



“Attention is the Beginning of Devotion”: How an Open Access Public Humanities Project in Our Parks Can Serve as a Platform for Climate Justice Work

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THE PREMISE

This presentation and the public humanities project it outlines are grounded in two truths: the world is experiencing a global environmental crisis of immense proportions, and we, the peoples of the world, must transform our ways of being in order to address this common crisis. While many academics addressing these challenges point to economic and environmental policy initiatives as the primary vehicles for making changes, I am a poet, and therefore more interested in a single question: —

How do we “change our hearts” and our acts of apperception in order to develop a deep, authentic love for the world?

And herein is the third premise I hold . . . that our current global ecological crisis is, at its heart, a phenomenological problem — a problem tied to [how we experience the world](#).

THE PROJECT

Poetry in the Parks is an open-source public humanities project that uses place-based poetry, photography and video to address this phenomenological problem.

The organization provides curriculum and logistical support to educators, park foundations, and environmental organizations that are interested in developing or participating in the development of short poetry films.

Within each instillation, one or more ecological features of a national, state or local park is celebrated through a nature-themed poem that, in some way, probes the meaning and value present in the natural world. **Through the project, participants are drawing on phenological and natural history practices, as well as their own aesthetic sensibilities, in order to create stronger bonds to nature.**

It is this poet-phenomenologist's belief that stronger bonds will motivate more mindful environmental behaviors.

USE OF PHENOLOGY AND NATURAL HISTORY

Poetry in the Parks was first designed in order to engage participants in phenology and natural history. They are not ‘given’ a poetic subject . . . they have to find one in the landscape. Because the average person's species vocabulary is small, the participants are asked to use digital apps such as [iNaturalist](#), [Nature's Notebook](#), [Seek](#), and [Cornell's Merlin Bird ID](#) to identify species in their environment.

Engaging in citizen science is a critical first step in the project; only that which we have a language for we can begin to value.



Once participants have identified a number of species of trees, birds, animals, flowers in the field, they are invited to search for poetry that celebrates those things, using word and subject poetry indexes such as those supported by [The Poetry Foundation](#) and the [Academy of American Poets](#). This process of discovery is, like field research itself, indeterminate and full of detours.

When participants find a suitable poem to celebrate the lives they have engaged with, they are invited to collect photo and film footage that supports the development of a film.

SCALABILITY

Based on the target outcomes and material limitations of participants, Poetry in the Parks projects evolve in any of these ways:

Film Creation on a Pre-Identified Nature-Based or Ecological Poem

In conjunction with their visit to a park participants read a pre-chosen poem, then create films which narrate the poem's subjects.

Open Collaboration

Poetry in the Parks also coordinates [open collaborations](#). Through the course of these collaborations individuals around the world are invited to meditate on a selected poem, submit video and film footage from their parks, and Poetry in the Parks edits together the film.

PARTNERSHIPS

As CoVID shut-downs compromised the means for the organization to serve its constituents, we provided [Serantes Natur Eskola](#) in Serantes Spain with a new socially-distanced paradigm to teach students about their local ecology (and Basque and English) through the creative arts.

Each year we develop a collaboration to support the [World Listening Project](#), an organization devoted to fostering understanding of the world and its natural environment through the practices of listening and field recording.

We are currently developing a project with the [Walden Woods Project](#), a non-profit committed to preserving the legacy of Henry David Thoreau.