

Theme of nature in children's literature and its role in shaping environmental empathy

Introduction

Over the past few generations the definition of childhood and activities associated with it changed dramatically. Since the 1970s, the area around home considered safe for unsupervised play declined by 90% (Gaster, 1991) and children started to dominate the surveys measuring the estimated time in front of the screens, currently averaging 17 hours of television (Charles, 2011) and 20 hours online a week (Jackson, 2008).

The new, indoor and mostly sedentary lifestyle of the youth has a profound effect on their wellbeing. In 2005 Richard Louv defined the wide range of physical and emotional ailments resulting from lack of contact with nature as Nature Deficit Disorder (NDD). The high price we pay for the alienation from natural world manifests itself in almost all aspects of our lives: from lower attention span and diminished use of the senses to looser social ties and lack of mindfulness in the perception of the world around us (Ibid.). Furthermore, recent studies suggest even more gruesome reality of "ecophobia", the phenomenon where children lacking direct contact with wilderness associate natural environment with fear and potential danger, rather than possibility of adventure (Sobel, 2019). In the era of climate change, accelerating loss of biodiversity and unstable ecosystems, the problem that we face as a humanity can be summed up well by David Attenborough (2010):

*No one will protect what they don't care about;
and no one will care about what they have never experienced.*

Children do not know nature at best, fear it and avoid it at worst. If these trends are not reversed in the near future, it will be hard to guarantee that a new generation will be ready to change the world engaging in sustainable and eco-friendly behaviours. In my work I decided to look at this problem from the perspective of language. Children's literature might be a powerful tool in shaping environmental literacy, so in my work I will conduct an analysis of the primary sources in context of the messages that are conveyed, the tools that are used and the topics that are being omitted.

Lost words

Being Polish, but spending many of my school years in English speaking environment, I find myself in a unique position to look into language usage and patterns in two, seemingly similar, developed countries with comparable climate and biodiversity. Unfortunately, what they also seem to share is the same trouble with which children recognize the common species of their flora and fauna. In a recent study with the participation of English speaking pupils (partly from Great Britain), children aged eight and above were much more accurate in recognizing Pokémon species (Balmford et al., 2002), rather than common species such as “oak” or “beetle” (50% versus 80% accuracy). Furthermore, National Trust Survey (2008) estimated that half of the children could not distinguish bee from wasp and a study by Anne Bebbington (2005) showed that the problem also appears on higher levels of education. In Poland the situation is not much better, although there are no considerable studies to show this. Even though the term Nature Deficit Disorder was awkwardly translated, there seem to be no original research in this field. However, Dariusz Kucharski from Nature Education Centre in Warsaw, whose students come from both kindergartens and universities, confirms: “the knowledge of not only elementary school students is deteriorating. I showed the first-year biology students photos of 30 common birds in Poland. They only recognized three, confusing the names” (Kucharski, 2018).

Part of the explanation of this worrisome statistics lays in the environmental knowledge of the previous generation. According to RSPB “Birdwatch” survey (2017), quarter of adults thought penne was a species of bird rather than a pasta, but almost unanimously 90% of them declared that they want their children to learn more about common British wildlife (Ibid.).

It is clear that the vocabulary describing the natural world around us is slowly fading away. The loss of natural world that is happening in the real time is accompanied by a parallel extinction of the terms that help to describe it.

Lost words project

Robert Macfarlane, the British author of “Lost Words”, was the first one to counteract this enormous gap in children’s language: “I (...) believe that names matter, and that the ways we address the natural world can actively form our imaginative and ethical relations with it” (Macfarlane, 2017). His book, beautifully illustrated by Jackie Morris, was designed to “summon

the magic of nature” (Walsh, 2018) and present the natural environment as full of charm and mystery. The need for such a project was quickly confirmed by the feedback and the amount of copies ordered to primary school libraries (Macfarlane, 2019). So far, no similar project was ever launched in Poland, nor the book was translated. One of the possible reasons I found that might explain it is the continuity with which Polish traditional nature primer books are issued (for example: “Primer of Our Nature”). In Poland introducing children to nature is strongly considered a role of parents (Szydłowska-Pierzak, 2020) and there seems to be a general consensus that a blueprint for understanding and valuing the natural world survived in the communal imagination (Ibid.). The assumed attitude to nature can be well-observed in the layout and illustrations of said books.



Figure 1: On the left: expressive illustrations from “Lost Words”; on the right: images of common Polish species with detailed descriptions (“Primer of Our Nature”).

In “Lost Words” the author highlights the vanishing of words, reinforcing the message with the paintings of simultaneously disappearing species. Polish “Primer of Our Nature” lacks this

fineness of expression. Macfarlane creates an environment in which a child can rediscover and reimagine his relation to surrounding nature, whereas Polish nature books rely heavily on the assumption of some underlying nature literacy that the book has a role to deepen. Polish factual, descriptive form was so far not challenged. It seems that British children were given a chance to look at nature not through the eyes of their parents, but through a completely new, much needed, more empathetic standpoint.

Experience and emotion

Throughout the books that I familiarized myself with for this project, it seems that the borderline between the Polish and British children's nature literature coincides with the axis of the empiricism spectrum. In Polish books, both fiction and non-fiction, the emphasis is on personal experience, the main messages that I was able to distinguish were "explore it yourself" "pick it up so you can survey it from the shorter distance". Traditional herbaria, encouraging to pick the plants from the neighbourhood are still issued in new editions, more modern in style, but exactly the same in form.



Figure 2: Pages from Polish Herbaria with the outlined space for reader's own specimen.

Noticeably, British authors have entered a new phase in this genre. A modernised approach can be distinguished by its emotional tinge, paying much more attention to the spiritual connection and appreciation for nature. The main assumption of this trend seems to be that the nature can be experienced and enjoyed even when physically far away from it, which is a carefully

constructed paradigm useful especially in educating children who live in big, clustered agglomerations devoid of direct interaction with wilderness. At the same time it is worth emphasizing that this kind of narration definitely does not put the recipient in a passive position, it requires imagination and great attention from the reader, as well as practicing mindfulness. These two approaches highlighting completely different values are reflected in the choice of protagonists, setting of the story and the most popular themes.

Protagonists and problems

Aforementioned differences in the intention with which the text is written are reflected in the characters that are chosen to lead the story. The literature in Great Britain shows a tendency to narrate the stories from the children's point of view ("A walk in the forest"; "A River"; "Lorax"; "Just A Dream"; "10 Things I Can Do to Help My World"), which corresponds well with the motto that children are at the centre of all events, what counts is their imagination, heightened senses and intuition. Ability to look at nature through the eyes of another child make this journey less challenging. Becoming familiar with the subject is much easier for a young reader in the company of the other, more experienced explorer.

Similarly, the choice of protagonist in Polish books is very intentional. Here, the motivation is to fully immerse the reader in the new environment, therefore authors put nature itself in the foreground; often selecting animals as heroes ("This and that forest"; "Hela the seal"; "Where is the elephant?").



Figure 3: On the left: illustrations from "A walk in the woods" and "Just A Dream" emphasizing the position of the child and its relation to nature. To compare, on the right: image from Polish "This and that forest" telling the adventures of wild animals.

Regardless of these character choices, all of the stories take place outside. The physical location of the forest, backyard or park constantly negotiates with the fantastical world of imagination constituting another good tool for taming nature. As Macfarlane noticed in his first book on the language and landscapes “Landmarks” (2015), the physical space is just a template for children’s imagination and invention to create their own territory, much safer and comfortable. Representing outside locations in the books I have read gives inspiration and encourages personal exploration. By these means authors skilfully merge the word and the act, encouraging kids to enrich their perspective both through learning the language of nature and experiencing it first-hand (Ibid.).

Furthermore, both British and Polish authors target the same environmental issues. Among them there can be found deforestation (“This and that forest”; “Where is the elephant?”; “The Lorax”; “Just A Dream”) and pollution (“Hela the seal”, “Ekozosia saves the world”; “Just A Dream”).



Figure 4: The environmental issues covered in Polish and British books are very similar and they cover deforestation (“Where is the elephant?”); littering (“Hela the seal”) and air pollution (“Just A Dream”).

What seems to be missing is the clear link between the problems and solutions that can be found in the stories. Some of them explore the polluted environments, as in “Hela the seal”, where sea animals discover trash in their homes, but there is no comment on how the garbage

could have got there. Other, as British “10 Things I Can Do to Help My World” explore the little ways in which everyone can help the planet, but without giving clear examples on how it might influence the world around. Such clear separation of these topics in the studied books suggest that children are not presented with clear reasoning behind sustainable and eco-friendly initiatives. Indeed, in a small study conducted in Polish kindergartens, only 33% of children could clearly outline the activities that harm nature and only in a general way (Radkowska, 2020). Moreover, over half of the participants could not explain the reason behind popular eco-conscious activities, such as taking shorter showers or recycling trash (Ibid.).

From literature to formal education

It is out of dispute that the projects and innovations that the young generation will have a chance to introduce will be based on their knowledge and willingness to live in harmony with nature. Maniates (2001) argues that basing on current review of children’s literature there is too much fragmentation in the subject. Based on my observations I agree that there is a need to re-examine the way problems of the global scale are represented to the youngest audience. We need more holistic approach, where the causes and effects of nature degradation are clearly and logically related. Dr Dianne McKnight (2010) believes that literature might be a powerful tool in this transition, mediating between entertainment that sparks joy and wonder and coherent information transfer.

The individualization of responsibility and schematization of eco-conscious behaviour, although it is easier to describe, in the long term might be harmful (Maniates, 2001). After a lecture children remember to switch off the light, but it is our role to ensure they know it does not exhaust the projects they can undertake. Rediscovering nature should gradually turn into the feeling of responsibility for our planet.

As of today even official directives do not give much guidance. According to latest UNESCO report (2018), the main recommendations are to spend time outside with children and familiarize them with nature. We need much more than that. Literature has a potential to create emotional connection with the environment and develop empathy that are necessary to inspire change.

Conclusions

There is a great potential for “fostering environmental empathy” (McKnight, 2010) through the literature addressed to the youngest. British and Polish literature review is a great example that there is no one correct way to introduce the topic of nature to children and it is uplifting that there are different approaches to the subject young readers can choose from. Through the choice of protagonists, visuals and setting, the authors express different ways in which one can connect with the wild. However, there is a significant gap that needs filling in environmental education that would transform initial curiosity and playfulness into deep understanding of the mechanics of our planet and the responsibility we share for it.

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