

Chapter 5

America's Ancient Teachers: Exploring Old-Growth Groves in Secondary English and Biology Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Over the past 200 years, most of the forestland growing in the eastern United States has at one time been logged for timber, cultivated for agriculture, or developed into urban and suburban spaces. Though millions of wooded acres still exist in national forests, parks, and preserves, very little of that land should be considered undisturbed or old-growth. Given these realities, it may be surprising to learn that pockets of old trees, or groves, still survive near American suburbs. This chapter argues that the responsibility of forging a relationship between students and nature should not be the charter of one discipline; instead, teachers should work in concert through combined interdisciplinary efforts. In secondary schools, the most organic teaming for nature study are the biology and English departments. This chapter provides specific locations for teachers and students to discover and offers practical and inspiring assignments to help students develop of love for America's ancient woods.

INTRODUCTION

In the preface to *Kentucky's Last Great Places*, author Thomas Barnes (2002) comments that “we love what we know and care about. We can only know and care about something if we can begin to understand it, and we can only understand something if we are aware of its existence” (p. 1). Barnes's words are applicable to many of today's secondary school students and their relationships with the natural world. American students are spending more and more time dwelling in internal and digital spaces as they become increasingly divorced from nature. As a result of their insular lifestyles, many students act as if they have no first-hand experience in the environments of rivers and lakes, and forests and mountains. Students risk, to use Barnes' language, becoming unaware of nature's physicality. Unlike previous generations, contemporary students are in danger of losing a birthright, even a human right—the privilege to interact with the nonhuman world of flora and fauna. Author and educator Richard Louv (2005) has

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written extensively about the probability of American students becoming alienated from the natural world. In *Last Child in the Woods* (2005), he champions the benefits of spending time in the out-of-doors, observing that “time in nature is not leisure time; it’s an essential investment in our children’s health (and also, by the way, in our own)” (p. 120). Educators, therefore, have perhaps a greater responsibility than ever to introduce their students to wonders of nature. This responsibility for helping to forge a relationship between students and nature should not be the charter of one discipline; instead, teachers should work in concert through combined interdisciplinary efforts. In secondary schools, the most “natural” teaming of the study of nature are science—specifically biology—and English departments. When these two cultures work in unison with local and unique forested places, the results could be electrifying for teachers and students alike.

THE FOREST CLOSE AT HAND

Over the past 200 years, most of the forestland growing in the eastern United States has at one time been logged for timber, cultivated for agriculture, or developed into urban and suburban spaces. Though millions of wooded acres still exist in national forests, parks, and preserves, very little of that land should be considered undisturbed or old-growth. Given these realities, it may be surprising to learn that groves of very old trees still survive in American cities and suburbs. According to author and biologist Joan Maloof (2011):

Old-growth is a difficult concept to pin down [...] there is no single definition for it. For our purposes, we will be content with the notion that old-growth forests are places that have been left alone for a very long time (p. XIV).

Maloof’s broad definition will serve in this chapter, too. Indeed, the woods that the chapter showcases have been “left alone” to grow very old.

This chapter will highlight three of these ancient groves—one in Georgia, one in Tennessee, and one in Ohio—in an effort to illustrate how teachers and students in secondary schools could study these distinctive places. In addition, this chapter hopes to illustrate how a knowledge of these places could foster an appreciation for both scientific curiosity and reading and writing about American landscape.

Why study old-growth woods and introduce students to their marvels? From the inception of the United States, American writers have been fascinated with the fecundity of this continent’s landscape. In the late eighteenth century, St. John De Crevecoeur penned lines whose spirit would serve as a rallying cry for new emigrants:

After a foreigner from any part of Europe is arrived, and become a citizen, let him devoutly listen to the voice of our great parent which says to him, ‘Welcome to my shores [...] bless the hour in which thou didst see my verdant fields, my fair navigable rivers, and my green mountains. (p. 89)

Though St. John De Crevecoeur’s language is admittedly stilted, precious, and ethnically limiting, his message was clear—settlers can reinvent themselves and prosper by living in America’s “untouched” bounty. While Americans thought that they could not compete with Europeans in terms of intellectual and artistic endeavor, or in historical pedigree, many came to realize that the treasure of the country was

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