

The Manifesto of an Environmental Educator

What is an Environmental Educator?

“There are some who can live without wild things and some who cannot” – Aldo Leopold

An Environmental Educator is an ambassador of nature and learning. They are at home in the untamed wilds and utilize its chaotic beauty as the fundamentals for their rather unconventional syllabus. We are dedicated to the preservation and education of a world that few of us have the opportunity to know and even less of us have the time to understand. We live in a world dictated by deadlines and overrun with technology, where most of us don't have the time to stop and admire, let alone smell the roses. It is our job to create those moments; to not only let you smell those flowers, but to introduce you to their magnificent journey through a life of wonder, adversity, and triumph.

Spiders, and Fungus, and Ants; Oh My!

*“Like delicate lace,
So the threads intertwine,
Oh, gossamer web
Of wond'rous design!
Such beauty and grace
Wild nature produces...
Ughh, look at that spider
Suck out that bug's juices!” – Bill Watterson, Calvin and Hobbes Comic Strip*

Environmental education takes people on a journey through the noticeable and not so apparent aspects of the natural world. The main goal is to educate people about the world's natural inhabitants; from those merely seen on TV to the ones that they see every day in their own backyard. And introduce them to the often overlooked, and sometimes unappreciated, forms of life cohabitating around us. Environmental education is a way of fostering understanding and appreciation (Ok, sometimes just understanding) for the unexplained and often prejudiced parts of the natural world that people tend to shun. You know the ones; they go bump in the night, squeak in the darkness, and leave a slimy trail of... oh gross, left behind.

A Classroom with Four Walls vs. One with a Thousand Trees

“Must we always teach our children with books? Let them look at the mountains and the stars up above. Let them look at the beauty of the waters and the trees and the flowers on earth. They will then begin to think, and to think is the beginning of real education.” – David Polis

No matter where you teach the core elements stay the same; you are there as a guide to help facilitate the transference of information from the root source to the learner in a way that is meaningful, engaging, enjoyable, and memorable. A good teacher knows when to teach, knows when to learn, and knows when to inspire those around them to find their own voice and thus become a teacher themselves. The surroundings in which we learn do not dictate the quality of the education in which we receive; they merely provide the stage in which we perform our act. It just so happens that I like a stage with a few more props.

Mommy, Why is My Teacher Chanting and Burning Incense?

“Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.” – John Dewey

While we do occasionally climb trees, dig in the dirt, and get “school girl” excited over a rare mushroom, Environmental Educators are dedicated teaching professionals whose goal is to inspire those around them through the teachings of conservational awareness, ethical environmental practices, and the desire for lifelong learning.

The Selection Criteria

Inspiration can reveal itself in numerous ways; the culmination of a good book, the guiding words of a mentor, or the sunset that seemed to last forever. It’s hard to pin down what motivates an Environmental Educator, but I will try to limit these resources to the following criteria:

- 1) **Relevant Content** – Does this resource provide valuable information that directly pertains to education, pedagogy or the environment?
- 2) **User Friendly** – Can this resource be used by anyone or will it require an advanced degree to understand the title alone?
- 3) **Is it FUN-damental** – Is this learning resource entertaining and engaging? Will it keep my attention and motivate me to want to learn more?
- 4) **Value** – Does this reference cost a lot to obtain or is the value of experiencing this resource worth more than money can buy?
- 5) **Teach-ability** – Does this resource provide essential material that can be easily understood and reproduced in a teaching/learning format?

The History of Outdoor Education

A Sand County Almanac by Aldo Leopold

Aldo Leopold is considered to be one of the founding fathers of naturalism. His book reflects the basics of ethical land practices, nature in art, fundamental survival, environmental observation and data collection, and early environmental educational theories. It is short in length and large in content. This book will change the way you look at the land around you and the purpose for which it exists. Best read by a campfire or under a shady tree next to a lazy river.

No Child Left Inside by Richard Louv

No Child Left Inside depicts the current generation's disconnection to the outside world. It outlines how limited access to the outdoors is depriving our children of essential social, psychological, and physical health benefits shared by previous generations. It opens your eyes to the level of technological dependency and electronic servitude that we have all become accustomed to.

The Building Blocks and ABC's

Internship at Connecticut's Beardsley Zoo – Bridgeport, Connecticut

The fundamentals of my environmental instruction came from an internship in the Education Department at Connecticut's Beardsley Zoo. I was taken under the knowledgeable wing of a wonderful mentor who patiently taught me everything he knew about the teachings of the natural world and how to translate them into content that was relatable to any audience. It was in this institution that my educational career began. I highly recommend pursuing a volunteer opportunity with an organization of its kind to nurture the creation of your own environmental path.

David Attenborough: The Life Series - <http://www.davidattenborough.co.uk/>

The reason I put The Life Series as my David Attenborough resource is that it seems to be the most complete collection of his environmental work. David Attenborough has a unique way of adding a regal component to any environmental subject matter. Regardless if it is the dung beetle diligently on its journey to roll a large ball of fecal matter into its home in the ground in order to feed its young, or if it is the majestic bird of paradise anal retentively cleaning his courtship grounds in order to possibly impress his overly choosy perspective mate, Attenborough presents it with the importance of a royal announcement capturing the attention of any audience member in the room. It will teach you as much about content knowledge as it does about presentation styles.

The Creepy, Crawly, Scaly, and Slimy

National Wildlife Federation Field Guide to Insects and Spiders of North America by Arthur V. Evans

As far as field guides go this one takes the taco. This is not your dad's field guide of old. The pictures in this book are vibrant and updated; taken with a camera actually made during this century. Plus it includes just enough information to get you going. If you have the desire to take an in depth look at a particular species you can feel free to do so with a giant encyclopedia when you get home, but for a portable resource that fills you with key teaching points there is none better than this guide.

Reptiles - Magazine

I know what you are thinking, "A magazine devoted to nothing but reptiles! And to think that I was wasting my Saturday nights socializing." Okay, maybe not that far. This magazine was originally intended for the blossoming captive reptile hobby industry that started to really make its mark in the mid 1990's. It was a guide to share husbandry techniques, breeding procedures, and wild lineage information with people interested in keeping specific scaly species. However, this magazine turned into a conduit for professional articles, modern conservation efforts, and windows into species of animals that haven't even made it into scientific classification. For all that is cold blooded there is no better.

National/International Travel

The best experience is firsthand experience. There are hundreds of books covering thousands of species that are at your disposal in the local library (which is the pre-mid 90's version of the internet), but no matter how much time you spend looking at a picture of a giant sequoia tree you will never get a chance to know what its bark feels like or how the temperate rainforest surrounding it smells after the first mornings rainstorm. Tear yourself away from the computer screen, go out into the woods, find a quiet spot, and just sit. It's amazing how much life moves around you when you are finally sitting still.

Fin, Fur, and Feathers

Of Kinkajous, Capybaras, Horned Beetles, Seladangs: And the Oddest and Most Wonderful Mammals, Insects, Birds, and Plants of Our World by Jeanne K. Hanson

Now even though this book covers insects and plants, much of the focus is on mammals and birds, and not just any mammals and birds; bizarre mammals and birds! I started out as reptile enthusiast. If it was scaly, slimy, or cold blooded I was your guy. I had very little interest in other types of animals, especially mammals and birds, until I read this book. Of Kinkajous et al. introduced me to a world of birds and mammals that I had never seen before. They were weird, they were different, and they were spectacular. This book is for anyone looking to gain some valuable (and hilarious) knowledge about our furred and feathered friends.

American Museum of Natural History: Ocean Introduction by Fabien Cousteau

There are plenty of books covering the ocean and its life forms. Many will describe the fish in taxonomic classifications, group the sponges by family, and possibly even break down the algae by shades of green...Zzzzzz. What was that, oh I'm sorry, I just fell asleep for a second. The last thing you want to try to do when learning the A to Z's of environmental education is get overly bombarded with tons of scientific information that will ultimately make you pull your hair out in frustration. Ocean is an easy to read, visually dynamic journey through the diverse world of marine life broken down by habitat. It provides background history and modern exploration initiatives to the dominating element of our planet, water. A must read for those interested in incorporating aquatic studies into multiple subjects.

People are Animals Too

Dances with Wolves

Just to be clear, I am absolutely not trying to base any historical understanding of our Native American land use on an early 90's film directed and starring Kevin Costner. That being said, I believe Dances with Wolves paints an accurate picture of the understanding (or lack thereof) that early Europeans had in regards to the way that Native Americans lived along side of nature. This film shows the division between two distinct cultures; one that lives off of the land, and one that lives with the land. It is a nice way to integrate human impact and ethical land use into your teachings.

Alone in the Wilderness: The Story of Dick Proenneke

This VHS (that's right, I said VHS. But don't worry it's available on DVD too) was originally filmed nearly 50 years ago by one man alone in the wilds of Alaska with nothing but a tripod and some gumption. This is the story of Dick Proenneke who at 50 years old decided to leave civilization behind and head out into the wilderness to live the life he had always dreamed of. This is the ultimate story of living with nature. From making a refrigerator out of moss to building a log cabin with hand tools, this story shows what the human spirit is capable of when it is motivated by a true love for the outdoors.

The Way of the Woods

Man vs. Wild – Bear Grylls

Well I think the best way to start this one out is by just saying WOW! The amount of survival content covered in these shows (in just a short period of time) is staggering. Bear Grylls takes you on journeys to native and exotic countries and habitats that range from one extreme to the next. The basic survival skills covered in these episodes will give you a starting point when teaching about life in the wild or animal adaptations.

Wicked Plants: The Weed that Killed Lincoln's Mother and Other Botanical Atrocities –
by Amy Stewart

Having a working familiarity with the flora in your own backyard is a huge benefit when teaching students about the outdoors. However adding in a bizarre, gross, or spine tingling fact related to that plant of discussion is something that they will remember for a lifetime. *Wicked Plants* covers the “non-field guide” related facts about the wondrous life forms that just happen to be growing in our own backyard gardens. It covers what we like to call the “wow factor” teaching points.

Pedagogy

Saturday Night Live

When I was young the only thing that I wanted to be when I grew up was a cast member on Saturday Night Live. I loved the comedy, the impromptu sketches, and the ability that the performers had in delivering their lines in such a way that it grabbed your attention and made you listen. This method of utilizing entertainment as a method of engagement has stayed with me throughout my years and now plays a large role in the style of which I teach.

Reptile Education Specialist – Slither & Swim Reptile Emporium

That was my fancy title for guy at the birthday party with the reptiles. In my early 20's I had the opportunity to manage a reptile store in southern Connecticut which ran an off-site interpretive education program out of its central location. I presented at birthday parties, corporate events, nursing homes, community centers and pretty much anywhere else that would hire me. Now I understand that this doesn't seem like a usable resource, but you have to look under the surface. This was an opportunity for me to acclimate myself, to myself. Besides announcing in front of the mirror or singing out of key in the shower, I had never had the opportunity to present anything in front of anybody. This job gave me the chance to learn about what kind of presenter I was; how I spoke, how I moved, what mannerisms I did, and what type of techniques I could use to grab the attention of the audience. It was an opportunity to get out there and teach in any way possible. Take the chance.

The Ability to Grab the Audience (Metaphorically Speaking)

Robin Williams

This reference I am leaving wide open. Robin Williams was a childhood idol of mine because of his infectious style of physical comedy. He had the ability to “grab” the audience and force them to engage with him. No matter what you did you couldn’t look away for a second just on the off chance that you would miss an amazing moment in Robin’s repertoire. His style of movement in storytelling plays a large part in my teaching. It allows me to translate difficult subjects and engage the students no matter what the topic.

The Crocodile Hunter – Steve Irwin

This is a controversial topic for me. On one hand, the level of infectious enthusiasm that Steve Irwin portrayed in his educational television show got more people interested in conservation education than anyone within my generation (take that Jack Hanna). On the other hand, the way in which he approached, handled, and conducted himself around live animals had less to do with the animals overall welfare and more to do with pizzazz for the cameras. That being said, he was a wonderful showman. Steve Irwin knew how to play to an audience. The majority of people that he catered to were less interested in the conservation education message of his teachings, and more interested in his daredevil antics. However, because of his style of entertainment, the ones that came solely for the thrills left with an education, and they didn’t even know it.

A Little Tech Goes a Long Way

PowerPoint & Prezi

I have found both of these technological presentation platforms to be indispensable when the outdoor education makes its way indoors. PowerPoint offers a linear platform where images, text, movies, sound bites, animation, and so on can be integrated to create seamless storylines. Prezi affords the creator the same freedoms as PowerPoint but in a three dimensional context. You can zoom in, zoom out, and arrange content in a borderless frame that seems to go on forever. Put together well, both of these programs will become an indispensable asset in your education arsenal.

Multiple Device Assimilation

Try not to pigeonhole yourself by learning just one specific type of technology. Even though our goal is to introduce people to a world outside of their Smartphone, it’s never a bad idea to familiarize yourself with the types of technology people today are using. You never know when a mobile internet connection may come in handy in the middle of the woods. If nothing else, it’s a great way to break the ice and show common ground to someone who may be lost without their data plan.

You’re “WOW” Moments

Fabre's Book of Insects – Jean Henri Fabre

This may seem confusing to put an insect book in a section about inspiration, but this book is much more than your standard text on bugs. Jean Henri Fabre speaks of the creatures in his stories as if they were his neighbors and intimate friends. He constructs this wondrous world where elaborate movements, life or death romance, and magical transformations happen as if routine. The passion he holds in his heart for each and every crawling, chirping, flying, and stinging character pours out in the words on his page. It's this type of passion that motivates me to strive for more.

My Parents

This may seem like an odd resource to add into an educational manifesto, but I couldn't in all good conscience leave out what may be the most important resources of all. In our lives we meet people along the way who touch our hearts and inspire us to achieve any goals no matter how big or small. For me this inspiration came in the form of my parents. No matter what was happening in our lives as the years went on, the one thing that remained consistent was their belief and support of my dreams and choices. Find that person(s) in your life who inspires you and stop and thank them, because without them none of this could be possible.