

Wilderness Writing with Wild Youth

JAN D. WELLIK

At a certain point you say to the woods, to the sea, to the mountains,
Now I am ready.
Now I will stop and be wholly attentive. You empty yourself and wait,
listening.

— Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*

IN MY WORK WITH STUDENTS from kindergarten through high school, I have found that getting young people engaged with nature writing accomplishes multiple goals. While exploring the outdoors, students take a deep step inside themselves and are often able to see the world—and their place in it—from a new perspective. This in turn nurtures their literary and creative imaginations. For many of the kids I work with, the sense of empowerment they develop through wilderness writing is a welcome change. Just as ecosystems can benefit from healthy intervention, many of my students need a little extra help learning how to engage fully with their world in a positive way.

In 2004 I founded Eco Expressions, an interactive nature writing program based in San Diego, California that offers young people a chance to explore the wonders of the natural world, develop their creative writing abilities, and improve their social skills. We work mostly with at-risk youth in urban settings in Southern



One ticket sacrificed Kermit, and five angst-ridden dogs auctioned off one poison, but the schizophrenic Macintosh bought

Jan D. Wellik is Executive Director of Eco Expressions, a nature writing program for youth founded in 2004 in San Diego, California and offered throughout the U.S. She has an M.A. in English from Middlebury College's Bread Loaf School of English, and is the author of the Nature Writing Field Guide for Teachers, which is available for order online at: www.EcoExpressions.org.



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California, but have also offered programs in rural Idaho and northern New York. The Eco Expressions nature-writing curriculum is adaptable to youth across the spectrum of experience. It is structured around a simple premise: that all students have a voice and a desire to connect with the world around them.

Every nature-writing adventure is special—it is an amazing feeling to watch young people open up and unfold before your eyes. “Wow, I actually feel like a kid again!” exclaimed one eighth-grade boy as he dug his hands in the dirt while we were on a rock hunt. He had been dismissed from several other afterschool programs for bad behavior, so he was sent to the Eco Expressions afterschool program in Hailey, Idaho. A few weeks later when I asked the middle school students to stop throwing snowballs at each other on our hike, he led the group in cradling the snowballs like babies in their arms instead. As children are encouraged to slow down, study the world around them, and then note their discoveries in writing, a respect for others and self-awareness

develops—and every time I am awestruck.

A typical wilderness writing outing lasts about two and a half hours and takes place in a natural setting within twenty minutes of the students’ schools and homes. We often use city, county, state, and federal parks and local urban canyons and coastal areas. The outings are usually free for youth thanks to grants and community-sponsored workshops. Many of the activities we have developed are collected in the *Nature Writing Field Guide for Teachers* and are used by teachers, nature guides, youth leaders and therapists around the U.S. The guide correlates with multiple State Education Standards in English and Science.

A Day on the Trail

March 29

Torrey Pines State Reserve, La Jolla, California

Wilderness Writing Workshop with eighth-grade girls participating in BE WISE (Better Education for Women in Science and Engineering), a program of the San Diego Science Alliance (SDSA).

The ten girls in this group, all of whom are interested in science, are from several different middle schools around San Diego County. They have signed up for this adventure to explore a natural area that many of them live near but do not get the opportunity to venture into very often.

Before we begin our hike, I offer them some writing tips: first, I say, try to look at the world from many perspectives, just as geologists study rocks and astronomers study the sky. There are wonders in all directions. Second, I tell them to write without editing themselves. What you write today, I assure them, is not being graded or judged. There are no wrong answers here.

Lastly, I tell them that they can continue using these same writing techniques on their own by keeping a nature notebook as they take walks around their neighborhood, or backyard. Try observing the same tree once a month, I say, and write how it changes over time. Tell the story of your experiences. This is a powerful way to report history in the making, and share your discoveries with others.

Torrey Pines State Reserve is located within the city limits of San Diego yet offers two thousand acres of wild land that remain in its original state, giving a glimpse of the California seen by the early settlers, Spanish explorers, and the Native Americans who once lived there. This is only one of two places left in the world where the endangered Torrey Pine grows naturally. It is truly an oasis in a metropolitan region.

We hike the Guy Fleming Trail, a little less than one mile, with amazing ocean vistas and springtime wildflower viewing. Cecily Goode, a Torrey Pines naturalist docent accompanies us as the expert on native plants and flowers and encourages the girls to use the small magnifying glasses to look closely at the interiors of the flowers. I encourage the students to understand that they are witnessing history in action. Through writing they are documenting history and preserving their observations for future generations. Erosion is a key concept we discuss as we explore the seaside cliffs that are prone to landslides. Watch, I tell them, and you will see that this land is evolving before our eyes...

Getting Started

We begin by helping the students get grounded in this space, asking them to take in the 360-degree view and see the environment as a whole. Throughout the two-hour hike, I guide the girls in a number of different writing prompts. We stop along the way and sit on the trail or a bench for the writing exercises. We do one exercise at a time, stopping about every fifteen minutes for the next prompt. After each prompt, each student shares what she wrote, practicing speaking to a group and validating that her view is important here.



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1. Zoom Out: Imagine you are the panorama zoom-out on a camera and try taking in the wide lens view here.. Using all of your senses, observe the landscape as a whole and write about your observations. I ask the students to practice shutting out the rest of the world – loud voices, stomachs growling. This shifting between being up close and moving away helps to develop a sense of objectiveness as a tool to deal with emotions that threaten to control our actions.

HELEN

Yellow leaves, midst all the green,
 Piece of blue ocean peeking through the bushes,
 Prickly-looking pine needles
 One little cacti, separated from the rest of its bunch,
 Two bright red flowers, daring to be different,
 Yellow petals, feel like silk.
 When you close your eyes, you are touching air.
 They are fragile and breakable.

2. Zoom In: John Muir, a famous wilderness writer and outdoorsmen would climb up glaciers and down into caves to study the natural world. He didn't just walk straight ahead, he moved to where he could study the object. Choose one element of the natural world, I tell the students, and get close to it. Try focusing on one of your senses to write a detailed description.

LISA

Scruffy bushes, similar to light green steel wool bear long-stemmed flowers. The flowers have bright yellow petals crammed around a small center. The center is composed of small orange cones surrounding tiny green petals. The flowers, not yet in bloom, take the form of a pumpkin-like bud.

3. Patterns: Torrey Pine needles grow in clusters of five. Study the natural world in terms of patterns and clusters. Find repetitions of two, three, and four.

RACHEL

The sea has been duplicated in yellow and white
 So high that if you get any higher, you could walk on the sky.
 Triangle of sea, stretching to oblivion

4. Adaptation: Imagine why this area is only one of two places in the world where the Torrey Pine tree grows naturally. Write about the climate, geology, and location that foster its growth here.

CAITLIN

First, there is the sky, which blends into a calm blue ocean, which in turns becomes the land. Looking up, I am awed to see a truly magnificent pine tree with branches so long you feel small and insignificant in comparison. Purple nightshade catches my eye until I see the incredible Torrey Pines. The trees never cease to amaze me, grown bent over from wind and you are always expecting them to fall but they never do. This place is beautiful.

5. Natural Forces: Pick one of the natural forces that shape this land: rain, fog, salt, wind, sun and write about your observations.

CATHERINE

The trees bend in the blowing wind. The trees try to stand tall and true, but their cause is lost to this mighty force. The trees are carved at odd angles because of the power of the wind.

**What We Take With Us**

At the conclusion of the hike, I ask the students to write a group poem. I want to reinforce the themes we've talked about this day: that there are many different ways of observing the world and the importance of developing one's own perspective. I ask them to choose some of their favorite lines, from the day's writing and combine them into a poem about the experience of visiting this natural place.

Audrey, Aria and Taylor (8th grade)

There is a light fog on the ocean,
a ray of sunshine hits a white sailboat.

I see the ocean gently fading into the horizon.
As it approaches the shore,
it meets steep cliffs covered with pine trees and shrubs.
The ocean is royal blue
and most of the plant life is jade or dark green.

I look up to the sky. It's very dark,
but toward the ocean, the sky is blue.
Suddenly
the sun pops out of the dark clouds.
It shines on a rock making it bright. I can see the beauty
of the land further out.

These girls will remember this day, the feeling of the ocean air, and the wide expanse of water. My hope is that they also remember the feeling of empowerment that comes from exploring new territory and declaring their own perspectives, while learning to respect other points of view as well. 