

All Species Projects

Using art, drama, and pageantry to build a sense of community and a rapport with other species

by Marty Kraft

Subject areas: art, science, anthropology, drama

Key concepts: biodiversity, consensus building, perspective

Skills: mask making, dramatic skills, negotiation

Location: indoors and outdoors

Time: 1 week to 2 months

Materials: student journals, research tools, mask, costume, and float-making materials

In *The Practice of the Wild*, Gary Snyder tells of riding in a pickup truck in Australia with an Aboriginal man. As they traveled along, the man was telling stories at an amazing pace — too fast for them to be told properly. Wondering why he would do such a thing, Snyder learned that the man's people remember and teach their ancient culture and relationship to the land as they move through the bush. Each feature of the landscape relates to a specific story or part of a story. At the speed of a moving pickup, the stories had to be told faster.

What does this say about the relationship between this man, his people, and the land that they inhabit — or that inhabits them? In North America, perhaps only aboriginal people can truly appreciate the significance of this relationship. Most of the rest of us have become disconnected from humanity's tribal community beginnings and multigenerational connections to land. Our children now grow up with television, the Internet, and games that offer electronic representations of reality. Walking outdoors, they see mostly asphalt, monocultural lawn, and ornamental shrubs — substitutes for rock outcrops, forest, or prairie. How can they form a relationship with something they rarely encounter?

The systems we have developed to supply our basic needs further disconnect us from land. We flick a light switch and see the apparent consequence of our action. What we don't see is, for example, the strip mining of coal, the railroad cars, the mercury entering the atmosphere from a smokestack, the dumping of ash. These are also consequences of flicking that light switch.

All Species Projects offer a way to strengthen our connection with the Earth by making the needs of plants, animals — and the planet as a whole — more apparent to the human community. The idea was conceived in 1978 in San Francisco and further developed into an educational program for schools and community groups by Chris Wells, who had studied festival development and tribal celebrations in South America, and teachers John McLeod and Marty Kraft. The project invites students to adopt a favorite species and take on

the role of that creature in activities that explore relationships and celebrate diversity. All Species Projects thereby make use of a powerful tool — children's innate rapport with other creatures — to help them come to understand community and to connect with nature.

Choosing a creature

Start by having each student select an animal, plant, or other part of nature to represent.

Most will choose mammals and birds, but some might choose a tree, a dragonfly, or even an entire ecosystem such as a prairie or forest. Encourage the class to select a broad range of species, as this will give opportunities for learning about the dynamics within natural communities. Or, to gain a greater appreciation for the land where they live, encourage them to choose species from their own bioregion. If a student chooses an exotic creature such as a lion or gazelle, suggest that another student choose a related native species. The



Chris Wells

Following the 2002 All Species Parade in Santa Fe, New Mexico, the "Ravens in the Genetic Corn" theatrical production drew attention to concerns about genetically-modified corn.

class can then study the similarities and differences between the distant and local species, and learn how each has adapted to its environment.

To help students identify with the species they select for study, read them the following (or paraphrase it in your own words):

You may think of yourself as a person who is separate from others and from the rest of the world. While this is true in one way, thinking about yourself as part of nature might be just as true. Observing your own breathing is one of the best ways to recognize that each of us is part of nature. When you breathe in, you are breathing in some of the breath of everyone in this room — and of everyone and every creature that has ever breathed in this planet's atmosphere. You are also inhaling oxygen produced by a plant somewhere on Earth and exhaling carbon dioxide that can be used by a plant or a tree or, perhaps, plankton in a distant ocean.

Invite students to suggest other ways in which they are linked to all other organisms.

Have students research the creature they have selected and keep a journal to which they add newspaper articles, observation notes, haiku or other poems, raps, drawings, and facts about their chosen creature. To learn how their creatures move, students could find and watch relevant clips on film or websites; alternatively, you could take them to observe creatures on a field trip or in a zoo. Have them consider how it would feel to move like their creature, and whether that would help them to know more about that animal. Students can strengthen their rapport through these observations.

All species congress

When they have some knowledge about their creatures, have students form a creature congress or council of species to vote on a hypothetical human-initiated proposal that would affect them. Examples of proposals are:

- building a dam on a river
- trapping raccoons, squirrels, and coyotes and releasing them a long way from their city habitats
- cutting down trees at the edge of a town to build a large store



Chris Wells

Condors in an All Species theater production in Cayambe, Ecuador.

- poisoning prairie dogs, regarded as a nuisance by cattle farmers
- crossbreeding farm-raised salmon with wild salmon
- reintroducing wolves to a national park between mountains and prairie

Many other issues could be discussed; the key is to find a local or international issue that students find interesting. Through their

own observations and information gathering on their selected creatures, students themselves might suggest good issues. Alternatively, local environmental groups and public officials may be able to suggest current local issues and provide the class with background information that will help them to develop their perspectives and clear away rhetoric.

In a class of 25 students, 22 could play the role of creatures and 3 could be humans. Invite students to devise the voting system beforehand. Encourage them to examine various systems, and remind them not to overlook consensus building, as they could learn much in the struggle to find unity, even when it seems to elude them. As the congress discusses the proposal before them, each member speaks in turn from the perspective of his/her creature. Typically, when it comes time for the creatures to vote, the results are rather different from conventional decisions made from a wholly human perspective.

Dramatic skits

As the students become comfortable in their roles, they could begin writing and performing short skits on environmental problems faced by their creatures.

1. Brainstorm to generate a number of topics.
2. Divide the class into groups of four to five students to ensure a mix of species, and have each group choose a topic to present as a skit.
3. Give each group ten minutes to create and prepare a skit to present to the rest of the class. Emphasize that it is quick thinking and creativity that is called for, not perfection. Often, students who have not done well at other activities shine here.
4. Have the groups present the skits in quick succession, and then lead a discussion. You might be surprised at the insight and wisdom that emerges. Once

Making masks, headdresses, and costumes to represent their chosen creature reinforces emotional ties and leads students to want to know more about their species.

students are familiar with this process, they may wish to repeat it using different topics.

Making masks and costumes

A very powerful way to foster students' rapport with their chosen creatures is to have them make masks and costumes to represent them. Mask making is a nearly universal human activity. Masks are used in celebrations all over the world — from Halloween in North America to New Year's celebrations throughout Asia to Carnival in Latin America. Making masks, head-dresses, and costumes to represent their chosen creature reinforces emotional ties and leads students to want to know more about their species. It can also be part of preparations for an All Species Parade (page 148) in celebration of Earth Day.

Plaster-cast tape mask

Materials: Roll of plaster-impregnated gauze tape (from pharmacies and art supply stores) cut into strips about 3 x 10 centimeters (1 x 4 inches), petroleum jelly, bowl, warm water, scissors, paint, elastic string, headbands and old sheets for protecting hair and clothes.

Procedure:

1. Have students work in pairs. First, one partner smears the other's face with petroleum jelly so that the plaster will not pull hairs.
2. Dip plaster strips in warm water just long enough to wet them. Apply them to the greased areas of the face, with the plaster side facing outward. Spread the excess plaster to smooth and fill in holes in the gauze. Overlap the material well and build up about three layers.
3. Let the plaster dry for 15 to 20 minutes.
4. Pull the plaster mask off carefully, starting at the edges. Do not get petroleum jelly on the front of the plaster where paint and features will be added. Use crumpled newspaper to support the masks and set them aside for a day to finish drying.



Mary Kraft

Art instructor Linda Wheeler applies plaster-gauze tape.



Heartland All Species Project

After completing their basic masks, students add horns, feathers, and beaks.

5. The next day, students can add ears, horns, or other features by building up layers of plaster tape over bases made of cardboard that are shaped as needed. Students could also add felt or other fabric, hot-gluing it in place. (An art teacher could help students with ideas and material choices.) Wherever possible, encourage the use of scrap materials.
6. When the masks are completely dry, students can seal the plaster with a primer such as Gesso and then paint them. I prefer to use latex paint, as it dries quickly and is waterproof (essential for an outdoor parade or other celebration). An art teacher can recommend paint products.
7. To hold the masks on, bore a small hole with the point of a pair of scissors on either side of the mask and thread a string of elastic through the holes.

Baseball cap headdress

This cardboard and papier mâché headdress uses a baseball cap as a base. It can be made without a cap, but the bill of the cap is useful: it can be cut to a desired shape, and it can be worn reversed so that the flap is at the back, or worn frontward to provide a built-in feature — like a beak

— that is appropriate for the species.

Materials: Bristol board or other lightweight cardboard, baseball cap, stapler, tape, scissors, paper and paste for papier mâché, paint

Procedure:

1. Have students work in pairs. First, cut strips of cardboard of a variety of widths from about 1.5 to 5 centimeters ($\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 inches).
2. With the cap on the head, place a band of cardboard around the outside of the head and cap to form an exterior hatband. Overlap the ends of the band

slightly and mark where they meet.

3. Remove the cap and staple or tape the cardboard band firmly along the overlapped edges, as well as to the cap itself. To this hatband, staple, tape, or glue other strips of cardboard to create a basket that fits over the head.
4. Over several days, students can mold the features of the chosen species from papier mâché and attach it to the basket frame. Materials such as fake fur, feathers, and fabrics can also be incorporated. Some students might mold the entire body of their animal on the headdress, while others create only the form of the animal's head.
5. When the headdress is completely dry, it can be painted with latex or other waterproof paint.

Costumes

A costume can be designed to communicate what the species is or to suggest the environment in which it lives. Instead of a mask, some students might make a headdress of an entire animal, say a fish, and wear a costume with blue-green fabric to suggest water. Other costumes might attempt to create the body of the creature. Pieces of corrugated cardboard can be cut and placed under a costume to create the shape of a certain creature feature. Old clothes could be dyed or have pieces of fabric sewn on to complete an effect. Hospital or hotel laundries often have old sheets that they might donate for students to dye, cut, and sew. Fabric paint, available in many colors, can be used to create patterns on cloth that is difficult to dye. The ideas that students might generate in making costumes are endless, so encourage creative thought and trial runs.

All Species Parade

A parade, perhaps for Earth Day or some other celebration, is an

A culminating pageant such as an All Species Parade is a means of celebrating the relationships that promote our survival and of reminding ourselves of the values we share with fellow humans.

appropriate culminating activity for All Species Projects. Spring is a natural time to celebrate, just as plants and animals are re-emerging from winter dormancy or arriving back from their wintering grounds. The parade route can be around the halls of the school, it can be outside around

the neighborhood, or students can participate in — or organize — a larger community event. Most communities do not require a permit if students stay on the sidewalk and you have monitors at corners. If the whole school gets behind the parade and wants a community event, then check local regulations before your planning gets too advanced; you may have to ask for official guidance.

Discuss with students possible parade entries and perhaps having a theme — for instance, having the sun go first, followed by plants, then herbivores, and finally carnivores as a linear model of energy consumption. Another approach is to replicate where organisms occur in the environment, with soil creatures and plants at street level, animals on the base of a float, and birds at a higher level on the float.

A simple float can be built onto a child's wagon to represent an environment such as a prairie, a forest, or a coral reef. On the wagon place a lightweight frame made from used one-by-two lumber in the shape needed. Secure pieces of corrugated cardboard and fabric and color them with latex paint. (Tempera paint will run if it gets wet.) If you have funds, you can buy quarts of white, black, red, blue, and yellow paint to mix almost any color students might need. If the list of parade entries is short, consider including some short skits to be performed at intervals. Any way that students wish to organize the parade can promote learning and build rapport. Celebrations like these have been educating people in villages worldwide for thousands of years.

Heartland All Species Project



Heartland All Species Project



A fish joins in an Earth Day parade in Kansas City.

All Species events are very popular and photogenic, so be sure to invite local media to reach community members who cannot attend. Students could create and send media releases. By hosting or participating in a large community event, students receive public approval for their efforts. Beyond grades, they have an opportunity to communicate about issues they come to believe are important.

Until the advent of Earth Day in 1970, modern society had no celebration to strengthen our connection with the Earth. A culminating pageant such as an All Species Parade is a means of celebrating the relationships that promote our survival and of reminding ourselves of the values we share with fellow humans. Such events create community that does more than supply basic needs: if we choose, these activities can create neighborhoods that are friendly, supportive, and sustainable.

Building rapport with nature

In learning about nature, it is more important to know the relationship between the facts than to know the facts themselves. By building rapport with nature through All Species Projects, students are better able to shift their perception and take a larger view of the Earth, seeing it as a web of relationships and communities rather than a collection of isolated parts. By “becoming” their animals, they move from a self-centered perspective to one that includes other viewpoints. From there, you can help them look at the power of diversity. Start by considering how biological diversity helps every species to survive. Once the benefits of biodiversity are understood, students can consider the advantages of other kinds of diversity, such as economic diversity in hard times. It is a short step then for students to appreciate the advantages of cooperative relationships and cultural diversity.

The amount of time that is spent on these activities is up to each teacher: it could be one or two weeks, or it could be months with students doing a few activities a week. Some activities can be used alone. It would be wonderful, however, to transform an All Species Project into a total integrated curriculum touching on art, science, math, language arts, social studies, and other subjects. Like all good education, the All Species process is designed to educate the whole child and to foster a vision of a human society that is integrated seamlessly into the environment. Rather than being about filling a

Heartland All Species Project



Heartland All Species Project



human computer with thoughts, it is about engaging the whole person in a dynamic conversation with the world. It is about *being* a part of the whole, not about sitting apart and studying it. It is about us two-leggeds living in community with the wings, fins, four-leggeds, crawlers, and rooted folk.

Marty Kraft, a former science teacher, is co-founder and director of the Heartland All Species Project in Kansas City, Missouri, where he has organized eight citywide Earth Day celebrations. His efforts focus on promoting neighborhood gardens and other models of sustainable living. His 120-page study and activity guide Earth Day in Your School and Community: A Guide for Study and Celebration Creation can be obtained from The Heartland All Species Project (5644 Charlotte, Kansas City, MO 64110, 816-361-1230) for US\$15 plus \$5 shipping (\$7 to Canada). Marty Kraft, Stan Slaughter, and Chris Wells are available to help schools and communities implement All Species projects and perspectives.