

- Orr, David. "Reflections on Water and Oil," in *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and Human Prospect* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1994).
- Ray, Janisse, and David Scott. Watershed Journal, <http://www.lawsonsfork.org/journal/Journal.html>.
- Snow, C. P. *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- South Carolina's Fifth Grade Educational Standards. <http://www.sceoc.org/guides-to-scc-standards.htm>.
- Taylor, David, and Gary Henderson. *The Lawson's Fork: Headwaters to Confluence*. Hub City Writers Project, 2000.

## Beneath the Surface

Natural Landscapes, Cultural Meanings,  
and Teaching About Place

KENT C. RYDEN

In one way or another, almost all of my pedagogical activity involves teaching about place. The more I think about it, though, the more I realize that what's really going on is that I'm allowing places to teach me. And to be a good student of place, I've learned, you have to be a careful reader and listener. It's easy to be beguiled by the immediate qualities of an attractive landscape. But we need to look beyond those qualities to the many other stories that may be hidden there in order to understand just how rich a resource places can be for teaching and learning, and just how important their lessons can be.

Let me explain. I've always been drawn to places that have complicated stories to tell. Indeed, I think the reason that I've followed this professional path is that I've always lived in places that have given me plenty to think about. I spent half my childhood in western Connecticut, and followed that up with chunks of adulthood in central Rhode Island and southern Maine. All three of these places offered me plenty of woods to tramp around in—one of my favorite ways to spend an afternoon or a day—and cemented my love of being in the natural world. And yet these were

New England woods, and New England woods always try to teach you more than meets the eye if you know how to look at them the right way. I never had to walk far in my nearby woods before I came across a stone wall or an old foundation; my favorite swimming hole in Connecticut backed up behind the dam of a long-gone paper mill. My natural haunts were full of human artifacts, evidence that many people had been there long before me trying to make the landscape produce useful things for them, be it crops or hay or water power. The places that I enjoyed for their green and watery qualities, I came to understand, looked that way only because of things that farmers and builders had done there in the past.

As I've continued to read and travel and walk around over the years, I've realized that the lessons I've learned in New England can be applied anywhere. Any landscape—even one we think of as epitomizing “nature”—is a kind of historical artifact, the end result of natural and cultural processes working together. This hasn't affected my love of the New England woods. Far from it. As with the books I read, I like my landscapes to be challenging and thought-provoking. But I've also picked up a lesson that's important for anyone who teaches about place. Even as we instill a love and understanding of the natural world, we don't tell the whole story if we go no deeper than the leafy and wooded surface. And the more of the story we tell, the better and more responsible our teaching can be: if we understand that places look the way they do because of things that people have done in the past, we can think more effectively about what we might do to guide those places into a healthy future. Once we understand that “nature” is not separate from “culture,” we have to think more carefully about the roles we must inevitably take in shaping and sustaining the places that we love so well.

I teach in a graduate program in American and New England studies, and thus I've been able to bring many different disciplinary perspectives together when my students and I talk about place. Depending on the class and the particular assignment, we might bring the lenses of literary studies, environmental history, cultural geography, and other related fields to bear as we try to understand what a particular place is trying to teach us. In some places, the many layers of meaning that a place contains stand out with particular clarity, and I find that these places make especially good teaching tools, both for understanding a specific locality and for raising questions about the complex nature of place more broadly. In the summer of 2005, for example, I included Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* as part of my “Landmarks of American Nature Writing” seminar. On the last day of class, we gathered in the coastal Maine town of Wells to visit the Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge, a place with many preexisting meanings that visitors have to encounter before they walk through the refuge itself. Their vision is influenced by the historical reputation of Rachel Carson, in some cases by her writings (particularly *Silent Spring*), by the official endorsement of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and by the very notion of a “wildlife refuge” and the implications that such a term suggests. Once visitors enter the refuge, they are admonished to stay on a wide and well-maintained path, provided with scenic outlooks that focus their attention in certain directions for certain teaching purposes, and encouraged to bring along an interpretive trail guide and an explanatory pamphlet that nudge them toward grasping what the Fish and Wildlife Service explicitly wants them to think the place means.

And it means many things at once. The refuge is at the same time a coastal Maine salt marsh, a piece of government property, a symbol of

American attitudes toward the natural world, a physical reminder of a particular writer's books, and a stop on a Maine tourist itinerary that helps people understand, as our state slogan puts it, "the way life should be." Some of these identities overlap, some contradict each other. As my students and I walked through the refuge together, thinking about the literature class we had just finished, reading the lessons that the landscape had been specifically shaped to tell us, talking about the history of "nature" in American culture, we appreciated the thick bundle of meanings that the place made available for us to tease apart, meanings that were both grounded in a specific spot in coastal Maine and pointed to much larger issues of how to interpret places in general. The Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge makes the process fairly easy, but it also suggests questions that we can ask wherever we go, in landscapes that aren't helpfully labeled for us and where the trail guides are drawn up by our own whims.

While Rachel Carson's books about the ocean and the life it contains—*The Sea Around Us* and *The Edge of the Sea*—were quite popular when first published in the 1950s, she is probably best known today as the author of *Silent Spring*, a book that many historians credit with helping to curb the widespread use of pesticides, particularly DDT, in American agriculture. Carson was a sometime resident of Southport Island in Maine, and so it seems entirely appropriate to honor her with a wildlife refuge in the state that she loved. At the same time, *Silent Spring* is not so much a book about preserving nature as it is about safeguarding the health of both human and animal populations in the places that they share. Carson's view, like the one I developed in the New England woods, is of a world in which the natural and the cultural are tightly entwined; she begins her book with a nightmare "Fable for Tomorrow,"

in which "a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings" suffers seemingly inexplicable sickness and death among human, bird, and plant populations. While Carson supported the preservation of nature, her most famous and influential book locates nature in towns, in backyards, in our own bodies. Nature lives where we do, rather than out there somewhere beyond where the pavement ends.

The class and I had noted and discussed Carson's view of nature, and we had also talked about its difference from the versions of wild nature that emerge from the pages of writers from John Muir to Edward Abbey. These were the literary lenses that we brought with us to the refuge, and thus we were immediately struck by how the landscape of the place presented us with an understanding of nature that was the exact opposite of the one that Carson worked out in the pages of her book. The concept of nature that we saw in the refuge was one that draws and polices a firm line between the world of nature and the world of humans rather than a single world of mutually involved parts. Even the idea of a "wildlife refuge" is telling, as it evokes the image of a secure hiding place where wild animals can be safe from the nasty humans outside the gates; it is a landscape that is "theirs" as opposed to "ours." Humans may enter, but only on certain restrictive terms. The class and I were struck by the ways in which our experience in the refuge resembled a visit to a museum, where attractive specimens of high-quality nature are displayed for our viewing pleasure but always kept behind figurative velvet ropes.

An information kiosk at the entrance to the refuge's walking trail (supplemented by the official Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge brochure and a separate pamphlet on the refuge's seasonal bird populations) touted the wonders within: white-tailed deer, river otter,

beaver, fox, coyote, moose, harbor seals, turtles and frogs, and scores of bird species ranked by their “abundant,” “common,” “uncommon,” “occasional,” or “rare” appearances. To our amusement, we didn’t see anything as interesting and exciting as a moose or a seal; I think we topped out at a snowy egret or two. Then again, we weren’t able to search extensively for the foxes and otters that might have been hiding from us, for we were admonished by signs and brochures to stay on the trail to avoid damaging vegetation and disturbing wildlife. A sensible precaution, to be sure, but one that heightened our sense that we were in a place where we were alien intruders and where nature had to be admired from a distance, since we would only mess up if we actually came in contact with it. If wildlife deigned to show itself to us, we could count ourselves lucky.

The refuge provides a trail guide to the one-mile loop that winds through its woods and along the edge of its salt marsh, informing visitors about the interactions of land and water that characterize this particular location, and about the flora and fauna that occupy its various microhabitats. Anyone reading the guide thus gains a sense of the ecological complexity of the refuge’s landscape, and yet that complexity is simplified by the museum-like quality of the trail, which reduces an interdependent mix of land, water, and wildlife to a series of pretty scenes. The guide brings viewers to a sequence of numbered vantage points, sometimes enhanced by wooden observation decks, where they have presented to them a view titled “The Edge of the Marsh,” say, or “Hemlock Hollow,” “The Tidal Flux,” “Meanderings”—titles that suggest paintings, and therefore perpetuate the idea that nature here is fundamentally a static and visual thing, not a bundle of vigorous natural processes or something in which humans participate. Indeed, some of

the explanations in the trail guide serve as figurative “Do Not Touch” signs, as when we learn at “The Edge of the Marsh” that “undisturbed coastal wetlands that have natural vegetation along their edges produce dense meadows of grasses and other plants that support abundant wildlife. When marsh edges are cleared for buildings or otherwise disturbed, use of the marsh by wildlife declines.” Moreover, by highlighting eleven discrete spots in the refuge, the trail and its guide suggest that the segments of landscape between the numbered views are unimportant, not as interesting and meaningful as the places where we are told to stop and look and learn, an impression that again obscures any sense of the refuge landscape as a dynamic and seamless whole. Instead, it is a series of pictures in an exhibition; no one remembers what the floors look like in the Louvre.

The class appreciated these ironies, joking that we shouldn’t crane our necks too far while enjoying the views lest we break out of the frame that the trail’s designers intended us to see through. This pointed to a further irony: the fact that our experience of “undisturbed” coastal scenes was accomplished through a lot of human work, as we were led through the refuge on a carefully designed and maintained trail, had our eyes pointed in certain directions, and were instructed in what to think about what we saw. It’s the sort of landscape that tries to deny its own human-made quality, though, in that you are encouraged to enjoy scenes of natural beauty without thinking about how you got there. The cultural history of the landscape is hidden in plain sight, as it were. The Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge is itself a humanly created thing, of course. It is a bounded property on the map that separates a “wild” world from a tamed one; it is a category of federally protected and managed property; and the simple measure of deciding that some-

thing is “wild” is itself a cultural act. The refuge’s official brochure does have a page acknowledging that the southern Maine coast has a human history, which seems to break down into four periods: Native American settlements, colonial occupation, shipbuilding and fishing in the 1800s, and tourism and recreational use from the mid-nineteenth century (“Interest and access were particularly spurred by the arrival of the railroad in 1842”) to the present. Extractive uses of the landscape stopped long ago, it seems, and the coast has been able to be “nature” ever since, embraced by urban tourists when they need a refreshing break. At any rate, none of this sketchy history—Native American sites, say, or evidence of building and launching ships—is visible from the refuge’s trail. The human world stops, it seems, when we turn off of Route 9 and walk away from the parking lot into the woods.

One of the dangers of being a teacher is that sometimes people think you make things too complicated. This is the point at which a student usually cocks an eyebrow at me and says, “Oh, come on. Aren’t you being a little too cynical? Don’t wildlife refuges do a lot of good regardless of what they make us think about nature?” Of course they do. I am all for protecting habitat wherever it may be, and a place like the Carson refuge can teach people a lot about how salt marshes work and the role they play in broad cycles of plant and animal life. The refuge is becoming more and more an isolated island of “nature” along the rapidly developing southern Maine coast, but the encroaching tides of “culture” make its presence that much more vital. Still, one of the things that my university pays me for is to be a contrarian (or so I like to believe), and I feel obliged to teach my students to think critically about places rather than taking them at face value or ignoring them completely.

The Carson refuge amply repaid our visit because it clearly reveals many

facets of meaning at once. We approached it through the literary overlay of Rachel Carson’s writings and the environmentalist connotations of the name “Rachel Carson” itself. Once there, we encountered a carefully shaped landscape that conveyed a somewhat different message than that delivered by *Silent Spring*. Rather than encourage us to be stewards of the nature that surrounds our daily lives, the actual message that was communicated reinforced some common American cultural assumptions about nature as a place apart, one where humans can visit but never live. That is, the physical landscape of the refuge also connects to much broader trends in American cultural history, trends that run through the works of a John Muir and an Edward Abbey on the one hand to the national parks and the popularity of ecotourism on the other. It is difficult not to bring this larger framework to bear when encountering the refuge landscape and considering its meanings, and so the Carson refuge in the end is both a specific concrete spot of earth and a summary of an entire world of literary and cultural history. When we as a class set out to read this landscape as a communicative text, we found that the trail guide was only the most immediate of many guides that we had available to interpret what we saw.

As I have said, the Carson refuge made this process easy. It is an obviously authored place, one that tries to give you a specific message both through written text, in the form of signage and brochures, and through the carefully crafted shape of the landscape itself. It is difficult to finish a walk on the trail and not come away with a sense that you have just seen an official version of “Nature”—a nature, moreover, that is comfortably recognizable, filled with special things of the sort that you can see only when you visit a place like this. The messages that the Carson refuge intentionally beams to you are not particularly

challenging or complicated. Still, once you become conscious of the way that the refuge works to shape your thought, you realize that you can look beyond those meanings through methods and habits of seeing and questioning that you can bring to any landscape, any place, even those that are not so obviously authored. Not all landscapes guide you through on a trail that you are forbidden to leave, but they nevertheless shape and constrain our movements, putting us in certain relationships with nature and other people, and in that way send subtle messages about the expected relationship between the two. Moreover, as I learned in my New England woods, every place is an environmental text, from a second-growth forest to a wildlife refuge to the residential landscapes where we all live. All acts of building (or choosing not to build), from houses to roads to fences to farms to cities, grow out of an environmental ethic, a set of assumptions about what is right, proper, and necessary to do to the environments in which we find ourselves. When we read places carefully, then, we see how they make visible the social, cultural, economic, and environmental histories and priorities of the people who make them and dwell in them.

It's not always easy to tease out these many levels of significance, particularly when you're walking down the street, as opposed to visiting a place like the Carson refuge. This is where being interdisciplinary comes in handy. As a folklorist, I have gathered stories from residents of a north Idaho mining district; while the mines tell a story of human dominance over nature and its resources, patterns of local narrative reveal a place whose residents see it in much more ambivalent terms. As a cultural geographer, I know how to see landscapes as texts, as material culture that grows out of human minds as well as human wills, as sets of meaningful objects as well as practical artifacts that keep the rain off

our heads and let us move from one place to another. As a historian, I put the environmental assumptions that words and things embody into a larger context, linking the thoughts about nature that are symbolized around me with the thoughts of people in other times and places. And as a teacher, I try to get my students to see and understand in these ways as well, to find in even the most everyday scenes an eloquent testimony to the thoughts and acts of the people who have made them, who have used them, and who live and move in them today. Every piece of evidence tells another part of the story. And as I said before, I think it's important that we refuse to let our students complacently take places at face value; rather, we must encourage them to try to understand the many cultural meanings and historical tales that those places are waiting to teach them. Of course, I don't expect that other teachers will be able to take in large bodies of scholarship from disciplines outside their own in order to be able to teach about place in this broadly interdisciplinary way. Still, if we can at least suggest to students the richness of the places they see every day, the officially sanctioned and clearly authored ones as well as the obscure and mundane ones, we can increase their pleasure in their experience of the world and, if we're lucky, make them more responsible human beings as well.

How? Quite simply, every place is meaningful. The world is not a blank globe on which we can do whatever we want; as I began learning at an early age, every place bears stories, memories, the physical leavings of people long gone. I would hope that no one would want to bulldoze the Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge and turn it over to the highest bidder. When we think about it, though, every place is its own version of the Carson refuge, which may not stand for "Nature" so clearly, may not seem to stand for nature in any obvious way at all—think of your

average urban city block—and yet it bears a layer of imaginative, social, cultural, and historical significance all its own. There is much to disturb at the refuge, and it's not always animal habitat and fragile ecosystem. Both natural and human ecologies deserve our attention and respect, and we should engage in a process of long and hard thought before we choose to disturb them—if indeed we disturb them at all. And if some places seem, frankly, socially and environmentally hopeless, we can still understand them as bad examples so that we can collectively do better in the future. Places have much to teach us; indeed, they teach us every day without our necessarily realizing it. And the more we know—the more questions we can ask from more perspectives—the more we learn.

## COURSE READINGS

Asterisked entries are from the *Norton Book of Nature Writing*, edited by Robert Finch and John Elder. New York: Norton, 2002.

Abbey, Edward. *Desert Solitaire*.

\*Audubon, John James. *Ornithological Biography*, excerpt.

Austin, Mary. *The Land of Little Rain*.

Bartram, William. *Travels*.

Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*.

\*Catlin, George. *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians*, excerpt.

Dillard, Annie. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

\*Eiseley, Loren. "The Judgment of the Birds" and "The Star Thrower."

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Nature."

\*Hoagland, Edward. "Hailing the Elusory Mountain Lion."

\*King, Clarence. *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada*, excerpt.

\*Lopez, Barry. "The Raven."

Muir, John. *The Mountains of California*.

\*Powell, John Wesley. *Exploration of the Colorado River*, excerpt.

Snyder, Gary. *The Practice of the Wild*.

Thoreau, Henry David. "Walking."

PART III  MEETING THE CHALLENGES