

Our Earth, Our Ethics



Why Am I Reading This? Theme Information

In the 21st century, we are challenged by momentous environmental issues. Serious interest not only in the natural environment, but also in our proper relationship to it, has long antedated our present anxiety over greenhouse gas emissions, the hole in the ozone layer, and global warming. We may find ourselves dismayed as much as we are enlightened by what we read here. And then, after we have read and discussed the issues, what ought we to do? Will talking about it, the presumed goal of these library programs, lead to anything? We have introduced several titles with the West particularly in mind, but every community will have its own concerns when it comes to such matters as land use, air pollution, declining species (like the Atlantic cod and salmon), and water.

"Our Earth, Our Ethics" theme materials were created for Let's Talk About It by Ron McFarland, University of Idaho, 2007.

Book list:

1. *A Sand County Almanac* by Aldo Leopold (1949)
2. *Desert Solitaire* by Edward Abbey (1968)
3. *Indian Creek Chronicles* by Pete Fromm (1993)
4. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard (1974)
5. *Prodigal Summer* by Barbara Kingsolver (2001)
6. *The Botany of Desire* by Michael Pollan (2002)
7. *The Solace of Open Spaces* by Gretel Ehrlich (1985)
8. *Who Owns the West?* by William Kittredge (1987)

Theme Essay

When it comes to environmental writing in the United States, some might argue that everything we encounter amounts to a footnote to Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854). Others might argue for a text from half a century earlier, the *Travels of the Quaker naturalist William Bartram*, published in 1791, about ten years after the end of the Revolutionary War. In any event, serious interest not only in the natural environment, but also in our proper relationship to it has long antedated our present anxiety over greenhouse gas emissions, holes in the ozone layer, and global warming. The books we have selected for this series, however, date back, with a single exception, only to the one that many would agree has ignited the modern environmental movement, Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*, which appeared in 1949. Leopold's eloquent comments on a "land ethic" intended to reflect "the existence of an ecological conscience" have outlined what we may think of as the modern definition of this theme.

Nearly a century and a half has elapsed since a German biologist named Ernst Haeckel coined the term "ecology" in 1866; a Danish botanist, Eugene Warming, wrote the first textbook on the subject in 1895. To survey even a small university's library holdings in natural history (the QH section of the Library of Congress classification) and the section on environmental sciences (the GE section) is to be dazzled, or perhaps daunted, by the scores of books on those subjects, particularly those published in the past twenty years. In selecting titles for this theme we have attempted to choose books that are relevant to the environmental movement and that are at the same time readable. About half of the titles would be properly classified among the Q's; the other half would more likely be found in the PS section (American Literature). We have assumed the perhaps mythical "general reader" for our audience as opposed to botanists, zoologists, or ecologists, so any chemistry encountered here will be kept at the level of ordinary sodium chloride.

Most of the titles in this series are nonfiction, but the books vary considerably in nature. Technically, the only avowed scientist among these writers is Aldo Leopold, yet his encounters with the natural world may not strike us as much more scientific than those of Annie Dillard or Edward Abbey, whose formal education was in literature and philosophy respectively. Michael Pollan's essays in botany contain specific, documented scientific data, but he is a journalist by profession. Both Pete Fromm and William Kittredge earned undergraduate degrees in scientific fields, forestry and agriculture, but neither would be likely to refer to himself as a "scientist" or even a "naturalist." The old-fashioned term for a scientific generalist, "natural historian," seems remarkably outdated in an age of specialization that produces hydrologists, limnologists, plant geneticists, paleobotanists, and physiological ecologists. The only novelist whose work appears in this series, Barbara Kingsolver, received her bachelor's degree in biology and went on to do graduate work in ecology and evolutionary biology and to work at the University of Arizona as a science writer after completing her master's degree.

Those drawn to this theme may wonder why we have not included such classics as Marc Reisner's *Cadillac Desert*. Subtitled "The American West and its Disappearing Water," Reisner's book, which first appeared in 1986 and was updated in 1993, is wonderfully detailed, we agree, but lengthy at more than five hundred pages and slow reading. We have various reasons for not including a title by one or more of this remarkable trinity of spokesmen for the environment—Wallace Stegner, Wendell Berry, Barry Lopez—but we want them to have some say in all of this now. Stegner warns us in his essay, "*Thoughts in a Dry Land*," that "we may love a place and still be dangerous to it." The West, he states definitively in "*Living Dry*," is defined by "inadequate rainfall": "Aridity, and aridity alone, makes the various Wests one." In *The Unsettling of America* Wendell Berry lays out three numbered reasons for the sustaining of wilderness: "(1). Our biological roots as well as our cultural roots are in nature. (2). If we are to be properly humble in our use of the world, we need places that we do not use at all. (3). We need wilderness as a standard of civilization and as a cultural model." In his preface to *Arctic Dreams*, which won the National Book Award in 1986, Barry Lopez offers "a simple, abiding belief" that lies at the center of his book and that applies well to those of us engaged in this theme: "it is possible to live wisely on the land, and to live well." Confronted as we are by momentous environmental issues that range from the metaphysical to the biochemical and from the socioeconomic to the political, we may find ourselves dismayed as much as we are enlightened by what we read here. And then, after we have read and discussed the issues, what ought we to do? Will talking about it, the presumed goal of these library programs, lead to anything? We have introduced several titles with the West particularly in mind, but every community will have its own concerns when it comes to such matters as land use, air pollution, declining species (like the Atlantic cod and salmon), and water. The proliferation of international, regional, and local environmental organizations should remind us that communal options exist at all levels, from the international (Greenpeace was founded in Vancouver, British Columbia, in 1971), to the national (the Sierra Club was founded in 1892 in San Francisco, California), to the regional (the Alliance for the Wild Rockies was formed in 1988; Friends of the Clearwater was organized in 1987), to the local (the Palouse Clearwater Environmental Institute was founded in 1986). On the other hand, as Dr. Stockmann reminds us at the end of Henrik Ibsen's play, *An Enemy of the People* (1882), which concerns industrial pollution in a Norwegian resort town, "the strongest man in the world is the man who stands alone."

For Further Reading

Arctic Dreams by Barry Lopez (1986)

The Bear by William Faulkner (1942)

Beyond the Aspen Grove by Ann Zwinger (1970)

The Book of Yaak by Rick Bass (1996) *Cadillac Desert* by Marc Reisner (1993)

Cod by Mark Kurlansky (1997) *Collapse* by Jared Diamond (2005)

Silent Spring by Rachel Carson (1962)

The Rarest of the Rare by Diane Ackerman (1995)

The Unsettling of America by Wendell Berry (1977)

Water: The Fate of Our Most Precious Resource by Marq De Villiers (2000)

Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs by Wallace Stegner (1992)

Wild Life by Molly Gloss (2000)

Series Discussion Questions

1. Participants in this series are likely to be “nature-lovers”; in fact, some might argue that supporting the environment is a given, like favoring justice, freedom, education, motherhood, and apple pie. Perhaps the issue comes down to whether we are generic, or specific, in our feelings and attitudes toward the environment. Can you distinguish between the two? Everyone likes clean air and water (generic), but what happens when we get specific (the Snake River dams) about our concerns? How does our reading about environmental or ecological matters outside our specific region, in the Blue Ridge Mountains, or Sand County in Wisconsin, or the Arches National Monument in Utah, affect you?
2. Some of you might find that the authors in this series are too self-absorbed; that is, they are not so much interested in this or that river or mountain as they are in how that place or landscape makes them, personally, feel—so the book becomes a study in their psychological, political, or spiritual responses to nature, thus subordinating the environment to the self. Does this seem problematic to you, or does the personal connection lend perspective and value to the earth? Does the personal connection vary with the writer to some extent; that is, are some more outwardly focused than others (who are, presumably, more inwardly focused)?
3. Idaho depends more than most states of the union on various extractive industries (forestry and mining notably), and on other forms of commerce that tax the land, from ranching to farming, including the dairy and food processing industries. Have you, your relatives, or acquaintances made their living off the land? Do you, or they, appear to feel as emotionally or spiritually attached to the land as most of these writers seem to be? Is there an ironic truth to the notion that the logger loves the trees he fells?
4. Exact figures vary and are susceptible to change, but somewhere between 60% and 70% of Idaho is federally owned, much of it Forest Service and BLM (Bureau of Land Management) land. Are you aware of some of the issues currently involved with these lands? Does the recent decision by Potlatch Forest Industries to charge people for hiking, camping, or motoring on their lands seem justifiable to you? Do you suppose PFI and other entities have received tax benefits from the state (that is, from you as a taxpayer) over the years? How does what you read in this series impact your thinking on this sort of issue?
5. Some would argue that recreational use (fishing, hunting, rafting, backpacking) of public land provides the best option. Are all recreational uses of the land essentially “equal”? One might consider skiing and golf in this regard. What do you see as the “up” and “down” sides to this premise? Compromises are usually mentioned (land swaps, for example, and curtailment of the use of ATV’s) at the negotiating table. But as long as the world population continues to expand, are we just fighting losing battles? To what extent do these writers address such issues, at least tangentially?