

# NATURE'S GYM

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“As with all my work, whether it’s a leaf on a rock or ice on a rock, I’m trying to get beneath the surface appearance of things. Working the surface of a stone is an attempt to understand the internal energy of the stone.”

Andy Goldsworthy

“I believe in beauty. I believe in stones and water, air and soil, people and their future and their fate.”

Ansel Adams

“If you are a lousy hunter, the woods are always empty.”

E.O. Wilson

Paleo’s hot these days, and for good reason. There’s all that evolutionary history that’s coming to light and the compelling notion that an ancestral lifestyle is probably best for our bodies, minds and health. The concept makes great sense, but how do we put it into action?

This question plunges us straight into a conundrum. I don’t know how it is in your neighborhood, but I’m finding it pretty hard to adopt a hunting and gathering lifestyle here in Seattle. There’s just too many roads, buildings and fences, and there’s not much that’s really edible anyway, unless I take up a life of criminal trespass. And even when I do get out into open country, it’s still a challenge to “go Paleo.” Where am I supposed to begin? If I start killing animals and building fires, I’m going to get in trouble in a hurry.

So, I propose another point of view. We may not be able to make a truly authentic Paleo living in the modern world, but if we broaden our minds a bit, we begin to see that foraging isn’t the only way to stay in shape and develop a healthy and active relationship with the land around us. In this spirit, I propose some new “fitness programs” for your consideration.

## **ANDY GOLDSWORTHY**

We begin with Andy Goldsworthy. Goldsworthy, as you may know, is a British artist and environmentalist living in Scotland. His specialty is site-specific sculpture and land art situated in natural and urban settings. His art involves the use of natural and found objects

to create both temporary and permanent sculptures which draw out the character of their environment. Most of us have seen his work in books, and nearly everyone is struck by its sheer beauty and creative use of natural materials. His shapes, structures and arrangements of color are often breathtaking.

What we forget is the amount of physicality that goes into these creations. Goldsworthy works exclusively found objects in nature: rocks, sticks, soil, ice and leaves. He gathers these objects by walking the land and exploring his habitat; he is a hunter and gatherer of beautiful shapes, textures and colors. We have no way to quantify the magnitude of his physical efforts, but given the intricacy of his creations, we would be safe to assume that it's considerable. Selecting thousands of sticks, rocks and leaves means walking dozens or even hundreds of miles over the course of a project.



This then is the “Andy Goldsworthy Workout” and it’s something that any one of us can do, artistically inclined or not. Go to a natural habitat, imagine a creation and start collecting. Start with a simple structure or shape, then go in search of natural objects that will give it form. At first, you’ll be at a loss for solutions, but keep looking. (If you’re intimidated by the creative demands of your project, bring a child along and they’ll show you how to do it.) In time, the perfect materials will begin to reveal themselves to you. Of course, you’ll have to be walking, squatting, reaching or climbing to get what you need. You’ll have to be attentive to the land, it’s textures, patterns and shapes. And by exercising your attention, you’ll be entering into a form of hunter-gatherer awareness.

Cynics, of course, will harsh this suggestion outright, saying that Goldsworthy can’t possibly be getting his heart rate up high enough for a training effect and that he probably doesn’t even break a sweat. Picking up sticks and leaves for a workout? That’s strictly hippie stuff; not a workout to be taken seriously.

But if you look deeper, you may change your mind. Goldsworthy works hard on his creations, spending long days in the field, exposed to heat, cold, wind, rain and snow. He walks long distances and bends his body in all sorts of positions. Yes, his exertion level is probably modest on average, but he walks plenty of hills, trudges through mud and sand and lifts heavy rocks. It’s safe to say that he’s healthy and we can be absolutely certain that he’s fitter than his desk-bound counterparts in the city. Goldsworthy may not win any medals for cardiovascular performance, but then again, he’s developing an intimate relationship with the land, a relationship that most of us are in serious danger of losing. If more people did the Andy Goldsworthy program, we’d all be better off.

## ANSEL ADAMS

In a similar vein, we might also try the “Ansel Adams Workout.” Adams was an American photographer and environmentalist, best known for his black-and-white photographs of the American West, especially Yosemite National Park. You’ve surely seen his books and posters and you’ve probably been struck by his inspiring use of light and contrast.

Born in 1902, Adams surely knew nothing of modern physical training methods. He knew nothing about periodization, programming or protein shakes. By modern standards, he would be considered a slacker, completely out of the loop on the latest innovations. He didn’t wear a heart-rate monitor, log his performance on a spreadsheet or train with kettlebells in a hyperbaric oxygen chamber (or whatever it is the elites are doing these days). But he did lug that immense, large-format camera, tripod and other gear up and down mountains all over the American West, in both summer and winter. There can be absolutely no question that, by the standard of functional locomotor performance, Adams was in great physical condition.



Like Goldsworthy, Adams was a hunter, a hunter of light and form. An astute observer of the natural world, he formed an intimate relationship to the land. His physicality and his sensory development would have made him a valuable tribe member in any Paleo setting.

## E.O. WILSON

For Goldsworthy and Adams, the experience of moving in habitat and attending to natural detail was not just an individual act of artistic expression; the roots of these practices extend deep into human prehistory and our unconscious bodies. E.O. Wilson, the Pulitzer-winning biologist, is likewise famous for this immersion into the natural world. In *Made for Each Other: The Biology of the Human-Animal Bond*, author Med Daley Olmert describes the nature of Wilson’s childhood experience this way:



The emotions that guided Edward Wilson to watch ants also led him into a kind of meditative state that he calls the “hunter’s trance.” He says he first felt the hunter’s trance come over him as his eyes scanned the forest floor looking for his tiny subjects. He felt himself entering into an intensified concentration in which heart, breath, and mind are quieted. During this biophilia mind/body moment, Wilson says, the living world reveals its deepest and smallest secrets.

So take your pick: Shall it be the Andy Goldsworthy workout? The Ansel Adams training program? The E.O. Wilson biophilia and conditioning system?

Either way, you win. You may not satisfy the physiological requirements of today's exercise science laboratory, but who cares? You probably wouldn't be able to get Goldsworthy, Adams or Wilson on a treadmill either. They'd be too busy getting their bodies out into the world, experiencing what the land has to offer. We need to do the same.



Exuberant Animal is an innovative health leadership organization that promotes performance, team cohesion and physical happiness. We offer a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary approach that's invigorating, liberating and intensely meaningful.

Exuberant Animal is the creation of Frank Forencich, author of *Play as if Your Life Depends on It*, *Exuberant Animal* and *Change Your Body, Change the World*. Frank is an internationally-recognized leader in health education and performance training. He earned his B.A. at Stanford University in human biology and neuroscience and has over 30 years teaching experience in health promotion. He holds black belt rankings in both karate and aikido and has consulted to major corporations, human resource groups and health professionals.

- Partner at The National Institute for Play
- Expert consultant to WildFitness UK
- Featured presenter: First Annual Conference on The State of Play Science, October 31- November 1, 2008, Stanford University.
- Guest lecturer: Stanford University Institute of Design, April 2009 and 2010
- Featured presenter: National Applied Functional Physical Education Conference, October 2009
- Featured presenter: Seattle Chamber of Commerce Diplomats Committee: May, 2010 "Stresscraft: preserving your neurological assets"



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