

# Finding A Place of One's Own: Reflections on Teaching In and With Place

Lesley P. Curthoys, Lakehead University, Canada

## **Abstract**

*The School of Outdoor Recreation, Parks and Tourism at Lakehead University offers a third-year course on ecological literacy. The course evolved from one with a predominant scientific approach to studying the bioregion to one that embraced a broader epistemological stance, giving greater authority, voice, and presence to nearby landscapes. This essay traces the progression of an assignment designed to increase confidence, ability, and enjoyment of learning how to directly engage in reading landscape stories. Three key pedagogical changes amplified the potential of landscape as perceptible author for student learners:*

- *giving place a more tangible and “knowable” quality,*
- *increasing student motivation to visit “their” place more often and to stay longer, and*
- *facilitating transformation from story seeker to thoughtful participant.*

## **Résumé**

*L'école Outdoor Recreation, Parks and Tourism de l'Université Lakehead offre un programme de trois ans sur l'alphabétisme écologique. Parti d'une approche scientifique dominante de l'étude d'une biorégion, le programme évolue vers une approche qui englobe une position épistémologique élargie augmentant l'influence, la parole et la présence des paysages adjacents. Cette dissertation établit les étapes d'un travail visant à améliorer la confiance, l'aptitude, et le plaisir d'apprendre comment s'engager directement dans la lecture d'histoires de paysages. Trois changements pédagogiques majeurs ont développé le potentiel du paysage en tant que déclencheur concret pour les apprenants:*

- *l'application au lieu d'un caractère plus tangible et plus « connaissable »,*
- *le renforcement de la motivation de l'étudiant à visiter plus souvent « son » lieu et à y demeurer plus longtemps, et*
- *l'aide apportée au chercheur d'histoires pour qu'il devienne un participant réfléchi.*

**Keywords:** ecological literacy; story; place-based learning; undergraduate course

## Introduction

Canadian cultural journalist Robert Fulford (1999) called storytelling “a crucial element of culture” (p. x), and one that was deserving of more attention. Regardless of its many varied modes of delivery, from ancient myth to personal anecdote to commercially manufactured narrative, storytelling has and continues to play a dominant role in our constant striving to make sense of our world (Campbell, 1988; Chamberlin, 2003; Cruikshank, 1998). Stories have a way of getting inside us, shaping our awareness, perception of Other, and, at times, even our willingness and ability to care. The elegance of the story form permits a graceful blending of culture and nature into one ecology. A story readily morphs and meanders, inviting one or many to join in the journey. Story form often transmits place-based knowledge without an emphasis on identification, categorizing, or theorizing, yet if one finds resonance with a bioregional narrative, much can be discerned about local names, relationships, sensibilities, and responsibilities.

As such, stories have the power to transform the common perception of landscapes as mere backdrops for human activity into places imbued with personal and public meanings. Thus, stories and storytelling are integral to advancing ecological literacy: knowledge about, connection with, and ability to act on behalf of the cultural and ecological integrity of one’s permanent and transient home-places (Curthoys & Cuthbertson, 2002; Orr, 1992). However, even though the pedagogical value of narrative has gained recognition by environmental education and related professions, story form generally holds low status as a valid knowledge source for Western cultures, especially within academia (Bower, 1997; Henderson, 2005; Knudtson & Suzuki, 1992). How, then, might privileging place as primary author play out in an undergraduate ecological literacy course designed to explore the theory and practice of ecological literacy?

Lakehead University’s School of Outdoor Recreation, Parks and Tourism offers a third-year required course on ecological literacy. With attention to the specific dynamics of the Thunder Bay bioregion, this course explores the theory and practice of coming to know, connect with, and act on behalf of the cultural and ecological integrity of home-place. Over a five-year period, the course evolved from one with a predominant scientific approach to studying the bioregion to one that embraced a broader epistemological stance, giving greater authority, voice, and presence to nearby landscapes: a shift from learning *about* place to learning *in and with* place. This article shares reflections on a four-year pedagogical journey that engaged place-based discourse as one way of coming to know and respect communities of life within the Thunder Bay bioregion.

## Rethinking Story

As a long-time heritage interpreter and environmental educator, I value and practice storytelling as a way to transform facts and isolated concepts into meaningful wholes. First-hand teaching experiences and everyday encounters continue to reveal the enabling power of story to create open spaces where contemplation, connective thought, joy, and imagination can flourish. Yet, it wasn't until participation in the 2001 Canadian Network for Environmental Education and Communication Conference (ECCOM) in Whitehorse, Yukon that my preconceived notions of story origin and authorship were piqued. The primary flow of thought braiding through the EECOM gathering was the worth and primacy of telling *our* stories.

At that time, my conceptualization of *our* stories was wrapped within a constellation of human thought and experience. Thus, in teaching about the local bioregion, the narratives I shared tended to be imported from another time and/or place (e.g., published studies, field guides, words of other naturalists). However, in his keynote address, David Abram (2001) spoke of the landscape as animate: a multi-voiced author of a community's particular and ever-evolving meta-narrative:

All lives  
All dances  
All is loud  
Be a participant  
Be shaped by it.

Moreover, Abram (1996) noted that our engagement with nature, and on nature's terms, is often stifled: "Today we participate almost exclusively with other humans and with our own human-made technologies" (p. ix), thereby increasing our alienation from the larger community of life and their take on local reality. I was faced with a fundamental question: *Where were the direct voices of the landscape in my narrow conceptualization of OUR stories?* I realized that teaching about the local bioregion via displaced knowledge and connections, although valuable, essentially neglected the most important narrator of all—the place itself. Thus, my ecological literacy course required a major overhaul, with greater attention afforded to the ongoing landscape conversation, bringing in new characters and plot lines to enliven and enrich the dominant human monologue.

## Finding A Place of One's Own

The major change to the ecological literacy course, and the focus here, was a new assignment originally called "The Storied Landscape." The cornerstone of the ecological literacy term project is finding and coming to know a singular and specific "piece" of landscape. In essence, ecological literacy is the

willingness and ability to practice daily life in accordance with knowing and caring about consequences of our actions in relation to local and specific communities of life. Ecological literacy is difficult to achieve *on the ground* if Other is not known and action outcomes remain unnoticed. Accordingly, Gary Snyder (1990) and other proponents of bioregionalism (see McGinnis, 1999) implore us to “stay put” and get to know our places in intimate ways. The Storied Landscape assignment takes Snyder’s mantra and the general guiding principles of place-based learning (Orr, 1992; Sobel, 2004) to the microcosm level by asking students to find and concentrate on a single “story site.” This small-scale approach to landscape study/place-based learning was inspired by Andrew Brookes (2002), who engaged students in an even more precise field of engagement: singular tree homes. Influenced by Gilbert White’s *Selbourne* (1789/1993), which “offers an epistemology centered on a lifetime relationship with a relatively small area” (p. 75), Brookes developed an outdoor education curriculum aimed at learning to “see” the often-ignored tree hollows and their occupants (birds and nocturnal arboreal mammals). He did so as a way to counteract tendencies toward a universalized approach to outdoor environmental education in Australia. In his words:

I have tried to devise experiences that weave knowledge of the hollow trees and small mammals into stories that constitute a relationship with the forest. This is not particularly difficult: finding the trees with signs of occupation, waiting silently in the dark for sugar gliders or tuans to emerge, and joining a project to collectively accrue the stories of many of the trees over time introduces some of the elements of natural history “White” demonstrates. These elements include shaping interests, a growing capacity to make distinctions, not only between species, but also between individual trees. They include constructing stories which link knowledge of wildlife with personal experience and attach memories to certain places (“the tree where we saw seven sugar gliders and spilled the coffee”). They include treating experiences not as episodes but as part of a relationship, in which knowledge of a place contains memories (“I haven’t noticed a geebung growing in this area before”) and includes expectations of future visits (“Will the tuan still be there?”). (p. 83)

Back on Lakehead University’s campus in Northwestern Ontario, nearby fragments of mixed boreal forest, river corridor, and fields lack an ecological equivalent to the Australian tree homes that would afford the same opportunity to meet a wildlife community in a relatively sure and habitual way. Without the presence of “wildlife hotspots” found in Brookes’ locale, it was difficult to replicate the same sense of focus with the Storied Landscape assignment. I suspect several important factors were missing:

- the immediate motivation and reward of seeing wildlife on a regular basis,
- the intrigue of being immersed into the novelty of the nocturnal world, and
- the familiarity and sense of belonging with a larger community of life linked to the privilege of close contact with wildlife.

This is not to say that wild stories do not abound in our bioregion, but rather encounters are perhaps more subtle, requiring greater patience and development of sensibilities to experiences that can easily remain obscure for students just learning to read landscapes. In retrospect, I realized that I had expected too much and had in fact done the very thing Brookes warned against: I had imported an outdoor environmental practice without first giving deep consideration to place. Here the primary element that required deeper consideration was the pedagogy of place as perceptible author. For without more guidance and focused immersion, the original Storied Landscape assignment was analogous to asking a beginner reader to comprehend a Shakespearean play!

Thus, while some students rose to the challenge of discovering local landscape stories, a significant number of students (despite their passion for being outdoors), found the task of finding stories frustrating, unrewarding, and even foolish. Specific barriers to discovering place-based stories and coming to know landscape as author included:

- feelings of being overwhelmed and lack of confidence in observation and other naturalist skills,
- lack of motivation to visit the story site on a regular basis,
- difficulty focusing,
- unfamiliarity and strangeness of (and sometimes resistance to) learning directly from the landscape, as opposed to traditional knowledge sources, and
- confusion over the story concept (e.g., perception of story as something make-believe, foolish, and non-academic).

### Course Under Construction

The following section describes modifications that have helped to minimize the above barriers and enable a more rewarding and positive student experience, as reflected by student questions and comments, quality of student work, instructor observations, and general course evaluations pertaining to the Storied Landscape assignment. Continual restructuring of the assignment has shown that regular, highly focused, and guided immersion interspersed with flexible, structured mentoring is most rewarding for students. Drawing from diverse sources (acknowledged below), the ecological literacy assignment was modified in three ways to enhance the potential of landscape as perceptible author. These ways include giving place a more tangible and knowable quality, increasing student motivation to visit their place more often and to stay longer, and facilitating transformation from mere observer to engaged participant.

## Making Place More Tangible

While having students select their own place remained the cornerstone of the term project from its inception, both the ambiguous concept of “place” and the foreign practice of seeking stories directly from the landscape were problematic. Some students had trouble committing to one location due to an expectation that once a place was chosen, an event would happen on the first visit, or at least the potential for something to build a story around would be immediately obvious. Students generally were not used to just sitting and observing nature. Moreover, students often commented that they felt inadequate to the task of learning directly from nature. Thus, even with the patience and desire to learn, as well as related field trips and naturalist skill-building activities, students weren’t sure where or how to begin their story search. A key change in making the journey of learning to read landscape stories more manageable and rewarding for students was to give place a more tangible and knowable quality. This was achieved by adapting a nature study approach developed by the Wilderness Awareness School (see [www.WildernessAwareness.org](http://www.WildernessAwareness.org)), brought to my attention by a student. The assignment now requires that the study area be a specific size—approximately 200 paces in diameter.

The assignment also requires that “their” place be mapped within the first two weeks of term. The map includes the site’s boundaries, centre point, and *in situ* markers of the four cardinal directions (e.g., when perched on the granite boulder [the centre point], the tallest White Pine indicates North, the dip in Sibley Peninsula points East, the brown boat house points South, and the White Birch threesome denotes West). The direction markers serve two important functions in terms of developing personal connections to place. First, at the bioregional level, the markers help situate the place within the larger landscape community; second, at the micro-level, they serve as “memory building points” (*I discovered the ant highway in the northern part of my place, just near the base of the Tall White Pine*). As layers of place-specific experiences began to accumulate, increased familiarity helped diffuse felt inadequacies surrounding learning in and with nature. Also, the process of mapping appeared to foster a sense of ownership in a positive way, as evidenced by naming their places or specific features within them, picking up garbage, noticing human impacts, etc. Some students indicated a regret that the assignment was over and others have continued to visit “their place.” This is not a surprising observation, given the positive outcomes of community mapping (Lydon, 2003). Finally, creating a relatively small area with definite boundaries also helped students to focus their attention, a point discussed in greater detail below.

### *Creating the Need to Visit Often and Stay Awhile*

Like coming to know another person, coming to know a place (even one as small as 200 paces in diameter) requires a commitment of both time and attention. Steven Meyers (1989) states it well: “I believe there are some things that can only be seen if you stay awhile. Others become visible only to those who gaze at a landscape, and think, this is my home” (in Baker, 2005, p. 270). In the first renditions of the Storied Landscape assignment, I wrongly assumed that all students would be eager to regularly explore their story site. I even secretly hoped that the class might become “addicted” to spending time in their place, putting off more traditional indoor academic assignments! In reality, the search for a story was typically left to one or two quick visits just prior to the story presentation date, sometimes with discouraging results. To remedy this situation and encourage a greater time commitment to coming to know their landscape places, the assignment was modified to involve a series of guided exploration assignments due every few weeks, with the culminating activity consisting of both a tangible representation and an oral telling of place-based discoveries. The smaller assignments also serve to build nature observation skills and confidence. Beyond the extrinsic motivation of grades, the intrinsic rewards associated with sustained contact with local communities of life led some students to voluntarily visit their place almost on a daily basis. Not only did overall contact time increase, but the quality of time spent also improved. The latter was demonstrated by more reported encounters with wildlife, more unsolicited sharing of experiences, and a higher degree of detailed place-based knowledge than shown in previous years. Consequently, the revised ecological literacy assignment came closer to the ultimate goal: enhanced student abilities, confidence, and interest for meaningful participation with the more-than-human members of our bioregion.

### *From Observer to Thoughtful Participant*

Thoughtful participation with a particular place is the ultimate goal of the Storied Landscape assignment. It is also the most challenging element. For just being in nature does not “automatically contribute to environmental awareness, commitment, and action” (Russell, 1999, p. 124). Meaningful participation with more-than-human nature first requires the ability to tune out preoccupation with self and human affairs in general, to learn to quiet the mind, thereby enabling a wider field of perception (Abram, 1996). Joseph Cornell (1987) recounts an experience that reveals just how restless human minds can be:

I once demonstrated this [inattentiveness] to a group of twenty-five teachers in Canberra, Australia. I asked them to look at a beautiful tree as long as they were able to, and to raise their hands when their attention wandered from the tree and drifted to other thoughts. In only six seconds, every hand was raised. They were amazed to discover how restless their minds were. (p. 10)

Although challenging, the rewards are worth the effort. For in being more attentive and fully immersed in our senses, we begin to notice patterns and changes, to hone abilities to see the subtle differences between crow and raven—each with a different landscape message to tell—and we may even come to know and be known by individual community members. Moreover, Paul Rezendes (1999) suggests that caring is attention:

Our security does not lie in the control we have over nature, but rather in the quality of attention that we bring to our lives. If we care about our relationship with nature, or our relationship with other human beings, that caring demands our attention. Caring is attention. [Through paying attention to other there is] the possibility of sensitivity, intimacy, communication, and harmony. (pp. 22-23)

Transformation from a busy to a mindful state of being moves us away from an abstract, voiceless experience of nature—nature as mere backdrop for our activities—toward a more thoughtful engagement with a distinct landscape community. Drawing from the work of Aldo Leopold, Molly Ames Baker (2005) describes the latter as a landfull experience, where “the essence for landfullness is for participants to discover a personal approach of relating to the land that is integral to everyday life” (p. 267). Accordingly, with a view to engaging students in a reciprocal relationship with place, students were asked to give their full attention to the life forms and processes of their place: its sights, sounds, textures, smells, and rhythms. Importantly, identification of community members was encouraged as a gateway to knowing, rather than as an endpoint (Bell, 1997). And while students were welcome to use familiar academic sources to address curiosities and deepen landscape interpretations, emphasis was placed on details and thoughts directly associated with their individual engagement with the animate landscape.

In the original assignment, stories from the landscape were to be founded on sensory experiences and reflections derived in coming to know, for example, *a particular Eastern White Cedar and its particular community*, rather than being imported from a generalized textbook account. Paradoxically, however, using story as the focus of discovery appeared to be a backwards approach. Perhaps the block many students experienced in finding a story stemmed from the common perception of story as something silly and make-believe, or perhaps the notion that finding a story implied witnessing a conspicuous landscape event. Regardless, it seemed that the idea of seeking a story needed to be left unsaid, letting place-based narratives evolve naturally, as they do in everyday life from the desire to share relevant and moving experiences.

Consequently, to shift the focus away from finding a story to simply participating with place, I adapted a playful approach called an “ABC.” An ABC is an eclectic and artistic way to express the subtle complexities and significances of place as known and defined by those who dwell there (for details, see Common Ground, 2002). Each letter of the alphabet represents some



dimension of local distinctiveness: architecture, foods, dialect words, vernacular greetings, endemic wildlife, festivals, songs, etc. ABCs have been successfully used by communities to spark local interest, showcase their community to tourists, as an agenda for local action, and as a tool for public participation. Applied to the ecological literacy project, students were asked to make 26 place-based discoveries and write about personal, ecological, and/or cultural connections to each discovery made. Students commented about their surprise and enjoyment of discovering how much lives and happens in one small place, especially within an urban campus setting. By way of celebrating their place, students created a tangible representation of their findings and revelations in any format of their choice. Many students expressed relief and appreciation of the opportunity to express connection to place beyond the traditional journal format. The creativity of the students was impressive, with the ABCs taking a wide variety of artistic configurations including maps, posters, journals, photo essays, quilts, puzzles, tree art, woodwork, poetry, etc. Overall, the ABC approach proved to be overwhelmingly positive in terms of encouraging careful observations, sparking curiosity, allowing total freedom in artistic expression, and enabling place-based stories to emerge without a forced or conscious effort.

Finally, heeding Abram's (1996) call to orally share stories, the course culminates with students giving classmates a tour of "their" place and recounting their experiences. Ian Sewall (1998) suggests that "[b]y our stories and by their telling we become native to the land, situated. Culture and nature interplay and negotiate a place in our words" (p. 4). Thus, the process of sharing stories in and of a particular place is a vital pedagogic bridge enabling the wider landscape conversation to become part of everyday conversations: a necessary anecdote to the dominant human discourse that tends to deny (via silence) our embedded existence within a larger community of life. Through storytelling place, we begin a homeward-bound journey.

## Conclusion

Brookes (2002) suggests that:

Natural history knowledge is not just the accumulation of facts, but also the layering of stories in which personal experience, social interactions, and locality together give both order and meaning to nature. One pedagogical implication is that natural history education should be considered as constructing relationships. Moreover, the local knowledge required for environmental education planning must include knowledge of local patterns of community relationships with nature. (p. 77)

Reworking this ecological literacy assignment has been a negotiated journey in trying to find that growth edge where students are willing to explore

different ways of relating with more-than-human communities of life, yet still feel within their realm of knowing such that exploration is meaningful and non-alienating. The inconsistencies in word usage in this paper (brought to my attention by two reviewers) reflect my struggle in this negotiation of philosophy, epistemology, and effective pedagogy. For example, Does nature speak? Yes, absolutely. However, while I may know this to be true through many conversations with wild beings and wild places, it is not everybody's truth. For some students, the idea is absurd. It is absurd because they no longer perceive the multi-voiced language of place. Thus, *awareness of Other* seems to be the logical and compassionate starting place of learning how to give greater authority, voice, and acknowledgement to nearby landscapes. I concur with Leesa Fawcett's aim as environmental educator, where she proclaims: "I need to nurture my imagination and the imaginations of my students, so that we don't reduce the unknown subjectivity of an other being to the limited range of our own experiences"(Fawcett, 2000, p. 140). Nurturing imaginations through specific place-based storying is one such way. Students have taught me this process must be combined with patience and non-judgement, as each person finds their own way back to a broader sense of community and belonging—in their own time.

Overall, from an instructor's perspective, I believe the revised Storied Landscape assignment (now called "Your Place"<sup>1</sup>) successfully provides a learner-directed opportunity for deepened relations with a knowable community of life. Based on four years of observations, informal conversations, and personal reflection, it seems the assignment has increased student confidence, ability, and enjoyment of learning how to directly participate in landscape stories. Now it is necessary to formally evaluate the assignment's impacts and outcomes from a learner perspective.

*Full assignment details and the course syllabus are available from the author.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I personally prefer the assignment's original title ("The Storied Landscape"); however, as mentioned, an explicit focus on story seemed to confuse rather than illuminate. The title "Your Place" was inspired by a group's map which proclaimed in bold, hand-printed font: "Our Place!" I was delighted! For seeing those words in combination with the obvious care and detail that went into the painted canvas map depicting place-based discoveries spoke to me of commitment, attention, and celebration of new-found relationships. Here, the word "our" did not imply ownership or domination, but rather it captured the essence of the assignment—a sense of belonging and shared community. Thus, it was within this context that the assignment came to be called "Your Place."

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## Notes on Contributor

**Lesley P. Curthoys** is an Associate Professor specializing in the areas of heritage interpretation and ecological literacy at the School of Outdoor Recreation, Parks and Tourism at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada. **Contact:** 955 Oliver Road, Thunder Bay, Ontario, P7B 5E1, Canada; lcurthoy@lakeheadu.ca

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