

# WONDER

The Nature Action Collaborative for Children Global Newsletter

Coordinated by Kirsten Haugen

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## A Context for Place-Based Learning with Nature

*“We make the places and the places make us.”*

— Jim Greenman

*Nature-based spaces should respect and celebrate the site’s natural assets, local culture, climate and history.*

— NACC’s *Universal Principles for Connecting Children with Nature*, [worldforumfoundation.org/nacc-up](http://worldforumfoundation.org/nacc-up)

Think back to when you were a child. What experiences touched you, or even shaped who you are today? Chances are, those experiences were not part of a standardized curriculum, and were more likely highly personal and unique to where you grew up. Educators who tune into this power of place discover ways to build, and build on, children’s relationships with where they live—their local environment, community and culture. Greg Smith offers both background and a deep understanding of place-based learning, which calls to mind a core tenet of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: children’s rights to participation—to having a voice in issues that impact their lives. Barb Carlson and Karen Anderson vividly share how they’ve brought an understanding and love of place to the children and families in their programs. As leaders of the

World Forum Indigenous People’s Action Group, Carlson and Anderson contributed to “Indigenous Early Care and Education Understandings and Perspectives,” available at [worldforumfoundation.org/indigenous](http://worldforumfoundation.org/indigenous).

Consider how a sense of place plays out in your life and work. Find out what the children in your care know, enjoy, or wonder about their local environment and community. How will you respond to their awareness and concerns? How will the conversations and activities that emerge help these children learn to care for themselves, their environment and their communities?

With gratitude,



This is part one of a two-part series on place-based learning with nature.



### Nature Action Collaborative for Children

The mission of the Nature Action Collaborative for Children (NACC) is to re-connect children with the natural world by making developmentally appropriate nature education a sustaining and enriching part of the daily lives of the world’s children.

[worldforumfoundation.org/nature](http://worldforumfoundation.org/nature)

### Write for WONDER!

Send your “Wonder-filled” story about connecting children with the natural world to

[kirstenh@dimensionsfoundation.org](mailto:kirstenh@dimensionsfoundation.org)

## Affirming Place, Community and Responsibility

by Greg Smith

Professor Emeritus, Lewis & Clark College  
Portland, Oregon, United States

One of my primary hopes as an educator was that students in my classes would leave with a deeper sense of relatedness to the world around them and their own responsibility to other people and the planet. Over time, that hope assumed the shape of an approach to teaching and learning that I, and a number of colleagues, came to call place-based or place-conscious education. Our aim was to encourage other educators to embed at least part of what happened in their classes to their own, and their students', experiences in the places where they lived.

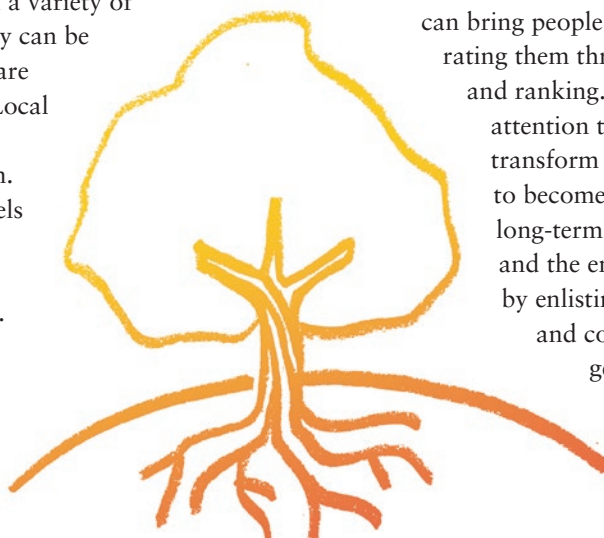
Place is fundamental to human life and can be linked to all subject matter, so it can serve as the springboard to lessons in science, history, literature, art, economics—you name it! Doing so can ground learning in what students from pre-school through college already know, linking new understandings to things they are familiar with and may see as important. Rather than being abstract and disconnected—which formal instruction is for too many students—what happens in school can instead become vital and immediate and directly related to the lives of friends and loved ones. This is the way learning was throughout our species' tenancy on the planet, until the creation of schools and their tendency to box children up in buildings separated from the lives of both adults and nature.

Place-based educators seek to create a bridge between classrooms and the world just beyond the boundary of school walls. This can be done in a variety of ways. People from the community can be brought into the classroom to share their experiences and expertise. Local history or literature can be given an honored slot in the curriculum. Student projects across grade levels can be linked to the needs of the local organizations, such as the town or county historical society. And schoolyards can be transformed into learning laboratories by creating wetlands on school grounds, landscaping with native species, or planting vegetable gardens and orchards. School build-

ings, themselves, can be turned into study sites, where students can measure energy and water use, indoor air pollution, and solid waste levels, with the aim of reducing them all. Or, they can investigate the incidence of bullying and initiate student-run programs aimed at exposing and reducing these behaviors.

Beyond the school, students can become participants in efforts to improve their neighborhood or community by monitoring diesel particulate levels in the air, salt runoff from roads in winter, or the number of invasive species like quagga snails in streams running into the Great Lakes. They can visit elders in nursing homes and collect their stories. They can monitor locations in urban areas where dog poop is a problem and present proposals to the local city council to address it. They can study the history of civil rights activists in their own town and create monuments or comic books or films aimed at teaching others about what they have learned. They can develop the high-level skills needed to monitor water pollution and contribute their efforts to the work of the local utility board. They can make films about abandoned factory sites thought to contribute to the incidence of cancer and teach adults about the need to clean them up. They can remove invasive species from Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management lands, and track their location using GIS equipment on the way to and from job sites.

When schools engage communities and places in these ways, students of all ages begin to grasp the significance of their own intelligence and collective power to bring about needed change. Education then becomes a means for discovering gifts and commitments, which can give meaning to their lives and the lives of their friends. Schools, when organized around this approach, can bring people together, rather than separating them through relentless competition and ranking. Schools that redirect students' attention to their common lives can transform education into what it needs to become—a vehicle that fosters the long-term welfare of human communities and the environments that support them by enlisting the young in this endeavor and confirming their capacity to make genuine and long-lasting contributions. This is the way to bring both our schools and our communities to life.



## Sturgeons Come to School: A Story of Place-Based, Land-Based Learning

by Barb Carlson

Early Childhood Education

Program Coordinator, University College  
of the North, Manitoba, Canada

I would like to acknowledge the treaty and traditional lands of the Indigenous people around the world, and to the land in which I live work and play.

The land is our first teacher, and the place we live then becomes our place of learning. Place-based, land-based learning is not something new. Indigenous people from around the world have traditionally used the environment they inhabit to allow their children to learn language, math, social studies, and science, using their land and community as their resources for learning.

Learning that is rooted in local traditions, values, customs, beliefs and language: this connects our children to their community and the natural world around them. Children learn from building relationships with the flora and fauna that inhabit their place. I would like to share one of my experiences with facilitating place-based, land-based learning with children.

A few years ago I had the opportunity to become a board member of a not-for-profit project that was developing a centre that would give local children, youth, families, and community the opportunity to experience place-based, land-based learning. Developed within the city of Thompson, Manitoba, this project is called the Boreal Discovery Centre. It is located on the traditional land of the Nisichaawayasihk Cree Nation (NCN Treaty 5), surrounded by the boreal forest and bordering the Burntwood River. This centre provides a place for children, youth, families, and community to experience hands-on place-based, land-based learning.

This led me to try to incorporate place-based learning into a child care centre. I wanted to have an aquarium in the centre, featuring fish that were native to the environment, so with the help of local natural resources and the Nelson River Sturgeon Board we entered a partnership that allowed us to take part in a program to help revitalize an endangered native species: the mighty sturgeon.



Photo by Barb Carlson



Photo by swimfinian (flickr)/p/6f6h4Q licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

*By providing opportunities for children and families to experience land-based, place-based learning, we provide parents with the opportunity to be partners in the learning.*

This opportunity would allow children and families to see and co-learn about the sturgeon. The aquarium was located in the lobby of the child care centre. My office was next to the lobby, so I had the privilege of hearing Indigenous parents sharing their childhood experiences with their children as they stopped to watch the sturgeon in the aquarium. By providing opportunities for children and families to experience land-based, place-based learning, we provide parents with the opportunity to be partners in the learning. I believe that collaborative learning within families and community is important for all children, but this is especially important to Indigenous children and their families, as this facilitates the traditional way of learning the traditions and customs of the place in which they live.

Some benefits of place-based learning:

- Makes outdoor places more meaningful.
- Nurtures connections with Mother Earth.
- Creates the memories that connect children to nature.
- Develops better social interaction.
- Promotes independence and self-reliance.
- Improves physical and mental health.
- Increases knowledge of the local environment in which we live.
- Supports becoming good stewards of the land.
- Improves academic development.
- Above all, land-based, place-based learning can take place anywhere and anytime in the place in which we live, work and play.

## The Bundjil Nest Project

by Karen Anderson  
Indigenous Peoples Action Group,  
Global Leader for Children, 2020  
[balnarringpreschool.org.au/](http://balnarringpreschool.org.au/)

I work as a kindergarten teacher at Balnarring Preschool in Australia, on the traditional lands of the Boon Wurrung people of the Greater Kulin nation. We have created a Living and Learning with Country philosophy, which involves the children learning about First Peoples cultures and teaching in a bush and beach environment once a week.

When the nature program began, it became clear that the voices of the First Peoples were silent in the program. We have now made a strong commitment to reconciliation and developing everyone's knowledge—our teaching team, children, families, and community—about First Peoples' history and cultures. Children's connections with nature and their sense of belonging strengthens as they learn more about First Peoples.

Evolving from this philosophy is the Bundjil Nest Project. Bundjil is the Boon Wurrung peoples' word for eagle, and is their creator spirit. This is a collaborative project between the preschool, two local schools and a day care centre. The children of these services learn about culture together. Each year this involves approximately 200 children who participate in a day of learning with First Peoples in an outdoor space. The children learn about the importance of connecting with nature through storytelling, dance, music, song and art. The children also learn some Boon Wurrung language, in particular words of the creatures and plants they will encounter when accessing the nature sites.



Photo by Karen Anderson

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In 2015 we made this Bundjil Nest sculpture, which is an acknowledgment to the Boon Wurrung peoples. It is located in a community space where the nature program is run. The nest contains sticks placed by community members. Each stick contains a message of hope and inspiration to the children and the land. When the nest is full, we take the sticks away and burn them, sending the messages into Boon Wurrung sky. The nest is then built again.

In 2019 the children were involved in a project about the impact of plastics on the waterways. They collected plastic, which we made into sculptures of waang and placed near the nest (shown above). Waang is the Boon Wurrung word for crow; crow protects the waterways. The nature program at Balnarring has been the catalyst for learning about the First Peoples and sharing this commitment beyond our program's walls.

## Universal Principles for Connecting Children with Nature

Have you seen our beautiful new visualization of NACC's "Universal Principles for Connecting Children with Nature?" This colorful guide is easily pulled from the center of the January/February 2021 issue of *Exchange*, or you can download it for free at [worldforumfoundation.org/nacc-up](http://worldforumfoundation.org/nacc-up).

