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Ecological Pedagogy in an Urban Prairiescape

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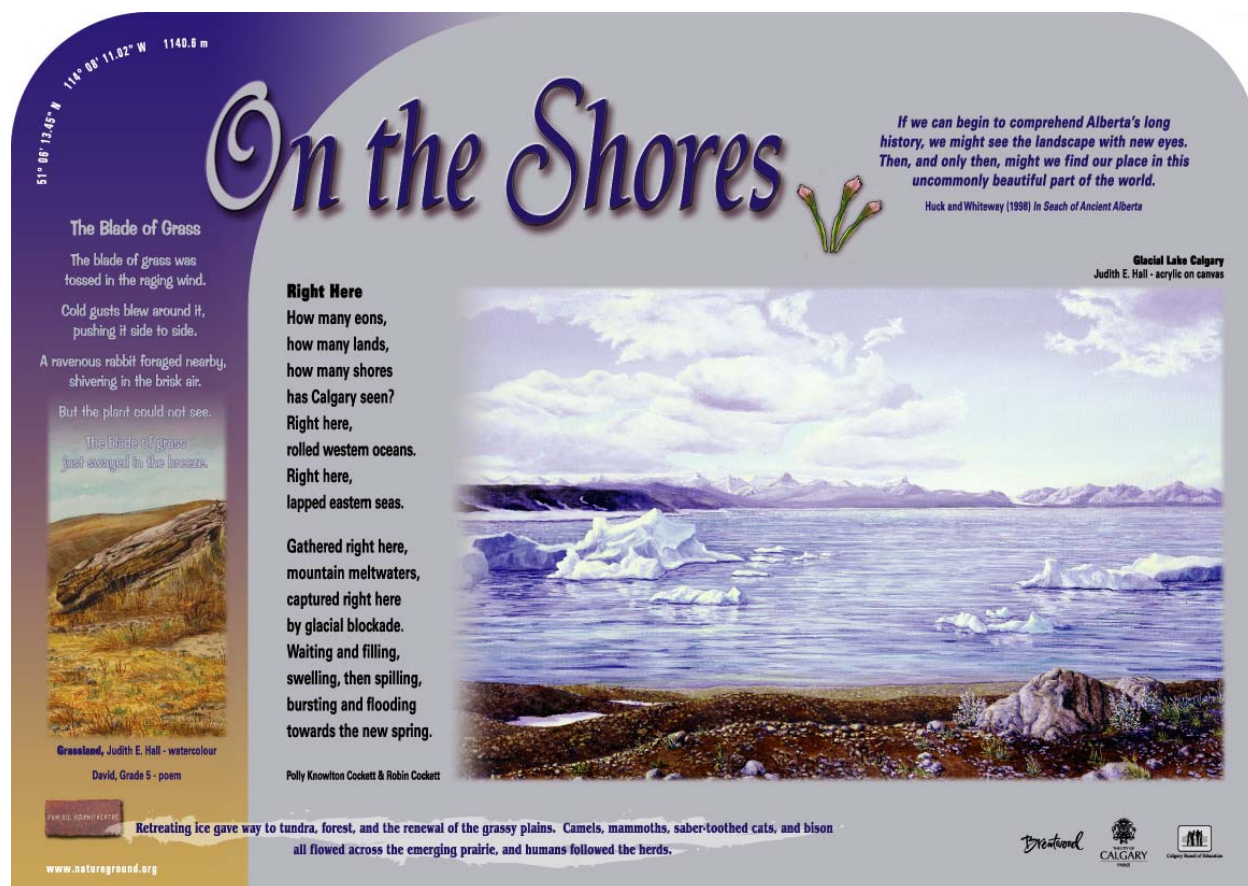


Figure 1. Post-glacial re-emergent grassland in the Bow River basin

*If we can begin to comprehend Alberta's long history,
we might see the landscape with new eyes.
Then, and only then, might we find our place
in this uncommonly beautiful part of the world.*

Huck and Whiteway (1998, inside cover) *In Search of Ancient Alberta*

Prairie conservation, environmental stewardship, invasive alien species, deep time, geomorphology, and conservation landscaping are but a few of the natural and cultural history concepts and issues touched upon by a unique set of interpretive signage panels in a suburban grassland and aspen parkland setting in northwest Calgary, Alberta.

An overarching ecophilosophy informed the site-specific and curriculum-connected ecological pedagogy used in the creation of this grassroots public environmental education initiative. The cumulative sign content addresses an extensive cross section of interrelated concepts from the biosphere, hydrosphere, atmosphere, lithosphere, and sociosphere, thus presenting an ecocentric perspective of our ecological context. The initial philosophical framework was enhanced via a process of open inquiry during the development of the panels, and through close collaboration with The City of Calgary Natural Area Parks department and Dr. E.W. Coffin School.

Detailed GPS data situates each sign with latitude, longitude, and elevation, and this generative project is supported by a website, www.natureground.org, which was launched in spring 2008. The Grand Opening of Whispering Signs was held on June 4, 2008 at Dr. Coffin School.

Whispering Signs: Ecological Encounters in an Urban Prairie (Knowlton Cockett, et al., 2008), for which I have been manager since its inception, is essentially a ‘Sense of Place’ project. “Sense of place is the foundation of our deepest connection to the natural world,” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 194). “Developing a sense of place is one piece of the puzzle in remaking our schools with a focus on sustainability,” (Sobel, 1998, p. 9). Interpretive panels in parks and natural areas are a way to extend sustainability and sense of place education into the public realm of lifelong learning. Vickers and Matthews (2002, p 16) summarize others’ work on sense of place, e.g. Sanger’s (1997) definition that it is “an experientially based intimacy with the natural processes, community, and history of one’s place,” and Orr’s (1989) view that it is “a dialogue or conversation with the environment in which all human and nonhuman elements mutually enhance each other.”

The Whispering Signs incorporate original art, poetry, and text by students, teachers, parents, and community members who have worked together over several years to produce thirty-four amazingly beautiful and provocative signs for both school-based and public education. The signs are in two sizes: small ovals represent each letter of the alphabet and feature primarily student art; the rest are larger panels featuring paintings, stories, and poems by local residents. The project committee collaboratively developed the main text, and consulted a wide array of inputs from the greater community. As a result, many stakeholder voices are ‘in dialogue with the environment’ on the signs in deeply meaningful formats, thus directly facilitating the development of both community and individual ecological identity and a sense of place for all viewers.

Thomashow discusses the fabric of community in his ecological identity explorations. He suggests that “one’s perception of community is crucial in traveling the path of ecological citizenship.” Sobel (2004), in his book about connecting classrooms and communities with place-based education, includes both the natural and built environments in looking “at how landscape, community infrastructure, watersheds, and cultural traditions all interact and shape each other.” Hart (1997) argues for emphasizing local environmental research by children because “genuine ecological understanding involves an understanding of environmental phenomena ‘in place’ – that is, their complex spatial relatedness to one another.” Orr (1994), in looking at recovering a sense of place as a route to a desired biophilia or love of planet, suggests that “means rediscovering and restoring the natural history of our places.” A main purpose of the

community environmental education projects I have been involved in is precisely to ‘rediscover and restore’ natural and cultural heritage ‘in place.’

Grunewald (2003, p. 6), in discussing the importance of ecological thinking within the many faces of environmental education, calls for a synthesis of critical pedagogy and place-based education into a “critical pedagogy of place.” He suggests this “must embrace the experience of being human in connection [with] others and with the world of nature, and the responsibility to conserve and restore our shared environments for future generations.” He also asserts (p. 10) that “developing a critical pedagogy of place means challenging each other to read the texts of our own lives and to ask constantly what needs to be transformed and what needs to be conserved.”

Grunewald’s assertions resonate with me. Through my prairie conservation initiatives and my future research, I am addressing the experience of being human in connection with others where we are taking responsibility for shared local environments for the benefit of local students and the wider public. Wessels (1996, p. 60), in his work related to interpreting landscapes, states, “Only when we understand the heritage of the land, the linkages between a culture and nature, and are able to interpret that heritage, does a real sense of place become possible.” Wessels’ landscape work encompasses biological and cultural heritage at the land’s surface. Looking deeper, Hawkes (1951), narrating from a single point of contemplation in her back garden while she gazes in awe at the heavens, takes her readers on a storytelling journey around Great Britain through geologic time from the Precambrian to the present. She repeatedly touches on the idea of consciousness evolving along with the evolution of the landscape, thus contributing to a sense of connectedness. In a constructive quest for connectivity, Butala (2000) narrates her

autobiographical immersion in her prairiescape in Saskatchewan. Her whole book, *Wild Stone Heart*, is essentially about her becoming connected with a special field within her grassland ranch.

The field ... had become my church, and I went there in silence, with reverence, and in awe, hoping to make a connection with – something – if not the gods, then at least with spirit or a spirit, although of what or whom I didn't know, but had thought must be the spirit or essence of Nature. ... What I found in the field, I began to see, was presence, but it was presence beyond that of animals who made it home; it was presence that I was nowhere near ready to name precisely or even describe. (p. 98)

The urban prairie conservation initiatives I have been involved in are testament to the bringing of people together around complex issues, deriving a coherence within a collection of multiple perspectives, deriving themes and elucidating threads without compromising the individual voice, and presenting the results in a compelling way. As a set, the Whispering Signs speak closely to the complexities of our ecological context and our place in the web of existence, especially at the precious and precarious intersections of our natural and built environments.



Figure 2. Four examples of the Alphabet Panels

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