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Introduction to the Special Issue: Community Literacy, Sustainability, and the Environment

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Introduction to the Special Issue: Community Literacy, Sustainability, and the Environment

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With this special issue, our hope is to encourage community literacy educators, practitioners, and scholars to consider more deeply how the discipline of Community Literacy can support the development of a sustainable global society. Many thinkers, perhaps beginning with ecosopher Arne Naess, have suggested that in order to fashion an ecologically sustainable society our fundamental conception of what it means to live on a planet must deepen, expand, transform. We must develop an elemental appreciation of ourselves as equal members of the global biotic community—equal with marmot and manatee, with saguaro and birch, with amphibian, arthropod, lichen, and microbe—a community that is utterly dependent upon stable worldwide ecosystems for its continued existence.

To augment a society's base literacy is a slow process, yet progress has been underway for quite awhile. In 1890 John Muir's determined activism inspired public discourses of conservation that eventually resulted in the formation of our National Parks; in 1949 Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* mapped a land ethic such that a broader public could appreciate its value; in 1962 Rachael Carson's sobering *Silent Spring* served as the exigence for our current late modern project of ecological restoration; and Garrett Hardin's 1968 "The Tragedy of the Commons" has proven prophetic in its base and scope. 1970 marked the first Earth Day. Now, a new generation of thinkers has stepped up to carry the project forward: the most overtly public include James Hansen, David Orr, Bill McKibben, and Paul Hawken. Behind the scenes, discourse scholars like Jimmie Killingsworth, Tarla Rae Peterson, Sid Dobrin, Derek Owens, Phaedra Pezzullo, and many others demonstrate how our use of language is central to our perception of the natural world. Changing language changes minds.

Much has changed since early 2008 when this special issue of CLJ began to take shape—notably, we've elected a national president who takes environmental concerns seriously. Indeed, even as I write, June of 2009, the Climate Bill has just been passed in the U.S. House of Representatives and is on its way to the Senate. Regardless of its fate, the significance of stewarding our planetary ecosystem is rising in the public conscience, and creating a sustainable, just future seems more possible every day. Around the globe are a multitude of projects aimed at increasing humanity's ecological literacy—the literacy that takes ecosystems into account when making decisions of every sort.

The essays in this special issue work to expand the theory and practice of Community Literacy to include an underpinning of what might be called

a "biospheric" literacy—a core sense of our place in the global system of ecosystems, the biosphere, the realm of our planet within which it is possible for biological life to exist. Expanding on the term Community we work to integrate all the diverse members of our actual global biotic community—human, plant, and animal. Expanding the term Literacy we work to integrate the global ecological literacy—biospheric literacy—through which it is possible to become aware of and to appreciate our larger community.

The following essays and poems provide just the smallest sample of the work being done to encourage sustainable practices. They illustrate the discursive processes whereby our general literacy base is being slowly infused with the ecological literacy that may lead us to a sustainable future. For example, once, in the not too distant past, the origin and growing conditions of that perfect Gala apple in the produce section was not of much interest. Today, more and more of us are becoming aware of the importance of supporting local farmers, and fresh, organic, local food has become the poster child of our slow shift toward sustainable practices. Since a felt concept of "place" is central to developing a biospheric literacy, in the overview that follows each of the articles is "placed" according to the ecoregion which it describes.

Our discursive journey begins in the North Atlantic Ocean, about 600 miles off the coast of North Carolina, in the Bermuda Subtropical Conifer Forests ecoregion. Peter Goggin and Elenore Long share with us their case study conducted in the island nation of Bermuda, "The Co-Construction of a Local Public Environmental Discourse: Letters to the Editor, Bermuda's *Royal Gazette*, and the Southlands Hotel Development Controversy." In this captivating article, authors Goggin and Long detail the discursive effect of letters to the editor and the way in which the editor of the local newspaper serves as an ecological literacy sponsor for the island.

From Bermuda, we move to the Great Lakes ecoregion, to the rural Midwest and Diane Miller's ethnographic study of a local food co-op, "Neighborliness at the Co-op: Community and Biospheric Literacy." Here, Miller takes a close look at community as a tri-faceted enterprise—the Voluntary Association, the Lifestyle Enclave, and the Neighborhood. Working to integrate two theoretical frameworks—community literacy and biospheric literacy—Miller expands the Neighborhood to include our biotic neighbors. By doing so, we are encouraged to engage in an expanded form of the "cordial chat" necessary to "get along in the shared space of the Neighborhood." Biospheric literacy, writes Miller, can be integrated by expanding on the familiar ritual enactment of "neighborliness." She asks us to consider not only the human inhabitants of our neighborhoods, but our animal and plant neighbors as well—those who inhabit our backyards, yet those whom we do not fully acknowledge.

From the Great Lakes, we move far north to Alaska's remote Lake Clark National Park and Preserve in the Subarctic Boreal Forest ecoregion, where Anne Coray and Steve Kahn live in close, conscious relationship with their biotic neighbors. Anne and Steve "live off the land" by hunting, gathering,

gardening, and scavenging. In "The Closer to Home the Better," Anne narrates one story of their hands-on, subsistence lifestyle in the remote and roadless subarctic wilderness 160 air-miles from Anchorage. In traditional creative nonfiction style, Anne "shows" the literacies necessary to "read" the land. And Anne's two delicate poems "Goats Beard" and "Cold Spell" convey something of the lyric nature of living in the subarctic wilderness.

Next we head south and east, into the North Atlantic Coast ecoregion and the north end of Rhode Island Sound, where Matthew Ortoleva's ethnographic study reveals the way in which becoming literate about the natural world is a sensory process, one we learn through physical engagement. "Narragansett Bay and the Biospheric Literacies of the Body" parallels two cultural stories about the bay: that of tribal elder Paulla Dove Jennings and that of a local environmental conservation group, Save the Bay. These narratives, remarkably different in their cultural bent, share common ground in the actual, physical experience of the oceanic ecosystem.

Missy-Marie Montgomery's "The Language of Birds" evokes a mystery, the way that all earthly beings speak, but we humans rarely listen. Yet "At Twilight I Watch the Wild Woodcocks Dance" reminds us of the cost of waking in the gentle realms.

Farther south, in the South Atlantic Coast and Piedmont ecoregion, are the hemlock forests of Georgia. In "Saving the Next Tree: The Georgia Hemlock Project, Community Action, and Environmental Literacy," Elizabeth Giddens describes the collaborative community effort underway to combat the infestation of hemlock wooly adelgid that threatens to devastate the forests. The complex effort is a showcase of effective, timely community action by disparate entities working together to realize a common vision.

From the Georgia forests, we move into the abstract "place" of the map itself, where Eric Mason demonstrates the pedagogical strength of semiotic representation in "Greening the Globe, One Map at a Time." Here, Mason shows how his classroom use of Green Maps™ works to encourage critical ecocitizenship. Mason's discussion of space and place, inclusion and exclusion, hegemony and social change demonstrates a compelling way to "engag[e] students in the exploration and preservation of their communities."

More than anything, these examples of the organic way in which ecological literacy seems to proliferate offers us great hope for the future. Whilst the pessimists amongst us lament that we've passed an ecological tipping point, these authors and the communities of which they write show the slow, steady progress that results from sustained and optimistic community action. Changing language changes minds. What might it mean to be a good biotic neighbor?

Enjoy!

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Special Issue Guest Editor