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Abstract

The tradition of oral storytelling is an art that stretches back to humankind's earliest cultures. While storytelling is often considered as a form of entertainment, it has also long been used as a teaching tool as well - a way of engaging listeners to come to new understanding of their world through subtle means. It is my belief that stories, particularly stories with a clear tie to students' sense of place, can be more widely applied to effectively generate interest in specific scientific topics and help students to form emotional connections with the topics under discussion. The following personal narrative describes an example of my own experience in using a traditional Arapaho tale to help a group of 4th-6th girl scouts learn about the ecological role of turkey vultures.

Author/Artist Bio

I am a research associate for an Earth science non-profit and CIG certified environmental educator. Through my current enrollment in the AIP Masters program at University Miami Ohio I have been researching practices for applying inquiry based learning to education ranging from an elementary school level to adult community engagement.

Keywords

vultures, storytelling, oral tradition, education, children

Cover Page Footnote

Special thanks to Miami University Ohio, Denver Zoo, and the girl scout and troop leaders of Basalt, Colorado.

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Elise C. Osenga

The day after Halloween, we met between the baseball field and the playground. The six girl scouts, ages 8 through 12, skittered about. A blue sky overhead promised a warm Colorado day, and the grass was still green. I wondered speculatively how much candy from the night before the girls had eaten before gathering. I was here, after all, to teach them a science lesson outside of school and hoped to capture their attention for a couple of hours. Luckily, I knew the magic words.

“I’d like to begin,” I said, “With a story.”

Storytelling is among the oldest of arts, and recent research has indicated that many of the same qualities that makes stories an effective form of entertainment, such as emotional connections and a clear arc of events, can also make them an effective tool for teaching. That ability to tap into emotional connections may be key in using storytelling to create impactful environmental education. In *Beyond Ecophobia*, education writer David Sobel presents the argument that emotional connections formed with nature in childhood have an influence on conservation behaviors in adulthood. He adds that the foundation for these emotional connections is formed by activity, play, and empathy-generating experiences. Curious to test if storytelling could contribute to the formation of positive emotional connections with an animal that often has negative associations, I designed a lesson for girls scouts that intertwined storytelling with basic anatomy facts intended to inspire interest in vultures.

I chose vultures as the focus because they fill an important ecological niche but are often maligned in popular culture. They are cast as the henchmen of villains in Disney films, and their circling is used to signal danger and death in Westerns. Perception of vultures matters in the conservation world because these scavengers are threatened by human activity. In India they have been unintentionally poisoned by medications remaining in livestock. Around the world, including in the US, they are regularly affected by traces of lead left behind in game animals by hunters' bullets. Meanwhile, in multiple countries in Africa, vultures are threatened by intentional poisoning of corpses as poachers try to avoid detection by rangers.

In Colorado, the local species of vulture, the turkey vulture (*Cathartes aura*), has stable populations, but even so, the turkey vulture can help learners make a local connection to the global concept of scavenger importance. With an impressive wingspan of up to 6 feet, turkey vultures have the potential to be quite a charismatic ambassador, and their distinctive silhouette makes them easy to identify as they glide across the sky.

Because of evidence that too much "doom and gloom" when teaching young children can lead to them shutting down emotionally, I focused on building curiosity about vultures, rather than on introducing the threats these birds face. Before the lesson began, I asked each of the girls to draw a vulture and write three words that came into her mind when she heard "vulture." Most of the girls had heard of vultures but knew little about them. For example, one member of the group recalled seeing a vulture in a friend's backyard, another girl thought that vultures were small birds, and another envisioned a small mammal. I gave a brief description of vultures, then gathered the girls for the story.

The story was “The Girl Who Climbed to the Sky,” an Arapaho tale shared by Glenn Welker. It was selected for relatability for the learners: the main character is a girl herself, and the Arapaho people from whom the story descends are native to Colorado, which is the girls’ own home, as well. In “The Girl Who Climbed to the Sky” a young woman is lured from her people to be trapped to in the lonely, gray basin of the sky. Only Vulture has broad enough wings to carry her toward the Earth, and with the help of Hawk he delivers the girl to her people who, in gratitude, henceforth leave a portion of every large hunt for vulture and hawk to enjoy.

In the story, Vulture’s role is subtle, but without such an immense wingspan, the adaptation that makes vultures such successful scavengers, Vulture could never perform his critical action. In telling the story, I let Vulture glide in naturally. I dwelt on the girl’s anxiety to escape from the sky, her careful preparation to do so, and her peril as she dangled from a rope thousands of feet above the ground. When Vulture soars in, it is just another step in the story arc, a resolution of the conflict.

The rest of the lesson involved visualizing the wingspan of a vulture and discussing what the term “scavenger” means. Although assessment of the lesson was inconclusive with such a small group, I considered the storytelling aspect a success. The girl scouts (and their mothers) leaned in when the girl in the story initiated her escape and smiled when vulture arrived. By the end of the lesson, every single girl understood that vultures are unusually large and several had added “cool” or “interesting” to their word list.

Because this lesson occurred only once, it is difficult to ascertain long term outcomes.

For this single lesson, however, starting with a story allowed me to effectively capture the

interest of my learner group and address biological concepts that the listeners later recalled well. Having spent Halloween as figures from popular culture just a day before, these girls now spent the afternoon as bald-headed birds of prey. As a consequence, they gained a sense of wonder about a bird that had previously held little interest for them and learned important lessons about adaptation, without realizing that they had done anything more than listen to an engaging tale.

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