

Walking without boots



By Nate Smelle

As the snow vanishes into the warm air of the approaching spring, the landscape comes to life with a wave of movement and growth. No matter how much we enjoy the sparkling illumination of the snow, the tranquil silence of the forest, or any of winter's seasonal decorations, the urge to step out into the daily increasing heat of the sun at this time of year is unavoidable.

Walking on the freshly revealed forest floor after it has been hidden by snow for nearly five months, there is a feeling of direct connection to the earth which is impossible to experience through winter boots. For me, this feeling is so strong and highly anticipated, as soon as I see the brown earth peeking through the snow each spring, I make a point of taking off my boots and planting my bare-feet in the soil.

Over the years, this first bare-footed hike has become somewhat of a seasonal ritual. On these slow and steady treks through the awakening woods, there are always surprises. For instance, during last spring's stroll I recall how with one of my first steps into a soft bed of red pine needles, I could feel the earth sluggishly slither away from beneath my feet to expose a plump garter snake more than two-feet long. As temporarily unsettling as this experience was, it was also a reminder of how wherever we are in nature, we are not alone. The environmental philosopher and author John Muir was on the mark in pointing out how "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe."

While the snow in the forest near my home is still too deep to explore without boots, from the recent reappearance of the sidewalks in downtown Bancroft, we will soon be able to experience our connection with the nature feet-first. Yet, as pleasurable as this annual ceremony of mine is, there is always also a disappointing revelation of the melting snow that reminds us of our interconnectedness with all things - trash.

Unlike my surprising yet peaceful encounter with the sleepy snake, our carelessly discarded waste products - single-use plastics, packaging foam, wax paper cups, etc. - possess an especially glaring and sinister presence in our natural environment following the pristine aesthetic of winter. Standing out among spring's fresh appeal to the senses like an overflowing toilet, this trash polluting our existence serves as a reminder that there is no such thing as away. Unlike in years past, this spring is exposing a carpet of disposable masks and gloves along with the usual scattering of plastic bottles, coffee cups, etc.

Although it can be argued that everything comes from nature, and is therefore "natural," when we twist nature's elements into products that are non-biodegradable, we unnecessarily toxify our environment and the source of all life. Out of necessity during the COVID-19 pandemic we have created an incredible amount of waste. With many experts now forecasting a third and potentially

fourth wave of the coronavirus on the horizon, as we navigate our way forward through this evolving public health crisis, we need to find a way to intertwine our solutions for the pandemic with those needed to remedy our longstanding environmental crisis.