> Without stories, in some very real sense, we do not know who we are, or who we might become.
>
> William Kittredge from Hole in the Sky

Our stories of place form us. They powerfully shape how we interact with and perceive the world. A child's sense of place grows with experiences that are personal, familial, and that stem from the community dynamics in which he or she is embedded.

Our stories of place also form our own personal biographies. And yet, profound changes over the past 70 years have put our children's biographies of place at risk. Our progressively isolated indoor and inward-dominated lifestyle has produced more malls than high schools and has contributed to the obesity epidemic. And, as Paul Hawken, author of The Ecology of Commerce worries, "we can identify one thousand corporate logos but less than ten native plants. We are starkly unfamiliar with the vocabulary of conservation biology or the science of restoration."

Symptomatic of this loss of connection to the land and landscape are the stories children tell us about where our food comes from (the supermarket), that wood can be manufactured, and that the earth supplies us with endless water. Richard Louv, in his book "Last Child in the Woods" has appropriately labeled problems associated with such stories as nature-deficit disorder.

But there are exciting new initiatives under way to counter nature-deficit disorder and reinvigorate our biographies of place. Across the country, these initiatives are remarkable expressions of communities' power to faithfully steward biographies of place, the education of their youth, and their public lands and natural resources.

Randy Jones

no child left inside

a child-centered land movement

Merging Place with Learning

In central Oregon, the public school districts in the communities of Prineville in Crook County and Sisters in Deschutes County are integrating multidisciplinary natural resources education programs (NREP) that partner with the community and state and federal government agencies. These new approaches focus on the common goal of adopting local watersheds. In this classroom of the landscape, children and their teachers meld traditional learning models with the "outdoor classroom," where concepts of enhancement, sustainability, re-creation, and restoration can be observed and touched. Students learn new ways to have open dialogue about both inherited and inherent natural resource conflict. The goal is to teach kids how to think, not what to think. This process of merging place with learning exemplifies ways, for example, for the arts to intersect with science, for mathematics to inform public policy. This non-traditional approach challenges students, making learning pertinent, connected, and real, promoting in youth a heightened understanding of the stunning intricacies and interrelationships forming the foundation of the natural world.

The central concept is to foster holistic, integrated thinking skills, to help kids recognize learning as a process, and where the practice of associating seemingly disparate disciplines is the most important aspect of the journey of learning.

Sisters

The Sisters program comprises an active community of learners working together to gain a balanced, in-depth understanding of the world around them. Focused at the high school level, the Interdisciplinary Environmental Expedition (IEE) course is offered as a special program where students study and learn through an on-the-ground, hands-on format.

Students learn critical thinking by getting outside to apply knowledge to their surroundings. An example of such creative, practical learning is a module in which students visit the High Cascade Mountains and follow a drop of water from snowmelt, to tributary streams, then floating main-stem rivers, and ending up in the Columbia River and the Pacific Ocean. All the while, instruction and learning occurs within hydrology, agriculture, water policy, botany and ethno-botany, regional economics, recreation management, and landscape art and creative writing.

After only four short years, reports from city administrators, families, and business owners have reflected that the Sisters IEE has sculpted students and a program that have clarified and changed the community, even helping stabilize it in an uncertain economic time. Could this be an example of adaptation and the development of a clearer perception of "place?" What is clear is that this utilization and expansion of connections in the community mirrors Peter Forbes' (executive director of Center for Whole Communities) belief that relationship to place is as important as the place itself. Not stopping there, Forbes makes the challenge to all of us to restore relationship with the land, making this the defining goal of a child-centered land movement.

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Crook County

The Crook County initiative is grounded in the tenet that "no matter where we live, we will always live in a watershed." The program applies knowledge of dynamic natural processes in the watershed to meeting state requirements for the school system, shaping community character, and evolving new technologies.

Because watershed processes are constantly changing and always naturally seek balance, this natural resources education program teaches children the concept of dynamic equilibrium—the idea that nature is a process that affects them directly and personally. This new Natural Resources Education Program (NREP) will be launched this fall.

The NREP is not a curriculum, as there are many fine and previously tested curricula available nationwide. The NREP is the framework from which instructors and students can choose from elements of various curriculum modules and projects to study sites on -the ground in the watershed. Three basic principles undergird the NREP:

1. Relationships in a watershed, both natural and societal, are inherently multifaceted;
2. Building connections between academic learning and outside, real-world natural resource conditions and issues will enhance and expand student success;
3. Student success, by integrating disciplines in and outside of the classroom, will have direct application beyond public education, by:

- Progressively building upon knowledge and skills gained in primary grades;
- Helping to shape and deepen student understanding of natural resources in their home watersheds;
- Forming a basis for an ethic of responsible citizen-stewardship;
- Creating opportunities for meaningful community connections; and
- Enhancing a student's desire to seek more knowledge and education at higher education levels.

The community hopes the NREP might change the way it delivers public education and that the program becomes integrated with others across the region and the state-including colleges and universities. Already, Portland State University, Oregon State University and Willamette University have taken notice. The Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service have taken bold steps toward support of the programs, asking questions within their institutions such as: Why are we interested and what might we do?

The Miracle of Understanding

A deepened appreciation of what it means to use and manage natural resources is not a silver bullet for our woes of today. But at the local level, understanding our capacities, limitations, and the choices we face in natural resource management can guide communities toward a more sustainable ethic. Engaging our young people in such understanding allows them to create a better future for themselves and their children, because they will then also better understand the connections between learning and living.

In a world where we conduct our daily lives indoors more than ever before, largely in urban settings, we are only beginning to understand how the past few decades have changed us. A recognition of those changes that have created nature-deficit disorder is embedded in the national "No Child Left Inside" policies currently being considered by Congress in the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act. If passed, this legislation would fund a much stronger and broader foundation for natural resources education in schools.

If, as many people believe, we are largely defined by what we pay attention to, these times require us to pay attention to the ways in which we foster connections between children and the land. These narratives will define the future of our health, our relationships, and our sense of equity and balance in the world. This generation can be equipped with the scientific, artistic, language, business, and interpersonal skills that will give them wisdom, empathy, and faith, as we create our personal and collective biographies of place.

Informed youth involved in public land-use decisions

Here is a story that tells why we need to involve our education system in our stories about place:

Recently, in Crook County, Oregon the U.S. Forest Service was presented with an issue of Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) use of National Forest lands near a local fish-bearing stream. Several thousand steelhead fingerlings, (listed as threatened according to the Endangered Species Act), had been placed into that stream.

A group of local decision-makers was invited to the area. Invited also were two of our local high school students. The question the Forest Service faced was: "Should we just close this area to OHV use?" After surveying the churned soils, the OHV tracks through the creek itself, and the torn hillsides, the group gathered in a circle and members were asked to give their own personal advice to the Forest Service Ranger.

The first few folks talked about impacts to fish, soil compaction, impact on other recreation users, and damage to plants. The next couple of individuals speaking were from OHV clubs in the area who felt they really were responsible stewards and often talked to their members about respecting others and minimizing off-trail damage. Then the first high school student spoke, obviously nervous. He said that it seemed to him that plants will grow back, people can recreate in other places and avoid OHVs, and that he knew the fish released wouldn't be back for three to four years. He said, for him, the question came down to soil damage—damage to soil that had taken 10,000 years to develop and was not repairable on our time-scale.

Feeling emboldened by the attention, he ventured a bit further and offered that enforcement wasn't going to nab all offenders and that education of OHV groups was key. So he said the decision should be easy: Close this area to OHV use. The National Forest is huge. The Forest Service should work with the OHV user group to sign a new area and provide education to the group. That is what the Forest Service is now closely studying and looking at ways to implement. This young man had had enough exposure to a variety of disciplines to discern a rational, equitable, and sustainable solution. The scope of his experience allowed him to employ both process and critical-thinking skills to a question of conflict. He was cogent in expressing his thoughts, and most importantly he was able to openly engage in dialogue on the issue. - Randy Jones