

Nature Journaling

Pre-Visit Activities

The nature journaling lesson at CWES is suitable for both beginning and experienced journal-keepers. However, it is certainly an advantage for students to arrive with some previous exposure to nature journals. The following activities provide you with some ideas to introduce students to nature journaling before the trip to CWES.

Journal-Keepers of the Past

Many explorers, scientists, writers, and naturalists of the past were dedicated journal-keepers, including Charles Darwin, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and Rachel Carson. The observations, discoveries, and insights they recorded in their journals helped them achieve the things we remember them for today. To help students appreciate the long tradition of nature journaling, explore the lives and writings of some of these naturalists with students. The following biographies are written especially for youth, and excerpts from the writings of the naturalists themselves could provoke interesting class discussion or serve as writing prompts for students.

Biographies and Writings of Historical Naturalists

Atkins, Jeannine. *Girls Who Looked Under Rocks*.
Carson, Rachel. *The Edge of the Sea*.
Cornell, Joseph. *John Muir: My Life with Nature*.
Darwin, Charles. *The Voyage of the Beagle*.
Johnson, D.B. *Henry Hikes to Fitchburg and Henry Builds a Cabin*. [Inspired by the life of Henry David Thoreau]
Kudlinski. *Rachel Carson: Pioneer of Ecology*.
Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac*.
Lorbiecki. *Of Things Natural, Wild, and Free: A Story about Aldo Leopold*.
Muir, John. *The Wilderness World of John Muir*.
Reef. *Henry David Thoreau: Neighbor to Nature*.

Mystery Bags. As humans, sight is the sense we rely on most to tell us about the world around us. Focusing on information from our other senses can open up new dimensions of understanding. Place an assortment of natural objects (pine cones, leaves, seed pods, bark, twigs, stones, etc.) into paper bags. Set each bag up at a separate station, and divide students into small groups to travel from station to station. They should bring their journals and pencils. As they move through the stations, have them reach into each bag in turn and feel the object inside. Have them try to identify the object and write their guess in their journal, or for a more extended . For a more extended exercise, they could draw the object as accurately as they can based on how it feels. Emphasize that they must not say aloud what they think it is. After students have been to all stations, reveal the objects. Try to match drawings with objects, or share the descriptive words they came up with for each object. Discuss how much information they were able to discover about the objects using their sense of touch. What are the strengths and limitations of each sense?

Rock Pass. Empathy is the ability to imagine life from another’s perspective and identify with that other being’s feelings. This activity helps students practice that skill in the context of a sensory game. Collect enough rocks for each student to have one, or find a place outdoors where students can hunt for their own rocks. Once students have selected a special rock, gather them into a circle. If your group is larger than ten or twelve, two smaller circles will work better. Ask students to explore their rock very carefully. What is it shaped like? What does it feel like when they roll it between their hands? Rub it on their cheek? How heavy is it? Does it have its own smell? Once they know their rocks well, collect the rocks. Have them close their eyes, and then begin passing rocks around the circle, one at a time. As students find their own rocks, they put them in their laps while continuing to pass the remaining unclaimed rocks around. When passing stops and everyone has a rock, give the eyes-open signal. Give them a chance to swap if they didn’t end up with their own, or play another round. Now ask students to imagine what their rock might have thought of the adventure it just had. Did it enjoy being passed around? Was it worried that it wouldn’t be claimed? How did it feel when you found it again? Give them time to write down their rock’s feelings, and then share their stories. You could also combine this activity with a study of the geologic history of your region. Encourage students to consider the whole of the rock’s life history, and include in their story some of the many other adventures it has had.

Place Descriptions. Choose an passage that describes a particular place and time in evocative detail. You could use the one from Aldo Leopold that follows, select another from a favorite author, or even write one of your own. Have students close their eyes while you read the passage. Then ask them what kinds of images they saw in their minds. Where was it? What season was it? Could they imagine what it would feel like to be there? Then ask students to think of a place and time in their own lives that they remember clearly. Prompt them with questions to help them recall specific details. What was the weather like? What did you see, hear, and smell around you? How did you feel? Have them write a few sentences describing the experience. Instead of naming where and when it takes place, they should give sensory clues that will transport a reader to that place with their words. Afterward, have them read their descriptions to a partner or the class. The audience can give their impressions at the end. What images did they see? Where was it? What time of day and time of year was it? Discuss what kinds of things made the descriptions most effective. Encourage students to include these same kinds of sensory clues in their future journal-writing.

“The geese weave low over the marshes and meadows, greeting each newly melted puddle and pool. Finally, after a few circlings of our marsh, they set wing and glide silently to the pond, black landing-gear lowered and rumps white against the far hill. Once touching water, our newly arrived guests set up a honking and splashing that shakes the last thought of winter out of the brittle cattails. Our geese are home again!”
Aldo Leopold -
“March” in *A Sand County Almanac*

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Post-Visit Activities

Additional nature journaling activities after a visit to CWES are an excellent way to extend and build upon the field trip experience. The following activities provide you with some ideas to extend nature journaling back into the classroom after your visit.

Special Place. Have students choose an outdoor place that they can visit regularly. It need not be a spectacular location; the best places are those that are accessible and easy for students to get to frequently. Each student could choose a different place (or even an individual tree) in the schoolyard to call their own, or they could do this activity after school hours in their own neighborhood. Mark each student's place or tree on a map. Provide them with guidelines about what to do when they visit their place such as: record the time, the date, the weather, observations they make, and changes they note from the last visit. Encourage them to record what they see, hear, touch, and smell there. Provide opportunities to explore their places at different times of the day. Encourage students to use a variety of techniques (writing, sketching, photos, leaf rubbings, etc.) and to look at their place from different perspectives. Give them a hand lens for some up-close investigations. Cut a window in a piece of cardboard and have students use it to frame close-up views and wide-angle vistas. Have them write the story of their place through time: how did it come to be here, and who else (people and other animals) has spent time here? Do this for as long a period of time as you can – weekly or monthly for a whole school year would be ideal. At the end of the experience, have students review the observations they made in their place and then guide the class on a tour of his or her spot through the seasons, telling the story of what is special about that place.

Phenology Record. *Phenology* is the recurring phenomena that indicate the changing seasons – temperature, wind speed, cloud cover, precipitation, time of sunrise and sunset, moon phases, animal sightings, migration and hibernation, plant growth, leaf drop, frosts, first snowfall, etc. Keeping track of the dates when these phenomena occur helps you create a picture of your place through the seasons. If you keep good records from year to year, you can make comparisons and look for patterns. Create a class calendar for students where students can record their phenology observations, and/or have them create their own phenology pages in their journals. Discuss the value of long-term records. If you collect data year after year, students can draw comparisons, represent temperatures, precipitation, or other patterns graphically, and calculate averages over time.

Field Guides This activity works well when students are familiar with journaling and have begun to develop their curiosity about particular aspects of the natural world. Collect an assortment of field guides and reference materials from the library. Make a list of potential topics appropriate to your area that students can make direct observations about in the schoolyard or in their neighborhood. The list at right provides some possibilities. Then have students select a topic they find interesting, and dedicate a section of their journal to creating a field guide to that feature. Show them examples of field guides, and ask them to include observations, sketches, and information found through research in published sources in their own guides. Encourage them to write down questions sparked by their observations, and then use those questions to guide their research. You could then post a list of each student's topic, and encourage students to use their classmates as resources when they have questions that relate to someone's field of expertise. When they have fully investigated their topics, hold a conference where each student shares what s/he has learned with the others.

Topic Ideas

Trees
Wildflowers
Ferns
Moss
Lichens
Rocks
Soil
Clouds
Weather
Birds
Birdsongs
Mammals
Tracks
Frogs
Insects

Symbolic Objects

Collect an assortment of natural objects, photographs of scenes of the natural world, and poetry or excerpts of writing about nature. Place them on desks around the classroom or in a circle on the floor. When students enter the room, ask them to walk around and pick up the objects, look at the images, and read the words. After they have all had a chance to take in what is there, ask them to sit down beside something that speaks to them. Give them five to ten minutes to draw the object they chose in their journal, describe the picture, or copy the passage of writing, and also write a few lines about why they chose it. Then go around the circle and have them share the reasons for their choices with the class. What does the object represent? Is it like them in some way, or does it remind them of something that is important to them? Discuss how each one of us carries a different set of experiences and interests and ideas with us everywhere we go. This activity provides a glimpse of what is below the surface of each member of the class. Explain to students that nature journaling is an opportunity to explore their own interests and ideas in greater depth, and to use their own unique outlook to communicate what they see and how they feel about it.