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7th Grader

When I was younger, I was afraid of bears.  It wasn’t just a vague unease around the topic. No, I had a debilitating *phobia.*The woods next to my house were no longer safe because they harbored grizzlies.  Every clump of leaves hid a bear, and every clump of hair belonged to one.  Once in kindergarten, one of my classmates was absent and I mournfully assumed the inevitable had happened.  Bear attacks were no joke, after all.  Few survived.

     Every time I look back on this dark part of my childhood, I feel regret.  I never needed to fear bears the way I did.  I was shielded from reality, not realizing how beautiful and gentle they really are.  Now I realize how easy it would have been to understand.  All I had to do was go to a national park.

National parks are preservations of particularly unique ecosystems.  Not only do they protect a certain area, they make it accessible to the public.  For most people, this is life changing.  We’re often told to love the environment, but there’s no way for us to know exactly *why*until we see it for ourselves.  After hiking through the woods, watching herds of buffalo, and climbing a mountain, you’re pretty much forced to appreciate everything nature has to offer, even bears.

It doesn’t stop there. Besides the basic information you’re bound to pick up, the amazingly diverse wildlife of national parks reveals surprising life lessons.  The hedgehog cactus, for instance, can endure even the coldest winters, and gray wolves mate for life and protect their young together.  There’s value in the quiet things.  Everyone can learn from them.

The sheer magnificence of national parks carries an even bigger impact on us.  Our world is being destroyed by pollution and deforestation, and these places give us reason to care.  Seeing our planet firsthand will show us how precious it is.  We are the future of a degrading Earth, and it’s more important than ever for us to get educated about conservation and sustainability. Programs in national parks teach us everything we need to know about our role in protecting the planet, and what we can do to fulfill it.

I know that many people put meaning in their lives with work, school, and social media.  Like a bear-hating toddler, the human world is all they’re familiar with.  While it is an important part of our lives, nature is worth it, too.  Don’t shelter yourself from Earth’s wonders, everyone.  Open your eyes and go to a national park.  There’s no way to know how far it’ll take you or the planet.