in the Gulf than the Atlantic Ocean, you can often see them playing in Pine Island Sound while on charter cruises.”

**Loggerhead Sea Turtle Sightings:** Springtime is when the females return to area beaches to lay their eggs under the sand, and the destination

is making huge efforts to “help bring these wonderful creatures back from the brink of extinction,” says Vance.

**Mangrove Outings:** There’s a National Wildlife Refuge that supports more than 270 types of migratory birds, as well as alligators, bobcats, river otters, and more. A team-building kayak ride through the mangroves is one fun way to go species spotting.