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Everyone Ought to Have a Ditch

By David Sobel, Guest Contributor
Illustrations by Michael Hoskins, GVSU Alumni

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I spend a lot of time these days talking with teachers, foundation directors, environmental educators, and evaluators about how to most effectively shape environmental stewardship behavior. The $64,000 question is—what’s the most effective way to educate children who will grow up to behave in environmentally responsible ways? Or, more elaborately, what kinds of learning, or what kinds of experience will most likely shape young adults who want to protect the environment, participate on conservation commissions, think about the implications of their consumer decisions and minimize the environmental footprint of their personal lives and the organizations where they work? There’s a surprising dirth of information about exactly how this process works.

A number of researchers have studied environmentalists to try to determine if there were any similarities in their childhood experiences that contributed to their having strong ecological values and pursuing an environmental career. When Louise Chawla of Kentucky State University reviewed these studies (Chawla 1992), she found a striking pattern. Most environmentalists attributed their commitment to a combination of two sources, “many hours spent outdoors in a keenly remembered wild or semi-wild place in childhood or adolescence, and an adult who taught respect for nature.” Lots of time rambling in neighborhood woods and fields and a parent or teacher who cared about nature were frequently cited as causal forces in the development of their own environmental ethics. In his autobiography about growing up in Denver, lepidopterist Robert Michael Pyle describes the urban semi-wild place that inspired him.

“My own point of intimate contact with the land was a ditch. Growing up on the wrong side of Denver to reach the mountains easily and often, I resorted to the tattered edges of the Great Plains, on the back side of town. There I encountered a century-old irrigation channel known as the High Line Canal. Without a doubt, most of the elements of my life flowed from that canal.

From the time I was six, this weedy watercourse had been my sanctuary, playground and sulking walk. It was also my imaginary wilderness, escape hatch, and birthplace as a naturalist. Later, the canal served as lover’s lane, research site and holy ground of solace. Over the years, I studied its natural history, explored much of its length, watched its habitats shrink as the suburbs grew up around it, and tried to help save...
some of its best bits…Even when living in national parks, in exotic lands, in truly rural country side, I’ve hankered to get back to the old ditch whenever I could…

Even if they don’t know “my ditch,” most people I speak with seem to have a ditch somewhere—or a creek, meadow, wood lot or marsh—that they hold in similar regard. These are places of initiation, where the borders between ourselves and other creatures break down, where the earth gets under our nails and a sense of place gets under our skin…. It is through close and intimate contact with a particular patch of ground that we learn to respond to the earth, to see that it really matters… Everyone has a ditch, or ought to. For only the ditches—and the fields, the woods, the ravines—can teach us to care enough for the land.” (Pyle, 1993)

One problem, of course, is that every child doesn’t have a ditch, or even if they do, they’re not allowed access to it. As more than half of the world’s children live in urban settings, the availability of ditches, or just urban parklands, is shrinking. Even in rural and suburban settings where patches of woods and ponds are available, parents’ concerns about pollution and abduction make these places unavailable. And so the task of providing access to semi-wild places with the tutelage of caring adults often falls to environmental educators. But as environmental educators seek to professionalize their endeavors and work more closely with schools, they become assimilated into the world of standards, curriculum frameworks and high stakes tests. Learning about the environment becomes ingesting a sequence of facts and concepts that create environmental knowledge. The underlying assumption is that knowledge leads to the creation of attitudes that eventually lead to thoughtful environmental behaviors.

For instance, California’s curriculum guidelines for Understanding the Local Environment starts out with the healthy notion that, “Direct experience in the environment also helps foster the awareness and appreciation that motivate learners to further questioning, better understanding and appropriate concern and action.” This is followed by content guidelines for different grade levels. Here’s an example of a set of related guidelines through the curriculum.

**Grades K-4:** Identify basic types of habitats (e.g., forests, wetlands, or lakes). Create a short list of plants and animals found in each. **Grades 5-8:** Classify local ecosystems (e.g., oak-hickory forest or sedge meadow). Create food webs to show, or describe their function in terms of, the interaction of specific plant and animal species. **Grades 9-12:** Identify several plants and animals common to local ecosystems. Describe concepts such as succession, competition, predator/prey relationships and parasitism.

This is a developmentally appropriate sequence of knowledge objectives, but there’s an inherent problem. Because these curriculum guidelines are connected to state assessments, the focus often collapses into making sure the students can recite the information. They follow the old Dragnet maxim: “Just the facts, ma’am.” As a result, providing the direct experience falls to the wayside. The opportunity to explore the ditch gets replaced by memorizing lists.

Go back to Pyle’s description above to see where the problem lies. From exploring the ditch, he became interested in natural history and then became an advocate for preservation. Sounds like knowledge to attitudes to behavior. My contention, however, is that the crux element in his description is, “These are places of initiation, where the borders between ourselves and other creatures break down, where the earth gets under our nails and a sense of place gets under our skin.” What gets lost, when we focus on facts, are the initiation experiences, the moments of transcendence when the borders between the natural world and ourselves break down, where the earth gets under our nails and a sense of place gets under our skin.” What gets lost, when we focus on facts, are the initiation experiences, the moments of transcendence when the borders between the natural world and ourselves break down. It’s like Dylan Thomas describing “I was aware of myself in the exact middle of a living story, and my body was my adventure and my name.” It’s these experiences that provide the essential glue, the deep motivational attitude and commitment, the sense of place. These in turn fuel the pursuit of knowledge that leads to conservation behavior. John Burroughs puts it simply when he says, “Knowledge without love will not stick. But if love comes first, knowledge is sure to follow.”
“One transcendent experience in nature is worth 1000 nature facts.”
Which leads me to my controversial hypothesis. “One transcendent experience in nature is worth 1000 nature facts.” Stated in a slightly more positive form, it may be that one transcendent experience in the landscape has the potential for leading to 1000 nature facts. Maybe even to infinity and beyond. So the question becomes: How do we design family outings, school curriculum, and environmental learning opportunities with an eye towards optimizing the possibility of creating transcendent experiences? Of course, first we have to get a sense of what these transcendent experiences are and if they really make a difference before we can decide that they’re important to pursue.

**Nature Mysticism**

Writing at the beginning of the 19th century, William Wordsworth was the one of first poets to identify the significance of children’s nature experiences. In his *Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, Wordsworth recalls his boyhood wanderings saying,

“There was a time when meadow, grove and stream, The earth, and every common sight, To me did seem Appareled in celestial light, The glory and the freshness of a dream.”

Wordsworth contended that children perceived nature differently from adults and that this mode of perception was a gift rather than a delusion. Their experiences were transcendent in that the individual often felt connected to or merged with the natural world in some highly compelling fashion.

Following Wordsworth’s lead, anthropologist Edith Cobb reviewed the autobiographies of 300 European geniuses and found that many of them described similar kinds of experiences in childhood.

“My position is based upon the fact that the study of the child in nature, culture and society reveals that there is a special period, the little understood, pre pubertal, halcyon, middle age of childhood, approximately from five or six to eleven or twelve, between the strivings of animal infancy and the storms of adolescence—when the natural world is experienced in some highly evocative way, producing in the child a sense of some profound continuity with natural processes…”

It is principally to this middle-age range in their early life that these writers say they return in memory in order to renew the power and impulse to create at its very source, a source which they describe as the experience of emerging not only into the light of consciousness but into a living sense of a dynamic relationship with the outer world. In these memories the child appears to experience a sense of discontinuity, an awareness of his own unique separateness and identity, and also a continuity, a renewal of relationship with nature as process. (Cobb, 1959)

Cobb’s description, (a renewal of relationship with nature as process) is surprisingly ecological in character, especially when you recognize that she was writing in the mid 1950’s, well before any ecological theory had developed. It
turns out, however, that these experiences are not limited to geniuses. Two similar, but unconnected studies, document the widespread occurrence of spiritual experiences in nature during childhood. *The Original Vision: A Study of the Religious Experience of Childhood* by Edward Robinson was conducted by the Religious Experience Research Unit at Oxford University in England in 1977. *Visions of Innocence: Spiritual and Inspirational Experiences of Childhood* is a study completed by Edward Hoffman in 1992, a practicing psychologist and university professor who solicited descriptions of childhood experiences from adults in the United States and around the world. Hoffman does not reference Robinson's study, so they appear to be quite independent, though their findings are absolutely resonant.

Robinson's British study was based on adult responses to a published query in newspapers asking people if they had ever “felt that their lives had in any way been affected by some power beyond themselves.” Of 4000 responses, about 15% described childhood experiences and a significant proportion of these occurred in nature. Robinson analyzes these is a chapter entitled Nature Mysticism. Hoffman's study similarly requested respondents, “Can you recall any experiences from your childhood—before the age of fourteen—that could be called mystical or intensely spiritual?” Again, though no mention was made of nature, a significant proportion of the experiences described are nature-based.

Both authors describe that these are accounts written by adults of childhood experiences. Many of the writers suggest that though the childhood experience was monumental in significance, they had no way of describing the experience in childhood. They were swept up in a wave of awe, but had no way to tell their parents what they had felt. Robinson and Hoffman both acknowledge the possibility of the experience being reshaped by years of memory, but the similarity of the descriptions suggests an integrity to the original experience. Let’s dip into some of the experiences.

“Through the spring, summer and autumn days from about the age of seven, I would sit alone in my little house in the tree tops observing nature around me and the sky overhead at night. I was too young to be able to think and reason in the true sense, but with the open receptive mind of a young, healthy boy I slowly became aware of vague, mysterious laws in everything around me. I must have become attuned to nature. I felt these laws of life and movement so deeply they seemed to saturate my whole mind and body, yet they always remained just beyond my grasp and understanding.” (68 year old male)

“When I was about eleven years old, I spent part of a summer holiday in the Wye Valley. Waking up very early one bring morning, before any of the household was about, I left my bed and went to kneel on the window-seat, to look out over the curve which the river took just below the house...The morning sunlight shimmered on the leaves of the trees and on the rippling surface of the river. The scene was very beautiful, and quite suddenly I felt myself on the verge of a great revelation. It was if I had stumbled unwittingly on a place where I was not expected, and was about to be initiated into some wonderful mystery, something of indescribable significance. Then, just as suddenly, the feeling faded. But for the brief seconds while it lasted, I had known that in some strange way I, the essential ‘me’, was a part of the trees, of the sunshine, and the river, that we all belonged to some great unity. I was left filled with exhilaration and exultation of spirit. This is one of the most memorable experiences of my life, of a quite different quality and greater intensity than the sudden lift of the spirit one may often feel when confronted with beauty in Nature.” (40-year-old female)

The comments of the woman above illustrate Edith Cobb’s notion of discontinuity or unique separateness and continuity or oneness with nature. The woman sitting at the window describes “the essential me” (her unique separateness) being unified with the trees, the sunshine and the
river, (continuity with nature). I contend that this sense of deep empathy, of being saturated with nature, yet unique and separate, is one of the core gifts of middle childhood. The sense of continuity provides the foundation for an empathic relationship with the natural world and the sense of separateness provides a sense of agency, of being able to take responsible action for the natural world. The deep bond creates a commitment to lifelong protection. The next question then might be: Are these experiences really specific to childhood? These next two recollections suggest the narrowness of the developmental window of opportunity.

“The only aspect in which I think my childhood experience was more vivid than in later life was in my contact with nature. I seemed to have a more direct relationship with flowers, trees and animals, and there are certain particular occasions which I can still remember in which I was overcome by a great joy as I saw the first irises opening or picked daisies in the dew-covered lawn before breakfast. There seemed to be no barrier between the flowers and myself, and this was a source of unutterable delight. As I grew older, I still had a great love of nature and like to spend holidays in solitary places, particularly in the mountains, but this direct contact seemed to fade, and I was sad about it. I was not quite able to grasp something which was precious.” (46-year-old female)

From a thirty-three year old German woman who grew up in an urban setting:

“Our home was in the city, but fortunately we lived only a few minutes away from a beautiful park with many kinds of flower…. On Sundays, we made trips regardless of the weather to the nearby Harz Mountains…

I can’t remember if my parents ever told me that nature is alive or has a certain spirit. But I always felt that nature had a definite soul. In our backyard an old maple tree stood, and I used to climb up it and spend many hours amid its branches. I would hug this old tree, and I always felt that it spoke to me. Its branches and leaves were like arms hugging and touching me, especially on windy days.

Not only the trees could speak to me, but also all the plants, streams and even the stones…When I would find an especially beautiful rock on the road, I would take it, feel it, observe it, smell it, taste it and then listen to its voice. Afterward, I would return happily to my parents and relate what the trees or flowers, rocks or brook had told me. They would find this amusing, and were proud of their daughter’s imagination…

Then school began, and everything changed. Because of my intense involvement with nature, I couldn’t relate well to other children who seemed silly and babyish to me. They found me strange and funny. But even harder was the change at home. Now (my parents) denied everything. ‘What nonsense! The rocks can't talk! Don't let anybody hear this, because they'll think you're crazy.’ How right my parents were. I found out one day when my classmates saw me talking to a big chestnut tree in front of the schoolyard. Not only did they ridicule me, but they told the teacher, who requested a meeting with my parents the next day…

My parents recounted the conversation to me and clearly showed how ashamed they were ‘to have such a crazy child.’ From that day onward, my magic was systematically ruined or destroyed… So it happened, that I started believing that nature was mute and couldn’t speak to me.”

The window of opportunity is both developmental and cultural. The account of the first woman parallels the account of the 14 year old in the previous chapter describing how, at adolescence, she was just no longer able to capture the sense of transcendence after a certain age. The account of the German woman suggests that even when a child has a particular disposition towards transcendent experiences, the cultural context only tolerates this kind of magical thinking up through the end of early childhood. It’s like imaginary friends—up till about seven they’re cute, after
Creating Teacher Agency

The focus for next issue will be on creating “Agency” for the teaching profession. Agency in this regard, as defined by Merriam-Webster, is “The capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power.”

After talks with various faculty, staff, and students and of course with the board of the COE Alumni Association, I believe we need to break through the growing malaise that has settled over the field. The next issue will be a positive take on what you can do as a teacher to have power over what is happening in the system.

On another note, Colleagues has been awarded another APEX Award for Excellence and two Graphic Design USA Awards for Design. It is always exciting to be recognized for good work, so I am happy to say “Thank you!” to all the volunteers from within and without the university that allow this magazine to function.

Our next issue of course will need your input. If you are interested in contributing a piece, please email me at pelonc@gvsu.edu with your proposal.

While I am always looking to the upcoming Colleagues, I hope you find this one as exciting as I do.

Clayton Pelon
Editor-in-Chief

References


About the Writer
David Sobel is a regular contributing editor of Community Works Journal and the Director of Teacher Certification Programs at Antioch New England Graduate School. He also co-directs the Community-based School Environmental Education Program (CO-SEED). This essay is based on an excerpt from a chapter he wrote for Local Diversity: Place-Based Education in the Global Age, published by Lawrence Erlbaum, Associates. In it he shares his own experience teaching teachers with methods that model the best principles of place-based education. David is the author of a number of books including Children’s Special Places and a guest faculty member of Community Works Institute (CWI) http://www.communityworksinstitute.org.