

# LEARNING FROM THE LAND

Guided Reflections for Walking the King-Benson Preserve



**MOVEMENT**  
**EDUCATION**  
**OUTDOORS**



# About This Booklet

Movement Education Outdoors created this booklet to share what we've learned together about the land surrounding the MEO Lodge. It's designed as a "guide" to access the teachings of the land—and uncover its layered relationships with Black and Indigenous communities. These stories are not invisible—you just need to know where to look, and how to listen. Each page of this booklet draws our attention to a different piece of the landscape and highlights what it has to teach us.

This booklet is meant to be read while walking the trail system, but we invite you to use it in whatever way feels best for you! Take turns reading sections out loud in a group or quietly read to yourself...go through it all at once, or focus on just one page at a time. However you experience this place, we hope you find joy, peace, and connection to yourself, to the land, and to your community.

Like the land around us, the words in this booklet have layered stories; over time, they've grown and changed in different hands. These write-ups were originally created for MEO's Intergenerational Hike in October 2021 by Jo Ayuso and Jordan Schmolka and shared by MEO youth leaders. Since then, they've been revised each year as community members have shared their knowledge and made new contributions. This booklet will continue to change as we deepen our knowledge of the land as a community. If you have contributions, corrections, or other revisions to suggest, we welcome your feedback...this is a collective document! Thank you to everyone whose knowledge continues to shape these pages.

# Land Acknowledgement

This is Narragansett land. Let's take a moment to acknowledge this together and reflect on what that means. Narragansett people have stewarded these lands and waterways for generations—gathering here for the herring run in the spring and to hunt in the summer. Indigenous people have lived in relationship with this land and its abundance for as long as memory goes back, and they continue to do so today.

The Narragansett people have seen many changes to these lands, from the retreat of the ice sheet 16,000 years ago which carved this river basin to the ecological and cultural violence of European colonization. But through these changes, their traditional culture has been passed down from generation to generation and is even stronger today. They maintain sacred relationships with the land, water, and all their living things, and they maintain diplomatic and kinship relations with the other Native Nations in Rhode Island, including the Nipmuc, Pokanoket, Wampanoag, and Niantic Nations. The education, family circle, traditional ceremonies, and Narragansett language are important aspects of the Narragansett Tribe's culture and daily lives.

There is no Rhode Island history without Indigenous history. We are all connected to this history and we honor with gratitude the contributions and knowledge of First Peoples.

But this acknowledgment isn't the end of our accountability to the First Peoples of this land. Narragansett people today are fighting to maintain their rights to this land, to clean water, to their ancestral fishing practices and foodways. We're reading this acknowledgment together now to remember and affirm that Indigenous rights and sovereignty are central to environmental justice. This acknowledgment is a step towards correcting stories and practices that erase Indigenous people's history and culture and a step toward inviting and honoring the truth.

As we build our own relationships with this land during our time here today, we remember that we are guests here, and we pay our respect to Narragansett elders of both past and present.

# Spruce Row

Let's turn our attention to this tunnel of trees. What do you notice? What do they smell like? How do they make you feel? What's their story?

Before colonization, more than 95% of what we now call Rhode Island was covered by forests. The First Peoples of this land cared for the forests. They used fire to nourish the growth of certain species, clear undergrowth, and create edge habitats for wildlife to thrive. It was often this time of year—November, when the grass and leaves were dry—that they lit these life-giving fires.

When colonizers arrived, they cut down the trees. By 1767, only 31% of the state was forested. Deforesting the land was one strategy colonizers used to dispossess Indigenous people and claim the land as their own. They sold the trees as timber and cleared fields for farming. They treated the land as something to be exploited for profit. The profit they earned wouldn't have been possible without Indigenous land or the labor of enslaved Black people.

The forest that's here now reclaimed the fields after colonizers abandoned them. By the twentieth century, the farming industry had moved west, where new farmland was being stolen from its Indigenous stewards through the violent process of westward expansion. Farming was becoming less profitable in New England, so many farms were abandoned. Forests like this one started to grow back throughout the region. New trees sprouted and grew—but the tree communities that took root were usually different from the ones that had thrived here before colonization. Colonization had transformed the landscape—and prevented this land's First Peoples from nurturing the forest as they always had.

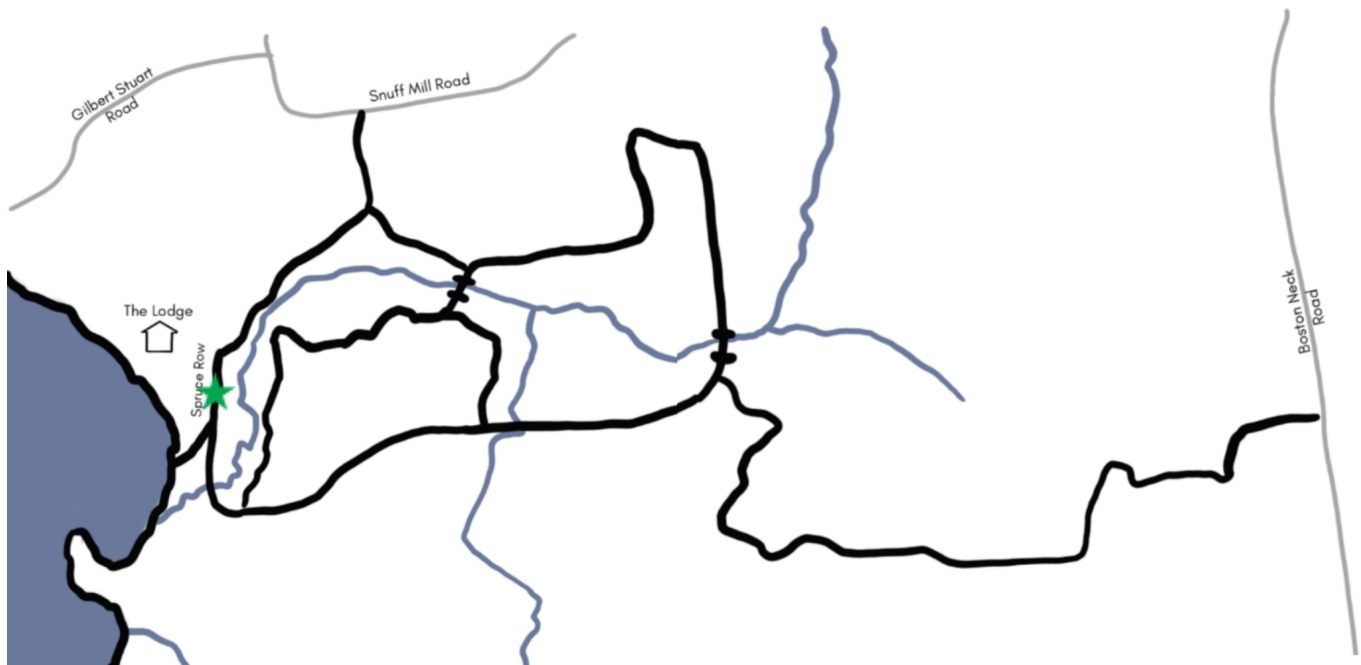
The Girl Scouts purchased this land in 1988. They were the ones who planted the trees that form this tunnel. These are Norway Spruce trees. Norway spruce trees actually aren't native to this region—they're indigenous to Europe, and were first brought to this continent by colonizers, who liked the way they looked and wanted to plant them on their homesteads. We don't know why the Girl Scouts planted these trees here, but we can imagine it was for the

same reason—because they're beautiful. Now, Norway spruce trees can be found throughout much of the continent. Their seeds, which are dispersed by the wind, spread and grow, often displacing native plant communities.

The spruce trees remind us of the many layers of displacement that this land has seen—and also that new things can grow through the mess that colonization leaves behind.

### Reflection question:

The Girl Scouts came together in this space and planted the seeds that became these trees. What seeds do you want *our* community to plant here? What should the future of this forest look like? Who would thrive here, and how can we cultivate that future?



# Upper Pond - Herring Run

This is Upper Pond. From here, the Narrow River—also known as the Pettaquamscutt River—flows south just over 6 miles to Narragansett Bay. Through the bay, its water connects all the way back to the Providence River and the other waterways so many of us know well.

This pond, like the entire Narrow River, is tidal—when the tide comes in, salty water from the sea flows upriver. If you smell the water, you might notice that it's “brackish”...saltier than fresh water, but not as salty as the ocean itself.

This river's connection to the sea makes it a special place for fish called river herring. River herring spend most of their lives in the deep waters of the ocean. But every spring, at rivers up and down the coast, these fish swim upstream together. Here at the Narrow River—home to the biggest herring run in Rhode Island—they swim all the way up from the bay and through this pond. They end their journey right beyond Upper Pond at Carr Pond, where the water is fresh. There, they lay their eggs before returning to the sea. When the baby herring hatch, they often stay here in the estuary while they grow, protected from predators and other threats of the open ocean. This is a place of shelter, birth, growth, and renewal.

Every year, for thousands and thousands of years, the herring have swum through these waters to give life to the next generation. The First Peoples of this land have lived in relationship with the herring run for just as long, coming to these waters each year to sustainably harvest fish.

Unfortunately, colonization has threatened the strength of the herring run and disrupted the relationship between these fish and the First Peoples of this land. Through the eighteenth century, European colonizers heavily fished local herring populations. Many herring were dried and shipped to Caribbean plantations, where they were fed to enslaved Black laborers. The taking of this

traditional Indigenous food source to instead fuel enslaved Black labor reminds us that anti-Indigenous and anti-Black violence are connected.

Indigenous people and river herring both were also harmed by the construction of dams. Just upstream, between this pond and Carr Pond—the spawning site for the fish—is a dam. It was built around the year 1800 to power a tobacco mill. It's one of thousands of dams that colonizers built throughout New England around this time. These dams helped protect colonial power by redirecting control of waterways from Indigenous peoples to the colonizers and powering the colonial economy. They broke the connection between the river and the sea and completely changed the ecology of the landscape. The herring could no longer get all the way upstream to lay their eggs. That hurts the whole ecosystem...and also worked as part of a colonial strategy to cut Indigenous people off from their traditional food sources and lifeways.

A fish ladder was installed at Carr Pond Dam in the 1960s to help fish get all the way to their spawning sites, but other barriers still prevent Native people from practicing traditional fishing here. Members of the Narragansett tribe today are still fighting government restrictions to regain their ancestral rights to the herring run. Let's honor that struggle as we all appreciate the beauty of this place.

### Reflection question:

This estuary is a life-giving space and a place of shelter, birth, growth, and renewal. What spaces play that role in your life? What conditions do you need to feel safe and sheltered?



# Stone Walls

This stone wall here is one of hundreds and hundreds of stone walls that cross New England. It's much older than any of us—it's even older than the trees around us. Most stone walls in Rhode Island were built between 1775 and 1825. They mark the boundaries of what used to be sheep pastures here. When colonizers divided the land into plots to farm and sell, they enclosed it so that other people—especially Indigenous people—could no longer access it. These walls were used to displace and exclude the First Peoples of this land.

These walls tell stories, if you pay attention. You can actually even tell how a piece of land was once used by the structure of the stone walls around it—walls like this one, with mostly large stones and not many small stones, usually mean that the land was used for pasture. Different types of walls, with lots of small stones, were typically created after fields were plowed for crops.

How did all these rocks get here, though? Zooming way out, they were brought here by glaciers—fifteen thousand years ago, the entire state of Rhode Island was covered by an ice sheet. Once, it was 3 miles thick. As these glaciers moved and retreated, they carried rocks with them, creating the rocky soils that New England has today...and carving the riverbed right next to us.

But who placed them right here? Whose hands built these walls? Let's remember—these walls were built long before trucks or even machines existed. Every rock in this wall was carried here by a person. It's very likely that some of the hands that placed these rocks here were the hands of enslaved Black and Indigenous people. At the time that these walls were built, about 30% of the residents of South Kingstown—just minutes from here—were enslaved Black laborers.

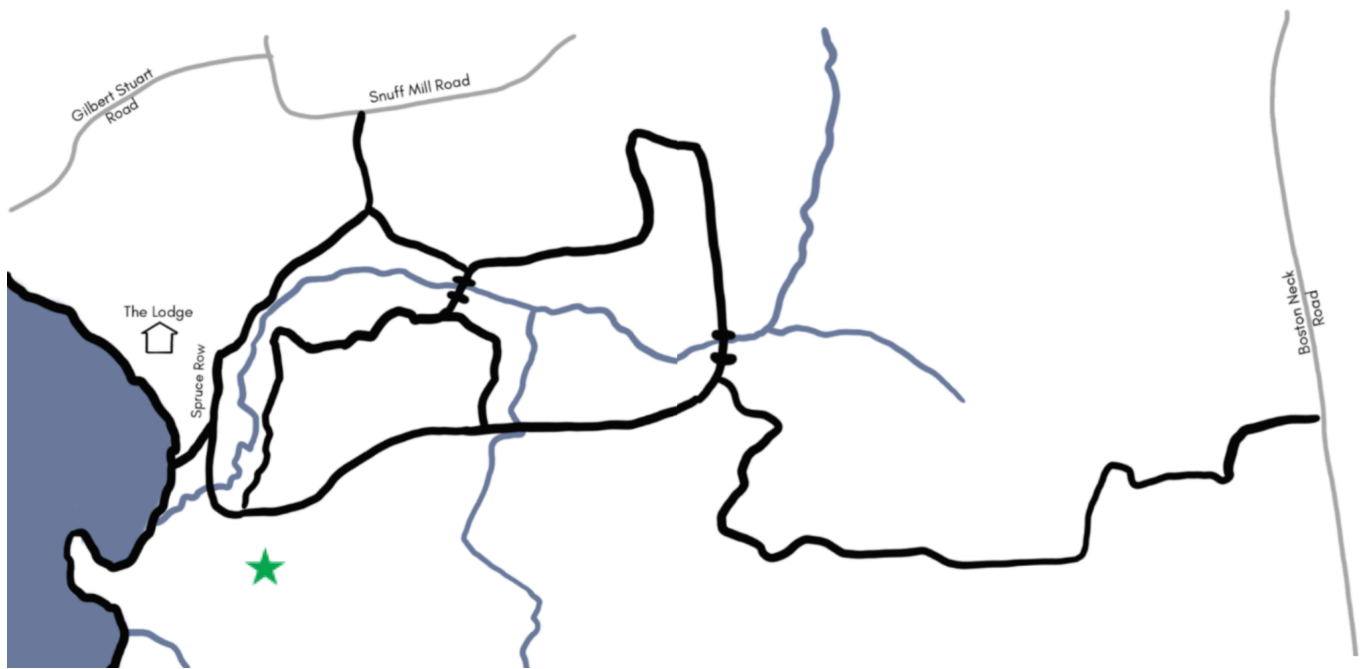
The family that owned this land, the Hazards, owned more than 1,600 acres of land—and likely enslaved more than forty Black people to maintain the land. As we stand here, let's honor the Black and brown ancestors who moved through and shaped this landscape. So many of their names have been



erased by history, but these traces of their lives and labor are still here, so many generations later.

### Reflection question:

Imagine your ancestors left you a hidden message. What form would it take? A recipe? A melody? A seed? A tradition? What are your ancestors telling you?



# The Nature Conservancy Sign

This land is currently owned and managed by The Nature Conservancy. Since 2015, it's been called the King Benson Preserve, named after two white people—David King and Elsie Benson—who helped put it under conservation. Let's remember, though, that even when land and forests are “conserved,” they often aren't accessible to everyone. Who uses these trails? Who benefits from them the most?

The history of “land conservation” can't be separated from the history of colonization. The idea that “wilderness” should be set aside as a space untouched by people has been used over and over again to justify land theft from Indigenous people and people of color. The founding of the first National Parks, for example, prompted the violent displacement of Native people from the lands that had nourished them for millennia.

And let's be real here: large, white-led environmental organizations like The Nature Conservancy are deeply tangled up in this history. The Nature Conservancy is a huge, wealthy, and powerful organization. Their endowment—\$9 BILLION—is larger than the GDP of many entire *countries*. Throughout the world—in more than 70 countries, many of which are still recovering from the effects of European colonization—The Nature Conservancy works to “protect” the land...but who are they protecting it from? Too often, environmentalist organizations like TNC “protect” the land from the Indigenous people and communities of color who have *stewarded* that land over countless generations. Environmentalism and conservation become code words for just another type of colonialism, justifying dispossession and control by foreign (usually white-led) decision-makers.

It's also common for large environmentalist organizations like TNC to work closely with companies that actively contribute to environmental injustice and climate change. TNC has long-standing relationships with corporations like BP, Shell, Monsanto, and Coca Cola. They've given these companies seats on their “International Leadership Council,” accepted millions of dollars from them, and even sold them rights to drill for fossil fuels on conserved land. Right here at the King Benson Preserve, the multinational electric company

Schneider Electric provided the volunteers and financial support to build the boardwalks on this trail system.

Environmentalism is different from environmental *justice*. Environmentalism, while well-meaning in most cases, reproduces the colonial idea that the land and humans are separate and, therefore, we need to preserve land away from human-intervention. Environmental justice is all about understanding humans as *part* of the environment. The environmental justice movement centers the connections between environmental destruction, capitalist extraction, settler colonialism, and white supremacy—and therefore emphasizes justice and liberation as critical to any environmental struggle.

Thanks to generations of Black and brown environmental justice leaders, many large “environmentalist” organizations are coming to acknowledge the importance of environmental justice. Sometimes, they’re stepping up: we’re deeply grateful to TNC for supporting MEO by offering this space, using their resources and land here at King Benson to benefit our Black and brown communities. As our movement grows, we can imagine together what steps towards redistribution, reparations, and true environmental justice might come next.

### Reflection question:

What does the name of this preserve communicate to us? If you could give this place a different name, what would you name it?



# Dead Oak Trees

As you walk, notice the trees around you—on the sides of the trail, over your head. Most of these trees are our elders. They're beings with long memories and many stories to tell. They hold these stories in the rings of their trunks, the marks on their bark, the way their branches have grown and fallen as their environments have changed... So what stories are they telling you?

You might notice that there are a lot of dead trees along these trails. Some of them are still standing, and some have fallen. Many of them are oak trees. Why all the dead oaks?

Between 2016 and 2019, a combination of pests and drought killed millions of oak trees in Rhode Island and New England, including in this forest. Both of these factors are results of the land management and economic systems that colonization brought to this land.

Spongy moths and winter moths are not native here. They were brought to this land from Europe as a result of colonization and global trade. Since arriving here, they've become overabundant, causing damage to many native trees, including oaks. It's common to call species like this "invasive," but we're avoiding that language on purpose. The language of "invasive species" can cause harm by reinforcing xenophobic ideas that are often tangled with—and reinforce—racism against human communities of color. It can also locate the threat to our ecological communities in plant and animal "invaders," rather than the *human* colonial systems that brought them here. Let's remember who's ultimately responsible here: not the moths, who are doing their best to thrive in the conditions given to them, but the colonizers.

The effects of the spongy moths and winter moths put these trees under stress, leaving them extra vulnerable to pressures that they otherwise might be able to withstand. When a series of unusually dry summers arrived, many oak trees just couldn't make it through. Let's not forget that these drought conditions are a product of the climate crisis and the capitalist carbon economy. Climate change harms those who are already vulnerable—this is true for trees, and this is true for people.

These trees are teaching us. They're telling a story of the harms done by colonization and climate change. They're reminding us that we live in relationship with the other beings of this land, that we are all connected.

Maybe they're also showing us what it looks like to nourish hope and regeneration, too. Notice how each fallen oak tree gives way to new life, becoming a home for a community of moss and fungus and countless insects and a source of new soil and nutrients to nourish future generations. How can we learn from them, transforming our environments to create conditions for new life to thrive?

### Reflection question:

Just like trees hold the memories of harsh winters and dry summers in their rings, we carry our experiences—and our traumas—in our bodies. What does it look like to check in with your body? How do you like to care for it?



# Hunting Stand

If you explore the trails for long enough, you might notice subtle signs of hunting activity—like a hunting stand up in a tree, where hunters perch while they wait for a target. Every fall, this preserve opens to archery hunting for deer. Why?

Throughout the northeast, deer are *everywhere*, but it wasn't always this way. Historically, natural predators like wolves and mountain lions kept deer populations in check here, but European settlers began exterminating these predators as soon as they arrived here—now, no wolves or mountain lions are left in these forests. This caused deer populations to grow...and so did other changes to the land that came with colonization. Deer thrive on the edges of forests and love to eat young, low-growing plants. This means they thrive in backyards, on roadsides, and near small patches of forest—the exact habitats that colonial land management and suburbanization have created.

Deer overpopulation has consequences for the whole living community. When too many deer eat the shrub and seedling layers of the forest, other beings that rely on those plants—like native songbirds—suffer. And organisms that rely on the deer themselves spread. This includes deer ticks, the type of tick that carries Lyme disease. Overabundance of deer caused by colonization, is a big reason why Lyme disease has become so common.

The Nature Conservancy allows hunting on this land to try to control deer populations and restore balance to the ecosystem. But hunting regulations are complicated. In many other places, where colonization has caused animal populations to drop, government and private regulations ban hunting...even by Native communities. Hunting restrictions imposed by colonial institutions make it a crime for Indigenous people to practice the cultural traditions that have always sustained them. Let's appreciate how ironic this is—after all, the hunting regulations themselves are only necessary because of the ways that colonization disrupted the traditional Indigenous land management practices that stewarded this ecosystem for so many generations.

## Reflection question:

Wearing fluorescent orange during hunting season and doing regular tick checks are two ways we keep each other safe in the landscape that colonization has produced. How else can we take care of each other out here in the forest and keep each other safe? In general, in the wake of colonial violence, how have our communities taken care of each other?



# Upper Pond - Oyster Spat

Look at the rocks around the water and see if you can find any young oysters—called spat—growing on their surface. The oysters that make their home in this water have a lot to teach us.

Did you know oysters can change gender multiple times throughout their lives? Most oysters start out their lives as male, but as they grow larger, many of them will switch genders—even multiple times. Sometimes, they can have both male and female sex organs at the same time. Like many of our non-human neighbors, oysters embody a relationship to gender that goes beyond male/female binaries.

Oysters also have a rich Black history. Between the 18th and 20th centuries, oysters provided Black oystermen a path to freedom and autonomy. Up and down the east coast, Black communities applied ancestral fishing knowledge and boating skills to harvest oysters from marine reefs. At the beginning of the 19th century, more than half of the oystermen in New York were Black. Some Black oystermen started their own communities, called “freedmen’s towns,” which thrived on oysters—as both a source of food security and economic growth. These Black oystering communities included Hobson, Virginia and Sandy Ground in Staten Island.

Black folks have built all kinds of successful, thriving businesses and livelihoods around oysters. Besides oyster harvesting and shucking operations, Black-owned oyster carts and restaurants have a long history. In the 19th century, most oyster bars in the U.S. were Black-owned and operated. Right here in Rhode Island, Emmanuel Manna Bernoon, an emancipated slave, opened an oyster house—one of the very first restaurants in the U.S.—on Towne Street (now South Main Street) in Providence in 1736.

George Downing was the grandchild of emancipated slaves and the son of Thomas Downing, the famous “Oyster King” of New York. George grew up helping to lead escaping slaves to the safety of the basement of his father’s oyster restaurant. In the 1840s, George moved to Newport, where he opened his own oyster house and hotel. He built a reputation as a successful



restaurateur—and also as a fierce advocate for racial justice in Rhode Island, leading the campaign for desegregation of Newport schools.

### Reflection question:

Oysters fed and sustained the First Peoples of this land for millennia—and later offered Black communities here both food and freedom. Is there a specific food that makes you feel connected to your community or your ancestors?

