



Soundscape Activity

Listening to Muir Woods After Dark

At Muir Woods National Monument we lead night walks through the forest each month during a full moon except in the winter. Each park ranger leads a different program, but our core messages are redwood ecology and early conservation history. I talk about the natural soundscape and the need to protect it in the park throughout my interpretive walk which takes two hours.

In the introduction, I advise the group that there are no guarantees of encountering wildlife or seeing the full moon in the forest, and that it would be a bonus if we did. In the past, we've encountered a family of baby skunks, a great horned owl, barred owl, and deer, but one of the most profound encounters was the sound of a creaking redwood swaying in the wind. In the dark of night, sitting on a bridge without our flashlights on, I asked the group what it sounded like to them. Someone said it reminded her of a creaking mast on a sailing ship. Another person said it was a lonely sound, as if there was no one else in the world. On another night walk, I've heard the wind sweeping through the canopy like the ebb and flow of ocean waves. One time, we heard the soft thud of a redwood seed falling on leathery tanoak leaves multiplied a thousand-fold all around us during a time of seed fall.

These sounds are interpreted differently by the individuals who experience them, so as an interpreter I help them transition from the bustle of a major metropolitan Bay Area to the quietness of a primeval forest by slowing the pace of my walk and talk gradually. As we progress from the visitor center to the back of the canyon, day transitions into night. I pause more frequently to listen to the natural sounds, linger longer at the bridges, and speak more quietly. By the time we get to the back of the canyon, the people are accustomed to listening as a group. We are able to sit on a redwood log and not talk for about five minutes before we head back to the visitor center. On the way back, I invite the group to go on a solo walk and enjoy the night walk on their own, as a couple or in a small group. I ask a volunteer to help me stagger the solo walk so that people feel like they're alone on their walk. Meanwhile, I head back to the visitor center to say goodbye, answer questions, and gather flashlights.



National Park Service
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