Finding Your Place

Connecting to the land brings belonging in Appalachia

By: Darcy Higgins

The fifth-grade boy scrapes the leaves off the forest floor, and pushes the damp seed, shaped like a tiny macaroon, into the dirt. Then his classmates kick leaves back over the seed. It will be five years before the ginseng might send up its first fanning, ankle-high leaves. I wonder if the kids will come back to their elementary school woods to see them, if they will remember to look.

If word gets out that there's ginseng behind the school, someone might come looking. Last year, prices for ginseng root ran around $500 a pound. Some of my students are excited to share their stories about hunting ginseng with their grandpas, and the secret spots they visit on cool, north-facing hills. Sometimes adults hesitate to share these experiences, because gathering medicinal plants to sell can be associated with hard times, and protective laws are getting stricter. But the ten-year-olds haven't learned that yet.

As a place-based educator with a community non-profit, it's my job to connect the kids to the woods. They are getting to know them pretty well. Their science class has documented over 400 plants behind the school as part of a BioBlitz, a project to survey every living thing in the area. They found, to their competitive outrage, that they had fewer species in their schoolyard than the school the next town over. The understory bristles with invasive, thorny multiflora rose bushes and brittle japanese honeysuckle. The kids, some for fun and some in genuine alarm, get stuck in the brambles and call for help.

On the way back to class, the students point out other things to me: sycamore trees that might harbor elusive, damp-loving morel mushrooms underneath their spreading branches, and bark scraped off trunks by buck antlers. Their knowledge is uneven but rich—and largely ignored at school.

Land—and its loss—shapes us

Connection to the land forms part of our identities. Just as our parents orient us to the world and claim us theirs when we are young, so do the places we live. This creek, where I catch crawdads with my cousin, is my creek. The morel mushrooms I eat connect me to the holler I find them in. In urban areas, we connect to the rhythms of our city block, watch the squirrels, or bond with our dogs. One student doesn't explicitly talk to me about being the only visibly mixed race kid in his grade, but talks to me about places instead: "I'm a little country and a little ghetto. I can make it either place."

So why do so many of us not identify with our local landscape? In the history of injustice, separation from the land was a deliberate tool. The Shawnee, the first people in our part of Ohio, were brutally forced from their lands. They mostly ended up in distant Oklahoma. This is the most impactful example, but it has happened over and over again. The British settlers who stole from the Shawnee had slowly lost their communal grazing lands. The powerful in Britain had fenced the commons off and declared it private, so the poor could not feed themselves in the places they had for ages. African-Americans freed from slavery were briefly promised 40 acres to make a life on. Post-Civil-War politics swiftly broke that promise. Their descendents were forced into sharecropping and redlining, systems that prevented gathering wealth from generation to generation.

Around here, the coal companies of Appalachia literally sold the land out from underneath of us. They took the profits back to the big cities, and left the people here without a functioning economy.

Today, my rural students are asked to make a trade. If they are successful in school, they can get a good job in the city. All they have to give up is home. Katie Hendrickson at Ohio University asked “disruptive” high school students in Appalachia why they resisted school. Their replies showed they preferred to commit to their communities, rather than pursue school’s version of success that might make them leave. School carries on the legacy of dismissing our relationships with place.

When students explore the local woods with me, it disrupts the narrative of school versus home. It shows students that we do not have to accept that everything valuable in Appalachia, be it natural resources or smart people, leaves. For my students who already have strong knowledge of our land, it is empowering to have that relationship celebrated, perhaps for the first time. For students who are getting to know the natural world for the first time, it begins to restore the local relationship that history has undermined.

When the familiar goes unexplained

Sunday Creek, which runs behind Trimble Elementary and Middle School, is bright orange. Every now and then, I get a drawing from a young student who hasn’t been trained yet to make all water blue and all plants green, who still draws what they see: a beautiful orange ribbon running across the page. This acid mine drainage is the legacy of coal mining, which was completely environmentally unregulated until 1977. The low pH water is unliveable for most fish and insects, and causes a chemical reaction that creates the vibrant iron sediment. The old-timers call them “sulphur cricks” and say it’s good for poison ivy rashes.

“We played in that water all the time, and just thought the color was clay,” my co-worker says about her childhood.

The acid mine drainage in the waterways is one of the most visible and impactful environmental conditions in the area. It fits into 7th grade science standards about water quality and pH, so my

organization leads school lessons and field trips to our treatment systems. Otherwise, some of these students will never have the fluorescent creeks explained to them. This, to me, is an injustice on top of injustice. Children have the right to know about the world around them.

The river is stolen from them twice, once by pollution, again by silence.

Most of us understand that social belonging and relationships are essential to our student's well-being. We try to help our students heal from fragmented families, breakdowns of relational support, dysfunctional institutions that aren't there when they need to be.

It is much less often that we recognize that relationship with the land is also an essential part of well-being. Research from Durham University confirms that place attachment provides security, identity and belonging. Living alongside a sick creek, unacknowledged, is a kind of relationship dysfunction. The healing starts with the simple step of re-introducing ourselves.

Getting reacquainted

The thing is, though some students know their woods like a family member, for others it's more like a distant great aunt. Visiting is awkward because we don't know each other that well. I use the BioBlitz as a tool for getting reacquainted.

The goal of a BioBlitz is simple: identify as many organisms as you can, in a given location, in a certain amount of time. We use the online platform iNaturalist, so we can compare students' results around their school to data from across the world — a comparative study perfect for practicing good scientific design. With help from a few community naturalists, we set the students loose in the woods behind the school.

Over a few days, Logan Middle School students found invasives, invasives, invasives. But they also found Christmas ferns dappling the ground, a red-backed salamander under a rock, ash trees decimated by borers. They asked about what the salamander ate, whether a wounded tree was dead or alive, whether development was the reason some woods were less diverse than others.

This was the get-to-know-you needed to start any relationship—speed dating, if you will, so the students could get a feel for what nature here actually looks and feels like. In the story of southeast Ohio, the BioBlitz provides the setting. With time, we add characters, like the charismatic ginseng plant, and challenges to overcome, like the acid mine drainage. The story of their home comes alive for students as they meet each part.

Reconnection is resistance

People across the country are reconnecting to the land as a form of justice. Our well-being, Audre Lorde reminds us, is a form of resistance.

Refugees have started community gardens where they can tend crops from home, using the skills they were taught growing up. The organization Afro Outdoor, in the wake of police murders, organized "healing hikes" across the country, quoting the spiritual: "Gonna lay my burden down by the riverside." And the Eastern Band of Shawnee are reclaiming their lands: they purchased 50 acres of land in western Ohio in 2016, and are lobbying the BIA to recognize the parcel as Indian country.

Invite your students' personal experiences of place, like the ginseng stories, validating the importance of their voices. And share with them the stories that they may not know, like those of acid mine drainage, that have shaped their community. The histories that separated us from land can be painful, but getting to know the land brings my students joy. Personal experiences of place can help students understand their identities and where they fit in a complex relational web.

Getting to know the local landscape

- **Just go outside.** You don't need a pristine green space. Even a simple schoolyard is full of life, and children are excellent at finding it. A square foot of grass tells you what biodiversity persists when forest becomes lawns; a paved playground tells you about runoff. This direct experience can help make sense of more challenging topics, like human damage to the environment or environmental justice.
- **Use iNaturalist to conduct a BioBlitz.** A BioBlitz just means identifying as many living things as possible in a certain time and place. iNaturalist's teacher guide will get you started. You can invite volunteers to help your students identify things, but their app can also help recognize species automatically.
- **Center student voices**. Students may have knowledge about their neighborhoods and local environment that isn't usually treated as "school" worthy knowledge. Their personal stories will help them engage and show they will be respected. For example, before teaching about historic coal pollution, I have my students share their stories and experiences of growing up in coal mining communities.
- **Look for connections between people and nature.** Every area has its defining ecological stories, and they are good places to start. When students see examples of how other people used and cared for local plants, waterways, and animals, it helps them develop their own relationships to where they live.
- **Start local to understand the global.** Don't start with an overwhelming problem, like the giant plastic island in the Pacific. Start with a local problem, like the absence of trash and recycling pick-up in your town.
- The **Teton Science School** and **Getting Smart** have guides to place-based education to dive deeper.

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