

During the fall of 2010, Lori Brant, CFPA education director, had the opportunity to interview David Sobel over the telephone. Mr. Sobel is a senior faculty member in the Education Department of Antioch University New England; he consults and speaks widely on environmental education. He is the author of seven books and over 60 articles focused on children and nature for publications including *Orion*, *Encounter*, *Sierra*, and *Sanctuary*. He resides in New Hampshire.

Lori: How do you describe place-based education?

David: I participated in coining the term as part of Co-Seed because there was a need for something broader and more inclusive than environmental education. Place-based education is mostly relevant in formal education spheres [school systems]. The environmental education programs often experienced in the schools often happen when a naturalist from a nature center comes to the class to lead a 50 minute owl program or rainforest program. Environmental education is then just a tassel on the outside of the fabric rather than the warp of the fabric. Place-based education is connected to social and cultural landscapes as well as the local environment. It doesn't imply just science lessons, but engages in all aspects of the curriculum of a school. (note: Co-Seed is a project of the Antioch New England Institute; more information can be found by visiting <http://www.antiochne.edu/anei/programs/coseed/>).

Lori: I've found your works, especially *Beyond Ecophobia: Reclaiming the Heart in Nature Education* to be an extremely valuable resource as an educator. I first read it as a novice in the environmental education field, working in a local nature center. I was working on writing some lesson plans about the tropical rainforest for a lower elementary afterschool program. Your writings truly enlightened and inspired me by the notion of 'no tragedies before fourth grade.' Every time I read your works, I become more capable of comprehending this idea. Can you describe developmentally-appropriate environmental education?

David: On the cover of my map-making book (*Mapmaking with Children*), the image is of a panoramic map of the landscape. My intent was to show how the book is organized and takes on the Russian nesting doll model, in which we start with something small and progress outward. That is, children's idea of place begins with their home and school, grows to include their neighborhood, then their community and the watershed. It's a movement outward. If you collect kids' map of their neighborhoods, you'll clearly see this progression. Social studies and English (language arts) curriculum often seem to follow these developmental lines for children. Developmentally-appropriate EE happens when an educator understands the need for relationships within the natural world and can design a program based on those relationships. It begins with understanding what is appropriate for the different age groups and devising lessons that meet their development need.

Lori: I once went into a kindergarten classroom which was covered from floor to ceiling with posters and information. On one entire corner of a wall were full-color photos and posters concerning spectacled (Asian) bears and how they are hunted and/or kept captive for their gall bladders and other body parts for medicinal use. I am sure the teacher meant well, but it was shocking to me that an educator would find this appropriate material for five year olds. I've also seen many programs teaching elementary-aged students about the tropical rainforest (which I myself once did) rather than the forests of Connecticut. I've also seen young kids having to learn about the continents and the world, especially Japan for some reason, at an early level.

David: If a class or program has, for instance, a large Japanese population, than it makes sense to study and learn about Japanese culture. But developmentally-appropriate environmental education targets the local community and grows from there.

Lori: What makes a person an effective environmental educator?

David: A good naturalist with a wide knowledge of effective educational techniques. Someone who is comfortable being barefoot and understands the developmental needs for a relationship between a person and the natural world; an effective environmental educator would then design their programs around this relationship. To be effective, an environmental educator would understand how all this fits into education for sustainability and then to cultivate environmental behaviors they may make as adults.

Lori: What can you share about the importance of special places for children?

David: Function of special places is to be a vehicle for kids bonding with their natural world. It's an eight to eleven year old childhood phenomenon. Developmentally, kids are starting to move away from their domestic home and to create a new home in the natural world; it's a metamorphosis. Their cocoon of their new self is born at adolescence; they are positioned between their familial world and their self in the broader world. This separation from the family happens in small increments and helps them establish their own roots.

Lori: In an educational world that can be consumed by teaching to the standardized tests, how can the community help teachers (and pre-service students) use the environment as a tool to meet curricular and other school needs?

David: In New Hampshire, we have school community change called CO-Seed. We held community vision to action forums in which community members identified initiatives and then connected those initiatives to opportunities in schools' curricula. An example was a neglected park adjacent to a village school. The community worked to restore the park. A 6<sup>th</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> grade teacher connected the restoration work to the science and social studies curriculum. With a community volunteer, the teacher and students mapped the park, created a replanting plan, replaced invasives with natives, etc. It was a year-long curriculum driven by that community's will to change and they helped the school participate. The community showed the school the opportunity. The community can dialogue with the school about what is being done at a local level and share their desire for student input and assistance. This method reconnects the school with the community. In Littleton, NH, the town manager got involved in connecting community and schools through a real, problem-solving opportunity. The town manager realized citizens were not reading the town report. So the town manager inspired a high school teacher to get involved and now the high school students write the town report. Imagine all the parents, grandparents, and caregivers reading the report to discover what the children in their life wrote. The students have learned to use the local resources and have become a participatory part of their community.

Lori: What resources or suggestions can you recommend for parents and caregivers who want to teach their family an environmental ethic?

David:

### **Books**

*A Natural Sense of Wonder: Connecting Kids with Nature through the Seasons*, by Rick Van Noy (ISBN 08203310310)

*Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature: for kids of all ages and their mentors*, by Jon Young (ISBN 1579940196)

*Geography of Childhood*, by Gary Paul Nabhan and Stephen Trimble (ISBN 0807085251)

*Hands-on Nature: Information and Activities for Exploring the Environment with Children*, published by the Vermont Institute of Natural Science (ISBN 1584650788)

*Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-deficit Disorder*, by Richard Louv (ISBN 156512605X)

*Sharing Nature with Children*, by Joseph Cornell (ISBN 18832207340)

*Wild Play: Parenting Adventures in the Great Outdoors*, by David Sobel (ISBN 978-1-57805-176-2 ,due out in spring 2011)

### **Websites**

<http://freerangekids.wordpress.com>

Do you ever...let your kid ride a bike to the library? Walk to school? Make dinner? Or are you thinking about it? If so, you are raising a Free-Range Kid! Free-Rangers believe in helmets, car seats, seat belts — safety! We just do not believe that every time school age kids go outside, they need a security detail. Share your stories, tell your tips ...here's to common sense parenting in uncommonly overprotective times!

<http://outdoorbaby.net>

for parents to stay connected by sharing stories, reading gear reviews, staying up to date on the latest outdoor happenings that are important for introducing their children to the natural world.

<http://connectedroots.wordpress.com>

a parent who blogs about letting go of answers, seeking wonder, and being present in the experience of living connected to one's surroundings

<http://kidsadventuring.org/blog>

a free monthly family nature club for families in the Roanoke Valley; the blog highlights it's three goals: play, nature education and volunteerism.