



# The Ecological Autobiography

## Defining One's Place in the Natural Environment

RUTH A. WILSON

A number of years ago, I published a paper on the “ecological autobiography” as a tool that could be used to get people thinking about their relationship with the natural world and exploring their “ecological identity.” The audience I had in mind was environmental educators working primarily with adults. To my surprise, a fifth-grade teacher wrote to me sharing her excitement about the idea. She explained that her students had responded enthusiastically to the task of reflecting on and writing about their experiences with the natural world. Included with her letter were samples of her students’ essays. “I never really thought about it before,” one boy had started his piece, “but the woods behind our house is an important place to me.”

The ecological autobiography, I have since found, is a wonderful way to get students of all ages to write about themselves in a way they “never really thought about” before, while also helping them to articulate an ecological identity, a sense of their place in the natural world. This exercise also lends itself very easily to

cross-curricular writing, as students’ explorations of ecological identity bring them into the realms of science and social studies.

I first used this approach with college students, and their response was overwhelmingly positive. I started off by defining an “ecological autobiography” as a narrative focusing on one’s experiences with the natural world. To move the students beyond just recording their experiences, I asked them to also reflect on what these experiences meant to them and how such experiences might have influenced who they are today. For example, how did their nature-related experiences influence what they like and don’t like, what they value, what they hope for, and how they live their lives?

One student’s work especially stood out. Susan was a senior in college at the time, and in writing her ecological autobiography, she identified four shifts in her relationship with the natural world. As a young child, she wrote, she viewed the natural world as a playground—a place to roam, to run freely, and to explore. She described in great detail the places where she played—sometimes alone, often with her cousins. During her middle childhood years, the natural world became a classroom where her observations, explorations, and experiments became more focused and intentional. “I found through my experiences with nature many different teachers . . .” she wrote, “few of them human and some of them not living at all.”

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*Dr. Ruth A. Wilson works as an educational consultant and curriculum writer, focusing on connections between humans and the rest of the natural world. She has worked as a classroom teacher in both regular and special education settings and as a teacher educator for over ten years at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. Her books include *Nature and Young Children*, *Fostering a Sense of Wonder during the Early Childhood Years*, and *Special Educational Needs in the Early Years*, and her articles have appeared in numerous publications, including *Environmental Education Research Journal*. Dr. Wilson lives and works in Cochiti Lake, New Mexico. She can be contacted at [wilson.rutha@gmail.com](mailto:wilson.rutha@gmail.com).*

As Susan got older and learned more about the natural world, she began to develop feelings towards nature that went beyond simple enjoyment and fascination. She realized that she also had a responsibility for taking care of it. She wrote, “My relationship with nature has grown and deepened in much the same way that a strong lasting friendship between two people can evolve.”

Susan’s ecological autobiography reflected the range, thinking, and expressive skills of a thoughtful young adult, but younger students can also develop surprising insights about their relationship with nature by focusing on a single place, a single experience. To use ecological autobiography with students of any age, keep in mind that the desired end product doesn’t have to reflect more than a single memorable experience with nature. In other words, the written narrative doesn’t have to cover an entire lifespan—it can focus on just one event in the student’s life. In this case, we’d refer to the writing as an “autobiographical essay” rather than an “autobiography.”

The teacher who used the ecological autobiography idea with her fifth-grade students started by asking them to think about an experience they had with nature that they could recall in great detail. She gave them examples of nature-related experiences that they might have had: camping, hiking, gardening, caring for a pet, observing other types of animals, volunteering in a clean-up campaign, etc. She suggested that they could also think about an experience they had in a special place (such as a cabin by a lake, a tree house or tent in the backyard, or a secret hiding place not far from home). She then had them write about the experience using the following questions as guides:

- Where were you?
- What did you see?
- What could you hear?
- Were you alone or with others?
- What did you do?
- What did you like or not like?
- Did you learn anything new?

- How did you feel?
- What made this experience special?

The fifth-graders weren’t expected to answer all the questions, but were encouraged to address at least the last two. The teacher’s intent—in addition to encouraging descriptive writing—was to get the students thinking about nature and what it means to them. The teacher’s enthusiasm as she shared the students’ responses to this exercise was obvious.

Jake, one of the boys in her class, wrote about spending time in the tree house in his backyard.

There are just four steps up to my tree house. But it seems like a place far away. I see leaves and branches up close. I hear birds and wind. Most of the time I just sit and look around. I feel peaceful and happy.

After this writing exercise, the teacher encouraged the students to read their essays and to share some things they learned. Jake made the following comment:

I never really thought about it before. Nature was just there—not something I really thought about or even cared about. I like the way I feel when I’m close to nature. I know I’ll start thinking about it more.

For high school students, writing exercises focusing on ecological identity can not only engage students in philosophical thinking about their place in the world, but also motivate them to make connections with other academic subjects. When asked to write about an experience that changed how he thought about nature, one high school student, Jeremy, described what happened when he whacked a tree with a stick.

I was just walking through the woods with a stick in my hand. I started hitting some of the trees. I don’t know why I was doing this—maybe I just liked the sound and feel of it. Most of the trees were big





and solid. I wasn't really paying that much attention to them. I just hit them with the stick when I walked by. Nothing really happened. Maybe some bark chipped off, but nothing else. But there was one tree that was kind of skinny. I whacked it pretty hard and actually broke it. Something—I think it was water—started to come out. I had never seen anything like this before. It was like the tree was bleeding. I knew I hurt it. Now, I'm a lot more careful around living things. I guess I woke up to how many things in nature are alive, just like I am. I don't hit trees anymore.

After writing about this experience, Jeremy was motivated to do a little research about what actually came out of the tree when he hit it. He read about transpiration—how water moves up through the roots, trunk, and branches of a tree and eventually evaporates through the leaves. Jeremy later did an entire science project around this topic.

Another high school student, Leslie, wrote about pulling a tire out of a river and explained how this experience got her thinking about working as a conservationist.

My friend Josie and I were walking along the Rio Grande one day when we saw an old tire in the river. The tire was halfway stuck in the mud, and other things like sticks and leaves were piling up behind it. We decided to pull the tire out of the river so the water could flow more freely. The bank was a little steep, so I told Josie to hold my hand as I climbed down. I grabbed the tire but couldn't pull it out. There was water in it and some other stuff like leaves and weeds. Josie came down to help me. We both pulled

on the tire, but the bank was slippery and we fell down. We got pretty muddy, but we didn't really care. We finally got the tire out of the mud and water, but couldn't pull it up the bank. One guy who was watching us said he'd help. It wasn't easy but the three of us pulled that tire all the way up the slippery bank. I'm not sure who that guy was, but he said he had a truck and could haul the tire away. I'm not sure why but pulling that tire out of the river made me feel good. I liked knowing that we helped to clean up the river. Ever since then, I've been thinking about what I want to do when I grow up. I think I'd like to work for the environment.



Photograph by Gary Brown.

Leslie's teacher encouraged her to learn more about the field of conservation, and she eventually went on to select an environmental studies program in college.

To make the link with science objectives more explicit when teaching the ecological autobiography, the teacher can pose questions relating to scientific inquiry, the diversity and behavior of organisms, the concept of interdependence, the use of natural resources, and concerns relating to environmental quality. These questions can be presented within the context of personal experiences with nature. Examples:

What do trees mean to you? How are they important to your life? (natural resources)

Have you ever had an experience that made you keenly aware of how much you depend on nature for comfort, guidance, or even survival? Where were you and what was happening around you during this experience? What were you thinking and how were you feeling? How did nature help you? (natural resources)

The students of today will soon become the adults and decision-makers of tomorrow. Let's hope they'll care about and make wise decisions about the natural world. To do so, they'll need to be intensely conscious of this world and their relationship with it.

Are there living things in the natural world that you dislike or that make you feel uncomfortable or afraid? What are these things? Do you feel these things pose special dangers or expose you to forces you can't control? What do you do when you're close to these things? (diversity and behavior of organisms)

Are there living things in the natural world that you really like or find especially fascinating? What are these things? How do they make you feel? Where do you find these things? What do you do when you're near these things? (diversity and behavior of organisms)

Have you ever helped with a project to clean up the environment? What did you do? How did you feel? How do you think we can get more people involved in cleaning up the environment—or not polluting it, in the first place? (environmental quality)

To encourage links to social studies topics in the ecological autobiography, the teacher can ask students to observe how interactions between people and the environment change over time, focusing on their personal experiences. The teacher might also ask students to compare their personal views about the environment to how people from other cultures have viewed the environment. Examples:

Think of a natural area within fifty miles from where you live (such as a river, a woods, an open field, or a lake). Explain what you know about this area and describe, if possible, an experience you've had in this area. Describe how this area has changed over time and why, or think about how this area might change in the future. Describe your feelings about any possible changes. (change over time)

How do various elements of the environment—forests, rivers, farmland, mountains—influence the development of the place where you live and the people who live there? (interactions between people and the environment)

In what ways do you feel personally connected to the natural environment? How do you use it, enjoy it, protect it, etc.? What do you like the most about it? What are some of your favorite places, sights, smells, sounds, etc.? (interactions between people and the environment)

Many Native Americans believed that the land does not belong to us but that we belong to the land. How does this belief compare with how you view the land? (culture)

Mountains and forests were viewed as obstacles to many settlers during the westward expansion, yet poets and philosophers sometimes refer to mountains and forests as sacred places. How do you view these features of the natural environment? (culture)

In addition to fostering writing skills and other academic goals, the greatest benefit of using the ecological autobiography as a writing exercise may be in the way it calls attention to and strengthens the relationship between a student and the natural world. The students of today will soon become the adults and decision-makers of tomorrow. Let's hope they'll care about and make wise decisions about the natural world. To do so, they'll need to be intensely conscious of this world and their relationship with it. The ecological autobiography can be an effective tool in fostering such consciousness. 🌱



