

Reading for the Planet: Integrating Biographies with Environmental Studies

by | Judith Snyder

Grades
K-2, 3-5

• **Keep 'em Reading** •

Biographies and memoirs offer glimpses into the lives of notable people, but the realm of these people is quite wide. Integrating this genre into an environmental awareness unit offers a time-efficient way to introduce students to the personal qualities that motivate people to act upon their convictions. Whether saving seals, soil, or sea, their grit and fortitude are fine examples for students to follow. Additionally, students learn how the actions of these people continue to affect our lives—and the planet—today.

Biographies come in a wide variety of reading levels and make it possible for teachers and librarians to create lessons for many grades and abilities. Activities can vary in length from a one-class-period overview using picture book biographies, to an in-depth project involving longer biographies. Here are some ideas to get you started.

Picture Book Biographies

For Primary Grades

The trend toward unique picture book biographies provides many wonderful examples to introduce students to this genre. Start by reading *Miss Lady Bird's Wildflowers* by Kathi Appelt to the whole class. (See sidebar for additional picture book biography suggestions.) Discuss Lady Bird's effect on environmental awareness and how her experiences may have led to her pursuing her vision. This one presentation may be enough for primary students, or you may wish to repeat the activity with additional biographies.

A Sample of Naturalist Picture Book Biographies

- *Beatrix Potter* by Alexandra Wallner. Holiday House, 1995.
- *Charles Darwin and the Beagle Adventure* by A. J. Wood and Clint Twist. Templar, 2009.
- *Darwin* by Alice McGinty and Mary Azarian. Houghton Mifflin, 2009.
- *George Washington Carver* by Tonya Bolden. Chronicle Books, 2008.
- *John Muir: America's First Environmentalist* by Kathryn Lasky. Candlewick Press, 2006.
- *Johnny Appleseed* by Steven Kellogg. HarperCollins, 1988.
- *Manfish: A Story of Jacques Cousteau* by Jennifer Berne. HarperCollins, 2005.
- *Miss Lady Bird's Wildflowers* by Kathi Appelt. HarperCollins, 2005.
- *Rachel: The Story of Rachel Carson* by Amy Erlich. Harcourt, 2003.
- *The Boy Who Drew Birds* by Jacqueline Davies. Houghton Mifflin, 2004.
- *Young Teddy Roosevelt* by Cheryl Harness. National Geographic, 1998.



For Intermediate Grades

For older students, use the previous activity as a model. Then gather fifteen to twenty picture book biographies of naturalists, and allow pairs of students to choose a book to read together. Their purpose for reading is to discover how the actions of their naturalist affected the environment. Students might display the answer in several sentences that they post on a chart, in a shared document, or on an interactive whiteboard. As a class, create a graphic organizer with the compiled information, and follow up with a group discussion.

Databases

Introduce students to the databases available in your school or public libraries. With a simple library card and Internet connection, access to short biographies is a click or two away. Demonstrate how to use the keyword “naturalist” to retrieve a list of biographical subjects. Pairs of students should then read summaries of three naturalists and list one major environmental contribution from each. Using this information, pairs should rank their naturalists according to the effect each person had on the environment. The criteria and reasoning for the ranking should be shared orally, along with the graphic organizer. Follow-up discussions can compare and contrast the findings and rankings of naturalists in different groupings.

Longer Biographies

For Intermediate Grades: Reading for a Specific Purpose

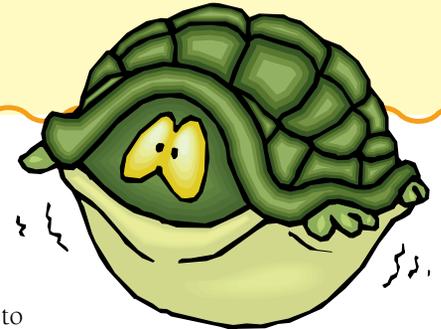
Select another picture book to use as a model for teaching reading for a specific purpose. Rather than asking students to report on the entire life of the naturalist, focus on just two aspects of the person's life:

1. Personal qualities and actions that demonstrate certain character traits (see sidebar for character traits to consider).
2. How the person took advantage of events in life to promote environmental issues.

Let students choose a book from your selection of naturalists. Provide square sticky pads for note taking. Notes should focus on the above two topics only. On each sticky note, students should include initials, page number, topic number, and one detail. Upon completion, each student should organize the notes in each category and write a short paragraph about both topics.

Character Traits to Consider

- Rebellious, accepting, ambitious, motivated, secretive, caring, accepts change, thoughtful, inconsiderate, cooperative, uncooperative, courageous, decisive, fearful, impolite, determined, enthusiastic, flexible, focused, scattered, thrifty, generous, hard-working, lazy, open-minded, intolerant, impractical, persistent, responsible, empathetic



Traditional Research with a Project Twist

Biographies offer the reader a chance to see the world through the eyes of another person. For this project, students will research all aspects of a person's life to try to determine the essence of the person. They will take notes and organize the information they find, but instead of a written report, propose one of the following options:

Alternative Project: Role Play

Ask students to role-play their chosen subject. In other words, students pretend to be the person they studied, and discuss their character's life in first person. It's a very powerful experience, for it requires the student to internalize the information he has researched, and develop empathy for the subject.



A short talk followed by a question and answer session works well. Costumes are not required, but a simple prop such as a hat or scarf may help students get into the role. Extend the role-play into a creative drama event. Blend biographical characters together into groups of five or six. Give groups a situation where there is an environmental problem, and students must stay in character and use their characters' skills to find a solution together.

Alternative Project: Write a Picture Book

Have students study the format of a picture book biography. Instruct them to organize their notes, and expand upon the information into about ten short narrative paragraphs. They should type, proofread, and critique the narrative with peers and the teacher. Using legal sized paper folded in half (hamburger style), have them create a dummy layout by placing a paragraph on each page and drawing illustrations. Be sure they include pages for the front and back matter.



others. While it is important that students study topics of interest and passion, it is also important for them to act. Challenge the class to identify an environmental problem within their community, develop an action plan, and implement it together!



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Making Meaning

As a group, identify what you believe to be the most common traits among all the naturalists you've studied, and list them across the top of a grid. Down the side, list the names of the people studied. Place a check mark in each column to indicate whether the naturalist demonstrated the trait. Ask students to reflect on the information and write a short essay about the exercise. They may want to address questions such as, What quality/trait is common to most naturalists? Is that surprising? Why? If one or more of the group lacked a certain trait, why do you think that is? Did they have to make up for not having it?

Action Plan

Biographies offer many opportunities for students to find inspiration through the actions of

