Who Belongs? Rethinking Equity in the Outdoors

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Educating for sustainability is the work of my former urban classroom and the work I now do with teachers and schools. This is work rooted in hope for a healthier future for our environment and our human communities. It is also rooted in a caring connection and sense of responsibility to the natural world. These are characteristics that I likely share with all of you. And I imagine that making such meaningful connections possible for all the young people we connect with is something we each aspire to. After all, given the climate crisis that we face, it is what we need.

So, as educators and community members, how do we do that? Research and experience tell us that a child’s early positive experiences engaging in the natural world is an important factor in that child developing environmental behaviors in adulthood.¹ I would also add that we need to have a sense of belonging to and fall in love with the places in which we dwell if we are to heal them. Let’s pause for a moment to consider how you and I developed our own abilities to be in relationship to place.

I’m a first-generation Filipina-American settler in this land. My parents came here for work in the late ‘60s and raised their four children in the suburbs of Upstate New York while also supporting their extended family back home. We were outsiders there, and I know I never developed a sense of belonging in the place where I grew up, a place and time where assimilation into Whiteness was the expectation, and our schooling did nothing to counter the constant messaging to people of Color that “you don’t belong.” I would later understand that the possibility that someone like me could feel that they belonged was a yet-unimagined possibility, an unexamined conundrum for my peers and the community.

But I had the advantages of growing up in a stable middle-class family, and my parents had the interest and ability to spend time with us outdoors. At home we rode bikes, played in the snow, picked apples, and tended the garden. We went camping and hiking and fishing and swimming in the ocean. We


Aimee and her dog Hygge on a hiking trip
had regular picnics and BBQs by the lake with close family friends.

My experiences were—and are—a counter-story to the dominant imagination of what kinds of people are recreating outdoors together. When you hear the words skiing and hiking and camping, who appears as the central characters? Despite living these counter-narratives in my brown Asian body, my own media-soaked American mind immediately conjures up images of joyful able-bodied White people communing with nature. Take a moment to recognize that limitation on our collective imagination. In response to an open-ended prompt, we tend to unconsciously reproduce the dominant narrative. If we aren’t intentionally imagining a more diverse narrative, we will reproduce the status quo and continue to limit access to the outdoors. I am grateful to my parents for planting in me the seeds of joy and wonder and reverence for the natural world. Through their actions, they opened a window onto the possibility of deep connection to the mountains, waters, sky, and soil of the places I might inhabit. I am especially grateful because I know that to have this kind of access to the outdoors is a privilege, but it shouldn’t be.

At school, it was a different story. My middle school is just blocks away from the shores of a freshwater lake. Yet throughout my entire thirteen years of public school education, I recall going outside for learning only two times: once in fourth grade, on a field trip to the Erie Canal, and once in ninth-grade Earth Science class to a graveyard down the street from the high school. For me, school was a place that was disconnected from the natural world and all that was happening beyond those classroom windows.

To contextualize this a bit more, the lake closest to my childhood home is Onondaga Lake, a lake that in her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer calls “The Sacred and the...
Superfund.” Unknowingly, I grew up on the ancestral lands of the Onondaga people. The shores of the toxic lake where we picnicked and rode our bikes is the site where five Indigenous nations came together as the Iroquois or Haudenosaunee Confederacy and agreed to live by the Great Law of Peace. It is also the site where generations of chemical companies dumped their toxic waste, caking the shoreline with white sludge and coating the bottom of the lake with mercury. In 2006, the Onondaga Nation filed a land rights action with the federal government for the legal title to their homeland, a move that would have enabled them to steward the land and to bring about healing between the land, lake, and all the people who live in the watershed. In 2010, the federal court dismissed this case.3

I share this legal story because I see it as a tragic missed opportunity for our schools and our community. When I partner with educators to design learning for sustainability, we use the triple Venn framework, pictured below. What if my schools had centered interconnectedness, sense of place, and the ability for each of us to make a difference? What if, while generations of industrial workers were dumping toxic waste into the sacred lake, schools were also nourishing a love of place and a sense of responsibility to our natural and human communities in generations of school children? Would there have been greater support from the community and within the government for the land rights suit of the Onondaga Nation? How would the outcomes have been different?

As educators and community members, this is our responsibility to our shared future. Public perceptions of who accesses positive experiences in the natural world is limited by racialized

Location of Liverpool Middle School, near Onondaga Lake

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biases and systems of generational inequities. Schools—and childhood—offer us amazing levers for change. Each year we get the chance to reimagine what is possible for our youth today and for the future we are currently creating. Each day is an opportunity to harness the power of school culture and practice to instill a deep sense of community and the actual possibility of belonging for each and every child.

I challenge you to push on the edges of your own vision of who belongs in relationship with the natural world and who the agents of change might be. In the words of Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, who writes about the interplay of race and imagination in literature, to make our world anew requires the emancipation of the imagination itself.

Aimee Arandia Østensen (she/her) is a first generation Filipina-American educator committed to transforming the educational system towards justice and sustainability. She envisions a future in which all children have a deep sense of belonging and love for the places in which they dwell. Aimee’s pathway has been a spiral of diverse experiences in learning, teaching, and being in urban, suburban, and rural spaces. She weaves all of these experiences into her work today as a professional learning facilitator in education for sustainability with Shelburne Farms Institute for Sustainable Schools and adjunct faculty at Antioch University New England.

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