Journal Challenge
Prompt #1: Map an outdoor space!

Duration: Approx. 1 hour

Grade Level: Any age, 4 and up!*

Location: An outdoor area! You can even draw your map from memory if you can’t go outside right now. “Nature” is not only untouched wilderness!

Materials: Paper and pencil (Optional: colored pencils or other coloring tools)

Background: This prompt is the first of a series of Journal Challenges which will include focused observation and thinking, and using a variety of techniques to record data.

*For younger learners: Set up the paper beforehand by drawing the most basic bare-bones frame of a map of the area.

Summary & Goals: Map-reading skills are important and necessary. Being able to read a map can help you find your way, but also the ability to draw a map and imagine looking down from above, improves spatial awareness and builds important connections in your brain!

This mapping activity will help you get more familiar with your local ecosystem, wherever you may be! From a backyard, to a park, the cracks in the sidewalk, or even a walk around your block, nature can be found near you! If you can’t go outside right now, challenge yourself to draw a map from memory!

The goal is to create a detailed map of an outdoor space near you! It doesn’t require you to be an artist! Create a map key, or legend, showing the symbols that appear on the map. It saves time, is easy to read, and takes the pressure off drawing.

Procedure Summary:
The overall goal is to create a map with enough detail to follow without guidance to find your way!

Activity STEP BY STEP:
1. Grab a piece of paper, something to write with, and a hard surface (like a big book or clipboard) to draw upon.
2. Choose a natural area around you - like your backyard, a park, or even the sidewalk in your neighborhood! Record the metadata on your page!

“We may live surrounded by a beautiful community, or travel to the farthest corners of the earth, but if we are not present and fully awake in these experiences, we will miss most of what they have to offer”
- How to teach nature journaling, by Laws & Lygren

Metadata is like a record. It gives context that makes the entry scientifically useful. You can get creative or just add a list that includes:
Date, Weather, & Location!
3. Walk around this space, start to tap into your senses. Think about how differently things look from above, the “bird’s eye view”. If you were to fly above a house, it might look like a square or rectangle. Now imagine you’re floating right above the natural space you’ve chosen. What does it look like? What shape is the yard, park, etc. from above?

4. Walk around this natural space and take note of the different kinds of plants, grass, rocks, etc. Maybe even count the number of bushes, or types of trees. Notice the placement of both natural and human-made things throughout the space. Is there a fence? A picnic table or bench? A shed?

5. Start by drawing a boundary or frame of the space on your paper. If you were to draw a yard, you might start with a fence or the building nearby, and so on. If you’re in your yard, what shape would your house or building be? What section of the map does it belong within? If you start with a frame and a central object, like a house

6. Once you feel you’ve developed a good idea of what exists in the natural space, you can draw different shapes, or a key, in their proper place on the map.

Guiding Questions:

- Have you ever been in an airplane? Or can you imagine flying over the space like a bird? How would things look different from above?
- How would your map look different if you were an ant?
- Were you surprised by anything you found?
- What would you add to your map if you had more time?
- Did you have any questions come up as you explored the space?

Conclusion:

Once you have drawn your map from, use it to link to your story of the experience within the space. What did you find/see/do? What did you hear? What observations did you make? Were there any challenges you faced? Add features or symbols to your map to show some of the fun and interesting discoveries you made!

An optional challenge! Once you have the maps finished, hand out little stickers or use a different marker or symbol! Participants can hide treasures and mark their locations on their maps with the stickers. Pass off your map to a family member or guardian to see if they can find the treasure.

Resources:

Geography for Kids: Map you backyard for a treasure hunt! Kid World Citizen - https://kidworldcitizen.org/map-your-backyard-or-playground-for-a-treasure-hunt/
