

Does Environmental Education Need a Thneed? Displacing *The Lorax* as Environmental Text

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Abstract

The Lorax, written by children's author Dr. Seuss in 1971, has been used extensively by educators with participants of all ages in outdoor and environmental education. This paper results from a critical reflection upon my own practice of employing The Lorax as a teaching resource with senior secondary and tertiary students in Australia. The paper provides an overview of the narrative contained within the text and considers a range of critiques that have been made of The Lorax by other authors, primarily situated in North America. In calling for a more thorough and pedagogically critical reading of The Lorax, I suggest other texts speak more specifically to Australian and other colonial contexts.

Résumé

The Lorax, écrit en 1971 par le Dr Seuss, auteur pour enfants, a été utilisé de façon soutenue par les éducateurs auprès de participants de tout âge dans des activités de plein air et d'éducation écologique. Ce texte résulte d'une réflexion critique de mes propres pratiques suite à l'utilisation de The Lorax comme ressource d'enseignement auprès des élèves plus vieux des 2e et 3e cycles en Australie. L'article fournit une vue d'ensemble des faits informatifs contenus dans le livre et étudie une série de critiques faites sur The Lorax par d'autres auteurs, principalement en Amérique du Nord. En recommandant une lecture plus critique et plus pédagogique de The Lorax, je donne à penser que d'autres écrits sont plus particuliers à l'Australie et à d'autres contextes coloniaux.

Keywords: environmental text; Lorax; Seuss; Australia; post-colonial children's literature; environmental education

Introduction

I was initially drawn to this subject matter through a conversation with a first-year tertiary student about her experiences of *The Lorax*. Subsequently, I reflected on my own use of the text with students and questioned whether I had been thoughtless and lazy in my choice of pedagogical material. Had I continued to use the text as a “ready-made” lesson, without attending to the more subtle assumptions contained within its more obvious message? I suspected this was so and I speculated about its use by others.

Similar to Darling (2001, p. 52), who had questioned whether “[i]ts

resonance with green-minded citizens requires some scrutiny," I wondered if my own, and others', use of *The Lorax* in Australian classrooms would withstand closer examination. How relevant is a text, written for children in the early 1970s in response to development in southern California and elsewhere (Darling, 2001; Henderson, Kennedy, & Chamberlin, 2004; Morgan & Morgan, 1995), to students in central Victoria, Australia? Are there other, more relevant, alternatives?

An initial Internet search for material about Dr. Seuss and *The Lorax* produced several sites featuring the motif of the Lorax in some form or another. Several were dedicated to "green" issues, while other sites related to environmental consulting or energy systems such as wind farms. Further research located a range of material, from a tongue-in-cheek analysis of the sexual connotations in Seuss's writing (Strong, 1977) to the lengthy biographies and analyses by Morgan and Morgan (1995) and Nel (2004).

Henderson et al. (2004) have written of their experiences with *The Lorax* as an educational tool and noted a distinct lack of discussion surrounding its use and implications for environmental education. They suggest a "pedagogical response, [which offers] possibilities for doing more with this seminal work in environmental education and thus better honouring the story and its intentions" (Henderson et al., 2004, p. 130). In Australia, Barron (1995) has used *The Lorax* in an analysis of how five-year-old children position themselves with respect to discourses about the environment. Barron highlighted how positioning themselves within dominant gender discourses (e.g., male as provider and female as one who lacks agency), resulted in limited interpretations by the students of how they might respond to a situation similar to that portrayed in *The Lorax*. She concluded that "children voiced many different understandings of *The Lorax*. . . . [This] could be read as children taking up multiple subjectivities in relation to contradictory discourses" (Barron, 1995, p. 116).

In this paper I provide a brief biographical history of Seuss, an overview of *The Lorax*, and then consider some of the criticisms that have been made of the text in terms of its content, portrayal of environmental issues, and use as propaganda. I also illustrate how a critical reading shows that the character of the Lorax is not to be eulogized in this tale, but rather censured for his proselytizing behaviour and anthropocentric view of natural environments. I suggest the Once-ler, on the other hand, may prove to be a much more appealing figure, despite his penchant for destroying Truffala Trees. I raise some questions about the use of texts like *The Lorax* in outdoor and environmental education in general, and in Australia in particular, focusing on the way in which they might encourage students to interpret natural environments. In conclusion, I will offer an alternative text, *The Rabbits* (Marsden & Tan, 1998), that may be more appropriate to Australian and other postcolonial contexts.

Theodor Seuss Geisel [a.k.a. Dr. Seuss]: A Short History

Born in Springfield, Massachusetts in 1904, Geisel adopted the pseudonym of “Dr. Seuss” in the 1920s when he began creating magazine cartoons. His first book for children, *And to Think That I Saw it on Mulberry Street*, was published in 1937. During World War II, Dr. Seuss became a propagandist, writing political cartoons for *PM* magazine and U.S. military publications. Following the war he returned to writing children’s books, but did not achieve widespread recognition until the late 1950s (Nel, 2004).

In a list of the best-selling hard cover children’s books from 2000, Seuss has 16 titles in the top 100 (six in the top 20) (Nel, 2004). Many of Seuss’s books addressed what Nel (2004) perceives to be the major issues of the 20th century: civil rights and anti-Semitism (*The Sneetches* (1961)); *Horton Hears a Who* (1954)); environmental consciousness and conservation (*The Lorax* (1972)); and the cold war (*The Butter Battle Book* (1984)). Concerns about literacy amongst children led to *The Cat in the Hat* (1957), *Hop on Pop* (1963), and *Green Eggs and Ham* (1960).

The Lorax—The Story

The Lorax is explicitly rhetorical and was described by Seuss as “straight propaganda” (Morgan & Morgan, 1995, p. 209). Seuss stated that “the book came from annoyance over the fact that natural resources were being plundered—not just lumber but land and other things—for dumb reasons like greed” (Nel, 2004, p. 210).

This cautionary tale about the evils of development, expansionism, and industrialisation revolves around the Once-ler, “an entrepreneur . . . who chops down Truffala Trees in order to weave their tufts into shapeless garments called Thneeds” (Marshall, 1996, p. 86), and the Lorax, a “sort of a man . . . shortish. And oldish. And brownish. And mossy. [Who] spoke with a voice that was sharpish and bossy” (Seuss, 1972, pp. 20-21).¹ As the Once-ler’s business expands, he ignores the objections of the Lorax, who claims to “speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues” (Seuss, 1972, p. 23).

The result of the Once-ler’s business activities is an ecological catastrophe. The landscape deteriorates until it can no longer support the wildlife and there are no more Truffala Trees to harvest. The business folds, the Once-ler retreats to his Lerkim, and the Lorax departs. Potential redemption arrives in the form of the child to whom the last Truffala Tree seed is entrusted by the Once-ler, with the petition:

You’re in charge of the last of the Truffala Seeds.
And Truffala Trees are what everyone needs.
Plant a new Truffala. Treat it with care.
Give it clean water. And feed it fresh air.

Grow a forest. Protect it from axes that hack.

Then the Lorax and all of his friends may come back. (Seuss, 1972, p. 61)

The rhetoric of the story does not need explaining—its moral is quite explicit. Fenkl (2001) has argued that it is so explicit that some readers have only focused on the issue of tree cutting, failing to recognize that that is simply one aspect of the broader message within the book: anti-pollution and anti-greed. This narrow focus is hardly surprising in light of Gough's (1993) claim "humans are symbolizing organisms who read the world in terms of symbols they learn from previous readings" (p. 10).

The Lorax is an example of what Ellis (as cited in Gough, 1998) has called the "discourse of apocalyptic ecologism" that began in North America during the 1960s. *Silent Spring* (Carson, 1962) is an oft-cited example of this type of discourse. Carson highlighted the universal use of chemicals (particularly pesticides and insecticides) throughout rural and urban environments with seemingly little regard for their environmental impact on flora and fauna. Despite being attacked and labelled an alarmist by conservatives within the U.S. government and chemical industries, Carson was embraced by many as the prophet of a new environmentalism. Responses to *Silent Spring* resonate with many reactions to *The Lorax*.

Conservation-minded Americans greeted publication of *The Lorax* with acclaim. Seuss received letters from children who had taken his message to heart and resolved to "do something" (Nel, 2004, p. 174). The character of the Lorax became iconic and remains a pin-up for the environmental movement in America: for example, people are invited to "'Be a Lorax Helper—Help Build the Dr. Seuss Lorax Forest'" (Nel, 2004, p. 174).

At the same time, *The Lorax* became the target of the logging industry. After several failed attempts to ban the book in schools, the National Oak Flooring Manufacturers' Association published *Truax*,² a pro-logging rebuttal to *The Lorax*, featuring a friendly and charming lumber worker pitted against a hysterical Guardback. The Guardback represents what the logging industry perceives to be the irrational rhetoric of environmentalism (Fenkl, 2001; Nel, 2004).

Critiques of Seuss and *The Lorax*

Despite Seuss's large literary output, relatively few authors have approached his writing in an overtly critical manner. With the exception of Barron (1995), Henderson et al. (2004), and Marshall (1996), I was unable to locate any criticism of the use of *The Lorax* in classrooms that *specifically* referred to outdoor and/or environmental education.

Much of the material written about Seuss can only be described as laudatory (see for example Fenkl, 2001; Minear, 2001; Morgan & Morgan, 1995; Nel, 1999, 2004; Zicht, 1991). Some authors' assertions seem to border on

sycophancy (see Alderson, 1972; Zicht, 1991), yet others seem to be so far-fetched as to be ludicrous (see, in particular, Fenkl, 2001; Strong, 1977). For example, according to Strong (1977), Seuss can be credited with escalating rates of promiscuity, whilst the Lorax himself is capable of untold deviance, including rape: “[h]aving violated his victim, having forced himself, (‘lifted himself by the seat of his pants’) on a woman in the darkness (‘a hole in the smog’), the Lorax flees from the scene of his crime” (Strong, 1977, p. 37).

Lurie (1990) has criticized the lack of female heroes in Seuss’s books and has further concluded that Seuss’s portrayal of women perpetuates the idea that “women have weak minds; they must not be ambitious, even in imagination” (p. 51). Rebutting Lurie, Nel (1999) has argued that many of Seuss’s characters are “every child” figures rather than specifically gendered. Seuss responded to these criticisms with the claim that most of his characters were animals and genderless (Morgan & Morgan, 1995; Nel, 2004).

Darling (2001), Henderson et al. (2004), Marshall (1996), and Ross (1996) have critiqued *The Lorax* from an environmental perspective. While Zicht (1991) describes *The Lorax* using terms such as “poignant” and “sobering” (p. 27) and commends its use as a strategy for exposing students to both sides of environmental controversy in an even-handed manner whilst teaching about ecosystem function and decline, Henderson et al. (2004) dispute such claims. They suggest instead, that as an introduction to environmental education, *The Lorax* is “in keeping with the rhetoric of unfinished and unexamined thinking that leaves polar opposition intact and allows foundational, cultural assumptions and practices to go unchallenged” (p. 130).

According to Nel (1999), although many of Dr. Seuss’s books are didactic, they teach not by delivering a lecture to their readers, but by encouraging subversive thoughts and behaviours. For Nel the deconstruction of language by Seuss has a liberating effect on the reader—potentially allowing them to challenge the hegemony embedded in language. This form of writing by Seuss authorizes the reader to at least imagine an alternative, or parallel, world which contests the dominant form of socialization (Nel, 1999).

Nel (1999) further claims that children come to know the structures of power while simultaneously acquiring language. This may be so, but in the case of *The Lorax*, Barron (1995) found that by positioning the reader as a boy, the text itself served to reinforce the constrained gendered positions that the children in her study adopted by constructing the reader as a male within a masculine narrative. By situating the reader thus, the opportunity for children to resist hegemonic discourses is limited according to Barron: “presenting environmental issues through particular discourses . . . will not necessarily disrupt other hegemonic discourses, thus leaving the status quo intact” (p. 117).

The Lorax critiques the creed of consumption that extols material production and its significant effects. Nel (1999) highlights how despite material success, the Once-ler’s enterprise ultimately fails as a result of over-exploitation of the natural resources on which it relies—the Truffala Tree. Meanwhile,

exhortations that “You need a Thneed” focuses public attention on the indispensable nature of the product while simultaneously distracting it from the environmental damage that attends their production.

More Subtle Readings

However, *The Lorax* may be more complex and subtle than is apparent at first reading. Marshall (1996) contends that it conveys a moral message for both environmentalists and industrialists. The Once-ler is positioned as the prototypical American by his “inventiveness, his self-reliance, his work ethic, his sense of family values, and his attempt to justify his product on the basis of pragmatism” (p. 87). Add to this the portrayal of his arrival in a covered Conestoga wagon, and the parallels with the colonial and pioneering experiences in the “new world” and of “westering” can hardly be missed (Henderson et al., 2004).

One of the functions of rhetoric is to use language effectively to persuade or influence others. Such persuasion occurs through the application of ethos (establishing credibility so that the audience agrees with the argument), pathos (appealing to emotion, particularly pity and sadness) and logos (appealing to reason). Marshall (1996) has argued that the Lorax fails to establish an effective ethos. He contends that the Lorax is insulting, rude, and abusive toward the Once-ler throughout the book, squandering opportunities to establish credibility with readers and gain their support. The character of the Lorax fails to elicit sympathy from me, even if he does claim to “speak for the trees.” The Lorax does not attempt to appeal to the Once-ler in terms that he might understand. For example, he makes no attempt to argue for careful and considered use of natural resources on the grounds of ESD (Economically Sustainable Development).³ Surely, if appeals to the Once-ler using ecological arguments fail, those based on his desire to continue “biggering and BIGGERING and BIGGERING and BIGGERING” (Seuss, 1972, p. 49) may have held some hope of success?

Neither character seeks to engage in any form of respectful dialogue (Henderson et al., 2004). Instead, the protagonists harangue each other and communicate with abusive derision. I concur with Marshall (1996) and Ross (1996) who suggest that the strident way in which the Lorax claims to represent nature⁴ is not at all inviting, but rather risks alienating readers in the same way it does the Once-ler who finally snaps at the constant badgering of the Lorax: “I yelled at the Lorax, ‘Now listen here, Dad! All you do is yap-yap and say, ‘Bad! Bad! Bad! Bad!’” (Seuss, 1972, p. 49).

Seuss’s depictions of the labourers who work in the Thneed factory are alarming, according to Darling (2001). As with the Once-ler, they are faceless: “the reader sees only their green and scaly arms, hands, and occasionally a pair of glaring yellow eyes . . . they are genderless, raceless and ethnically

homogenous” (p. 61). They are not portrayed as anthropomorphous alluring megafauna like the Bar-ba-loots, Swomee Swans, and Humming-Fish. Instead, they are rendered in dark colours of green and grey and reminiscent of lizards and monsters (Darling, 2001). No reference is made to the declining living conditions of the Thneed factory workers, despite the likelihood that they are also consuming identical pollutants in the air and water to the Seussian fauna. “Perhaps the irony of being compelled to destroy one’s own habitat for a wage is a paradox Seuss—who once drew advertisements for a pesticide produced by Standard Oil—could well understand” (Darling, 2001, pp. 61-62).

The anthropocentric positioning of the Lorax as the possessor of all he surveys has distinctly Biblical connotations (see for example, “Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all living animals on the earth” Genesis 1, 28 (The Bible Societies, 1976)). The use of the possessive pronoun “my” is incongruous with a character who claims to “speak for the trees,” and more suited to someone who speaks for himself.⁵ This is further reinforced when the Lorax departs the post-apocalyptic scene in silence after the fall of the last Truffala Tree (Seuss, 1972). No effort is made by the Lorax to redeem the situation or rehabilitate the land, whilst the Once-ler has sat “and worried and worried away...with all of [his] heart” (Seuss, 1972, p. 57) and at least made some attempt, however meagre, to educate the next generation represented by the young child to whom he entrusts the last Truffala seed. Henderson et al. (2004) have queried this use of “my,” asking, “why must ‘my’ denote property? Could ‘my’ not equally imply a personal identification with life in the habitat?” (p. 132). Whilst questions such as these make for an interesting pedagogical debate, they are not my focus here. They do however, draw attention to the many ways in which a text may be interpreted, some of which I have outlined here.

Depicting “Nature”

According to Darling (2001), the story is one of transformation: “of raw nature into processed commodities, unspoiled beauty into contaminated ugliness, the Garden of Eden into a fetid cesspool” (p. 53). Seuss’s portrayal of untouched nature is one of glorious superfluity: glowing green grass, vivid blue skies, frolicking fauna, joyful trees, and a notable lack of human structures such as buildings and power poles. “The feeling evoked by the colors, postures and expressions is rapturous, harmonious, and innocent” (Darling, 2001, p. 54).

Much of the portrayal of “nature” in *The Lorax* is problematic for me. For example, there is no apparent competition between species for resources, biodiversity appears to be quite limited (there are only four “native” species in the story) and natural environments are characterized as abstract, pristine, and uncontaminated places where humans (especially capitalists such as the

Once-ler) do not belong. Such romanticized representations are reminiscent of preservationists and restorationists within environmental movements who would see nature returned to an “untouched” state and further have readers believe that humans had no impact on the land prior to European colonization (see Darling, 2001; Flannery, 1997; Nash, 1982).

According to Gough (1993), one approach to the resolution of environmental problems may lie in “our transformation from the kind of people who are alienated from nature-as-other toward becoming people whose identity is inextricable from our environments” (p. 13). The use of *The Lorax* as a teaching tool may contribute little toward this goal, as Seuss seemingly ignores the necessity for humans to live and labour *in* nature. In doing this, he recognizes the “rights” of some species, while vilifying others for trying to earn a living. Humans require food, clothing, shelter, medicine, and warmth, all of which originate in nature. “To neglect this dialectic is to deny the very naturalness of human existence and to conceive a pipe-dream environmentalism based not upon productive, respectful engagement with nature, but upon a mythical separation between ‘us’ and ‘it’” (Darling, 2001, p. 64).

The depiction of nature as a commodity in *The Lorax* adds to this demarcation. At first, nature is a setting untouched by humans, awaiting someone like the Once-ler to put it to useful purpose. Later in the story, nature is reduced to a post-apocalyptic landscape and the last Truffala seed, the precious commodity to be carefully nurtured for a new generation of Truffala Trees:

Nature destroyed has become nature recommoditized through produced scarcity and resource management, intellectual property rights and sustainable development become the potential subsidiary industries which might organise this capitalistic involution of nature writ large. (Darling, 2001, p. 57)

Both the Lorax and the Once-ler are situated “outside an already created nature, in positions of dominance over that nature, as decision makers with competing rights to the Truffala Trees . . . both see themselves primarily as individuals making competing property rights claims” (Ross, 1996, pp. 100-101). Henderson et al. (2004) suggest two questions may result from the Once-ler’s imperative to expand: “Is capitalism inherently based on greed? Is humanity’s basic instinct greed?” (p. 133). Students exposed to an uncritical reading of *The Lorax* might be forgiven for believing this to be true.

Through such portrayals, the separation of nature and humans is reinforced. The natural environment (wherever and whatever it may be) is cast as “other.” Just as the Lorax does in the story, if humans don’t like what they see, they can relocate elsewhere or redesign their world. Untouched nature however, is a human construct (see Nash, 1982, for a thorough analysis of the cultural creation of the concept of wilderness). In a similar vein, notions of wilderness management, nature restoration, preservation, and conservation

can be seen as the result of capitalist development along with environmental degradation and exploitation (Darling, 2001).

Bowers (2001) has critiqued the way in which environmental educators fail to help students understand the connections between cultural practices and degraded environments. He contends that “too often environmental education is a form of socialization to the ecomanagement way of thinking that is predicated on the root metaphors of anthropocentrism, subjective/rational individualism, and economism” (p. 145). Without explicitly acknowledging the propagandist nature of *The Lorax*, environmental educators risk confirming the portrayal of human-nature relationships implicit in the text.

The idea that it is possible to redeem the ills that the Once-ler represents (for example, by caring for the last Truffala seed or establishing wilderness zones) potentially maintains the dichotomy between humans and nature. Reserved areas risk becoming artefacts of a “lost” nature, idolized for what they represent about the mistreatment of nature by humans. Humans today do not have to take responsibility for their behaviour: the hope of restoration exists provided that future generations heed the mistakes of their ancestors (see the discussion of abdication in Henderson et al., 2004)

Some Thoughts on The Lorax as an Educational Tool

There are several reasons for taking children’s literature seriously, particularly when it was written quite explicitly as propaganda (Morgan & Morgan, 1995; Nel, 2004). Texts can work to situate readers in both explicit and implicit ideologies through the ways in which authors assume a position toward the social and cultural norms they depict, and in the way that the reader interrogates text for the validity of these representations (Galda & Beach, 2001).

Picture books, for example, convey a narrative to children who construct that narrative as they read (Galda & Beach, 2001). The idea that children (in particular) might be taught to read for moral edification is anathema to some (Marshall, 1996). Children are impressionable and may lack the background knowledge necessary to “decode” text according to whether it is wrong or right. The responsibility falls to adults to provide, at the very least, some context for the texts they present to students (Zicht, 1991). Furthermore, children’s books need to be approached seriously because they often deal with quite “serious matters in subtle and complex ways, and are absorbed into the psyche at a decidedly impressionable period in people’s lives” (Darling, 2001, p. 65).

For the outdoor and environmental studies teacher or instructor, *The Lorax* is an ideal practical teaching tool: it is small and light, doesn’t take up much room in a backpack, is easy to read, and has lots of colourful images for those who don’t like too many words. From a content point of view the story is fairly

straightforward with a clear moral: into an Edenic land of plenty comes the entrepreneur who sets out on a one-way road to destruction. Before too long, development has outpaced the capacity of the land to sustain itself, the landscape is destroyed, the animals dead or displaced and the industrialist broken. It is a salutary lesson from the perfect “parent’s assistant,” Dr. Seuss, on over-development and greed. Students understand the message and are able to apply it to their own studies and experiences.

Henderson et al. (2004) have highlighted several themes within the book that they suggest can be used to “model the kind of open-minded thinking that we, students and teachers, need to engage in together in order to evaluate our central convictions concerning how we dwell on this planet Earth” (p. 129). Those themes include discussion of “individual greed or community caring, progress, ecopsychology, abdicating responsibility, and dialogic barriers” (Henderson et al., 2004, p. 130). In proposing these “direct interruptions” to the narrative, the authors intend to “question cultural assumptions and practices” (p. 143) that are both portrayed and reflected in the story.

Marshall (1996) is less comfortable with the text. He is uneasy that the “ecopolice” may be found in the classroom, implying that this is not the place for environmental proselytizing. His concern extends beyond primary and secondary schooling to include university classrooms where “nature writing is gaining more and more recognition as literature” (p. 90). Overt efforts to alter student beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour however have proven unsuccessful when the attitudes of teachers and students are largely divergent. The more extremism the student associates with the teacher, the less likely they are to be persuaded and the more inclined they are to reject the ideas presented (Marshall, 1996). This is supported by Ashley (2005) who has argued against indoctrination through environmental education and in favour of developing sound judgement that provides students with the opportunity to “synthesise understanding from a range of disciplines, including those that address value and judgement” (p. 187).

There certainly are resonant images and lessons for Australian students within the book. Just as the Once-ler initially appears to have no empathy with the land he utilizes, Lines (1991) has maintained that “Australian pioneers felt no emotional ties to the land. No heritage or tradition bound them....Subdivided Australia was a commodity; an investment...[and] represented potential wealth” (p. 96). Unlike Seuss’s character, however, early settlers “expressed no remorse for the loss of natural and indigenous life forms and landscapes” (Lines, 1991, p. 133). Flannery (1997) has claimed that 19th century settlers “use of the resource[s] was typified by extravagant waste [and demonstrated] no concern at all about the wastage of timber” (p. 360), so confident were they of the abundance of Australia’s forests.

Other authors have disputed these readings of Australia’s colonial history, and made alternative claims that early settlers did have an attachment to the landscape that went beyond the utilitarian and encompassed a desire to

preserve it. For instance, Bonyhady (2001) has written of the attention afforded issues of fauna and flora conservation, urban improvement, and the preservation of natural features as early as 1795.

In a similar way that any reading of European settlement in Australia may differ according to context, so too does a reading of a text such as *The Lorax*. Texts were once regarded as distinct entities, containing a static meaning awaiting detection by the meticulous reader. Applying a sociocultural framework complicates and expands this concept: “texts, readers and contexts, each inseparable from the other, are also inseparable from the larger contexts in which they are enacted” (Galda & Beach, 2001, p. 66). Considering these contexts is essential, and as Brookes (2004) argues, “in Australia at least, approaches to outdoor education theory which try to eliminate or discount differences between societies and communities, cultural differences, and geographical differences are seriously flawed” (p. 32).

According to Bowers (2001), approaches to environmental education premised on “the assumption that students construct their own conceptions of the world fails to take account of the meta-schemata encoded in the languaging processes that are [the] basis of thought, communication, and behaviour” (p. 148). Moving beyond a focus on individual characters’ actions and examining the systems and beliefs that may shape characters, the author’s depiction, and the reader’s construction of them, can assist students to consider how their lives may reflect social forces and taken-for-granted practices. *The Lorax* requires such a critical reading where “[b]eing critical means questioning against the frame of system, seeing individuals as always within systems, as perpetuating or resisting systems” (Edelsky cited in Galda & Beach, 2001, p. 67) and hence a part of culture and history. The abstract and context-free representations of natural environments and those that inhabit them in *The Lorax* may allow educators to perpetuate the idea that one place is just as good as another for the purpose of learning in outdoor and environmental education. In his discussion about the aims and purposes of outdoor education, Brookes (2004) has commented on the tendency for outdoor education textbooks to “suggest the development of generalised attitudes to conservation rather than those derived from attachment to particular places” (p. 30). I believe that the use of *The Lorax* by Australian educators may achieve just that, and I would like to commend an alternative text, written in Australia about a unique Australian experience, that challenges students to reflect on the history of this country.

The Rabbits

On the surface, Marsden and Tan’s (1998) book *The Rabbits* is a somberly presented allegory of the colonial experience in Australia. But it goes further, critiquing industrialization, the notion of scientific progress, population

growth, pollution, deforestation, and the treatment of the indigenous peoples of this country. In this way it parallels *The Lorax*; however there are significant differences, which may make it a more appropriate choice in the Australian context.⁶

Marsden's (1998) use of a phrase such as "The Rabbits came many grand-parents ago," on the opening page of the book, clearly positions the narrators of this tale as indigenous inhabitants recounting their own history. Initially, the Numbats and the Rabbits coexist uneasily, however, as more Rabbits begin to arrive the warning of the old people is recalled: "But our old people warned us. Be careful. They won't understand the right ways. They only know their own country" (Marsden & Tan, 1998, p. 5).

The demise of the indigenous species and their habitat follows in the face of exploitation by the Rabbits. Both the language and the illustrations starkly convey the feelings of helplessness and imminent doom as introduced species such as cattle and sheep, strange food, disease, and "superior" technology, including weaponry, is pitted against an ill-prepared native population. Eventually the Numbats are reduced to the role of a servile and defeated people, fringe dwellers in their own land. Perhaps most confronting of all is the portrayal of children being removed. Against a backdrop of children being lifted through the air in box kites, with their families below with arms outstretched, are Marsden's words: "They ate our grass. They chopped down our trees and scared away our friends . . . and stole our children" (Marsden & Tan, 1998, pp. 19-22).

Shaun Tan's subtle illustrations are rendered in intricate detail and result in a sobering examination of the European history of Australia and its effects on the land and its inhabitants. The stylized illustrations utilize colour and size to depict the power relations between the rabbits and the indigenous species. Tan's rabbits are rendered as militaristic and severe, with harsh lines and dominant poses. They are drawn in concert with their machines and uniforms, demonstrating that they represent a technological society, while the Numbats are portrayed closer to Earth, standing on hills or living in trees.

Symbolism is employed to great effect throughout the text: the designs on the rabbits' flags are reminiscent of the Union Jack, scientific experiments are conducted on indigenous species, a globe of the earth depicts an upside-down land, sheep have enormous teeth, cows are attached to permanent milk pumps, clocks symbolize progress, spears and shields are pitted against military might, and chains bind the necks of the conquered indigenous inhabitants of the land.

One of the key narrative tools employed by Marsden is to give voice to the indigenous species (in this case, Numbats) affected by change, as opposed to *The Lorax* where the narrative voice is that of the Once-ler, or the interloper. In contrast to *The Lorax*, *The Rabbits* utilizes animals that actually exist, and realistic depictions of nature that are clearly located *somewhere* to tell its story. These interpretations may still be presented in a stylized

manner, but they are a far cry from the fabricated Brown Bar-ba-loots, Swomee Swans, and Humming Fish. *The Rabbits* is a sophisticated picture book that confronts readers on various levels. The underlying theses are pertinent to humans throughout the world and provide analytical opportunities for students that range from history, human rights, politics and environmental issues, through to cultural studies and art.

Concluding Remarks

Ross (1996) has posited that an alternative outcome to the dispute described in *The Lorax* calls for change on two levels. Firstly, the Lorax would need to articulate a less antagonistic and more persuasive argument to the Once-ler. The second, and perhaps more fundamental, change would need to occur in the way the Lorax sees his role: “to envision himself differently, to imagine for himself a role other than that of ‘ecocop’” (p. 101). This advice may well be applicable to outdoor and environmental educators in equal measure.

I tend to agree with Darling (2001) regarding the use of *The Lorax*:

What rankles...is not so much the lesson children learn from *The Lorax* as the American environmental movement’s seemingly *unproblematic* embracing of its meaning. *The Lorax* resonates with liberal environmentalism because it affirms the latter’s facile assumption that nature can be saved excluding humans—and especially workers—from it. (p. 65, emphasis added)

I suspect that *The Lorax* and its more commonly applied interpretations may encourage both students and environmentalists to position themselves as “guardians of the trees.” It is my hope that some of the alternative readings and critiques of *The Lorax* described above can provide a different lens through which to view the use of similar texts in outdoor and environmental education. As an educator who aims to be thoughtful and responsible in my choice of pedagogical material, the least I can do is consider carefully and critically before making choices about what to include.

If, as Brookes (2002a) has written, “Australian environmental history has been marked by failures to understand particular environments, often with ecologically cataclysmic results, but also by countless small acts of inattention, indifference and ignorance” (p. 82), then the use of texts such as *The Rabbits*, which are written to specifically reflect the Australian cultural and ecological experience, may be one small but thoughtful and attentive act that outdoor and environmental educators in Australia, or other colonial contexts, can perform.

Notes

- ¹ I was unable to locate a copy of *The Lorax* that included page numbers. I have numbered my copy from the first page of text.
- ² *Truax* is available online at <http://www.nofma.org/truax.htm>
- ³ In this case I am deliberately subverting the common use of “ESD” to represent Ecologically Sustainable Development.
- ⁴ Brookes (2002b) has critiqued the context-free representations of nature employed by some Australian outdoor educators.
- ⁵ Throughout the book, the Lorax claims to “speak for the trees” and refers to “my poor Bar-ba-loots” and “my poor Swomee Swans.”
- ⁶ There may well be important pedagogical issues associated with the use of this text too, however the scope of this paper does not allow for a more thorough analysis of them.

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