

Sustainability: What's so sacred about nature?

Introduction

Go West, young man! Nature and the wilderness have long held a special place in American cultural mythology. James Fennimore Cooper wrote about the adventures of Hawkeye in American wilderness. Henry David Thoreau retreated to the woods of Walden. Theodore Roosevelt created the national park system and said of nature, "it was here that the romance of my life began." Go back a little further in history, and the wilderness was described with words like savage and desolate, a place filled with terror. At what point did this change? William Cronon argues that nature is indeed very unnatural, that it is, in fact, is a purely human creation. Humans can't live in the wilderness without assistance, and the myth of America as a clean, virgin land disregards the fact that there were people on the land for generations before Europeans arrived.

This lesson provides students with an opportunity to examine and evaluate the viewpoint of the sacredness of nature and the wilderness, as well as to identify and challenge long-held assumptions. Students will discuss their own views of nature, and then will use excerpts in order to provide text evidence for short research projects that result in a variety of writing activities.

Standards

ELA Common Core Writing Anchor Standard 7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Guiding Questions

Why do Americans tend to view nature as sacred?

How has this view of nature changed over time?

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

Determine the different attitudes about nature and the wilderness and identify their origins.

Evaluate the different attitudes about nature and clarify their own opinions about nature.

Use text evidence to support written arguments about American views of nature.

Resources

Resource 1: “This Land is Your Land” and the Northface connection.

Resource 2: The pre-Henry Hudson view of America: *The Great Gatsby* and Walking off the Big Apple

Resource 3: Review of Eric W. Sanderson’s Mannahatta Project

Lesson Activities

Activity 1: “This Land is Your Land”

Activity 2: Pre-Henry Hudson view of America- a close reading

Activity 3: Where did the people go? The Mannahatta Project.

Activity 4: Putting it all together and writing about it.

Activity 1. “This Land is Your Land”

Have students identify the mythical nature of the wilderness and how music and popular culture help to perpetuate this idea.

Students will read about how the band My Morning Jacket recorded the Woody Guthrie song, “This Land is Your Land,” and learn the band’s views about the importance of nature. Front man Jim James says, “I feel like I’d lose my mind if I didn’t get to spend a lot of time outside. It’s a big thing for me, it’s where I go to move thoughts and clear my mind and get it right.”

Ask students to read the excerpt of the interview with the band, read closely the lyrics to “This Land is Your Land,” and watch the two television commercials that use the song.

- The North Face commercial <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tll-4WONtg0>
- Jeep Super Bowl commercial <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7LbPdzYrrE>

Ask students to compare and contrast the two commercials that use “This Land is Your Land.”

Ask students how the views of Jim James (lead singer of My Morning Jacket) support or challenge the view of the sacredness of nature.

Ask students to consider the following two quotations:

- “We’re at a crucial turning point where hopefully we can keep reminding each other that technology is a tool and we don’t have to drown in it.”--Jim James (MMJ lead singer)
- “We do not ride on the railroad; the railroad rides upon us.”-- Henry David Thoreau

Assessment

Have students integrate the ideas discussed into a short writing piece that answers the question, “how does music and popular culture help to perpetuate the mythical view of the wilderness?”

Activity 2: Pre-Henry Hudson view of America- a close reading

Have the students examine examples of the pre- Henry Hudson view of America. We have provided two examples in Resource 2.

Students will complete a close reading of two excerpts detailing one viewpoint of what America was like prior to the arrival of the Europeans.

Explain that “tone” is the author’s attitude towards the written subject. Explain that tone is created through diction and details. Ask your students to read the two excerpts closely, looking for words and details that create the tone.

Ask students:

1. What is the tone of the two pieces?
2. How do these two pieces match the commonly held view of nature?

Have students integrate the ideas discussed into a short writing piece that answers the question, “how does pre- Henry Hudson view of America differ from today?” and also challenge them to think critically about that view.

Activity 3: Where did the people go? The Mannahatta Project.

Building on Activity 2, have the students consider who lived on the North American continent prior to the arrival of Europeans.

As a class, do a guided discussion of the quotation below from scholar Kristin Jacobson about the Mannahatta project.

Ask your students to break down what the parts mean:

This visual-cultural critique of the Mannahatta project's erasure of indigenous and ethnic populations highlights how the "eco-pornographic fantasy of a 'virgin' wilderness" is simultaneously connected with Euro-American culture and the value of whiteness.

Have your students consider the question Jacobson raises:

How do these highly researched images imaginatively project a dominant racial narrative about American landscape and ecology?

Activity 4: Putting it all together and writing about it

Tell students to organize and evaluate the ideas developed in activities 1-3.

Students will synthesize the multiple sources on the subject and write a paper in which they examine and evaluate the viewpoint of the sacredness of nature and the wilderness.

Resource 1: *Outside* magazine “This Land is Your Land” and the North Face Connection

As a My Morning Jacket fan who also happens to regularly review The North Face gear for a living, I was naturally curious about how this collaboration came about. Here, MMJ frontman Jim James talks about his visit to the Guthrie archives, the importance of questioning authority, and getting outside to slow down your molecules.

I don’t think I ever realized how defiant some of the verses in the song are—essentially encouraging people to trespass and question authority.

Everything he’s talking about needs to be questioned, and some of those things are controversial. There’s such a wide range of what "this land" really is. It’s obviously the actual land, the Earth, but it’s also the government, which you have to question and get mad about and talk about and wonder how is it possible that we live on the quote-unquote greatest country on Earth and people are not being take care of on a basic level. People deserve health care, for example. Everything’s not all sugar-coated, and I think Guthrie talked about some of these issues in such an eloquent and timeless way. And that’s the beautiful thing about this song. The first time you hear it in a casual way, it’s like a dream, a magic spell, but the way that he weaves in that questioning is just as powerful.

That’s one of the great things about the song, how it works on multiple levels. Maybe I’m a sucker, but I find it really inspiring.

Yeah, just the idea of someone sitting there on the couch seeing this commercial and hopefully being moved by it to get out. No matter where you live, you can walk out your front door and experience nature. There’s so much beauty in the world to see. I love that idea, especially nowadays, because we’re so flooded with technology, and younger people don’t even know what the world is like without the internet. It’s almost like you’re born with a cellphone in your hand. It’s scary to me. We’re at a crucial turning point where hopefully we can keep reminding each other that technology is a tool and we don’t have to drown in it.

I know you’re a very spiritual person. Is spending time outdoors a big part of that for you?

Definitely. I feel like I’d lose my mind if I didn’t get to spend a lot of time outside. It’s a big thing for me, it’s where I go to move thoughts and clear my mind and get it right.

This Land Is Your Land

Words and Music by Woody Guthrie

This land is your land This land is my land
From California to the New York island;
From the red wood forest to the Gulf Stream waters
This land was made for you and Me.

As I was walking that ribbon of highway,
I saw above me that endless skyway:
I saw below me that golden valley:
This land was made for you and me.

I've roamed and rambled and I followed my footsteps
To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts;
And all around me a voice was sounding:
This land was made for you and me.

When the sun came shining, and I was strolling,
And the wheat fields waving and the dust clouds rolling,
As the fog was lifting a voice was chanting:
This land was made for you and me.

As I went walking I saw a sign there
And on the sign it said "No Trespassing."
But on the other side it didn't say nothing,
That side was made for you and me.

In the shadow of the steeple I saw my people,
By the relief office I seen my people;
As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking
Is this land made for you and me?

Nobody living can ever stop me,
As I go walking that freedom highway;
Nobody living can ever make me turn back
This land was made for you and me.

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Did any of the images from the commercial inspire you to start rock-climbing or skiing?

There's a lot of stuff I haven't tried, and I'm pretty open to things, but I just don't have that kind of thrill-seeking personality. I think I get enough thrills on the road, performing and traveling. For me, it's a calming thing. My life is so fast and out of my control sometimes

that I really need to get into nature to find my center again, to slow the movement of all my molecules back to the rhythm of nature.

Moulton, Sam. "The North Face and My Morning Jacket Collaborate on "This Land is Your Land."" *Outside*. 11 Nov 2014. Web. 12 June 2015.

Resource 2: The pre-Henry Hudson view of America: *The Great Gatsby* and *Walking off the Big Apple*

From the last page of *The Great Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald

And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes — a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder. (180)

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2004. Print.

From the blog *Walking off the Big Apple* <http://www.walkingoffthebigapple.com/>

Tynes, Teri. "The 'Fresh, Green Breast of the New World'- Mannahatta/ Manhattan." *Walking Off the Big Apple*. Blogger. Web. 12 June 2015.

What a beautiful place this Mannahatta, the verdant paradise Henry Hudson and fellow sailors came upon almost 400 years ago. Switching from audio to visual for a moment, the visual aspects of the exhibit at the museum, with several geographical sections including Inwood, Foley Square, Turtle Bay/Murray Hill, Harlem, and Times Square illuminated in their own display, are stunning in their virtual renderings and computer simulations of the bygone natural world. Explaining that the pre-neon **Times Square**, for example, was a natural draw with its convergence to two streams, it's no wonder that we continue to assemble there. Now the lawn chairs make more sense.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's famous quote from *The Great Gatsby*, one of the most beautiful passages in American literature and that adorns one wall of the exhibit, speaks to the

imagined awe of the explorers' first encounter. The exhibit could have shamed us for our crass destruction of such a beautiful environment, but the organizers take a different route. Instead of bemoaning the lost Eden and advocating its return, the exhibit, curated by Eric W. Sanderson of the Wildlife Conservation Society at the Bronx Zoo, aims to heighten awareness of the theme of diversity throughout the area's history. At the time the Dutch arrived, the place had already lost its Eden qualities, as the small native-American population cleared and rearranged the land for their own purposes. Yet, here were hundreds of species of plants, fish, reptiles, birds and mammals living in a hilly-forested place with many islands and streams and in several distinct ecosystems. In time, a great diversity of ethnic groups and nationalities would come to live here and rearrange the landscape.

Resource 3: Book Review of *American Studies, Ecocriticism, and Citizenship: Thinking and Acting in the Local and Global Commons*

Myers applies William Cronon's article "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature" (1995) to Eric W. Sanderson's *Mannahatta: A Natural History of New York City* (2009). This visual-cultural critique of the Mannahatta project's erasure of indigenous and ethnic populations highlights how the "eco-pornographic fantasy of a 'virgin' wilderness" is simultaneously connected with Euro-American culture and values of whiteness (73). Myers's essay holds particular promise for interdisciplinary teaching in sustainability because you can access the images he discusses online (<http://www.wcs.org/multimedia/videos/the-mannahatta-project.aspx> and <http://welikia.org/>) and can consider with students how these highly researched images imaginatively project a dominant racial narrative about American landscape and ecology. (1)

Jacobson, Kristin J. Rev of *American Studies, Ecocriticism, and Citizenship: Thinking and Acting in the Local and Global Commons*, ed. Joni Adamson and Kimberly N. Ruffin. *ALH Online Review* 5 Jan. 2015: 1-4. Web. 16 June 2015.

Works Cited

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2004. Print.

Moulton, Sam. "The North Face and My Morning Jacket Collaborate on 'This Land is Your Land.'" *Outside*. 11 Nov 2014. Web. 12 June 2015.

Tynes, Teri. "The 'fresh, green breast of the new world' - Mannahatt/ Manhattan." *Walking Off the Big Apple*. Blogger. Web. 12 June 2015.