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## • THE BEST OF ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

**Learn** the secrets of successful environmental education programs! **Read** the perspectives and opinions of experienced teachers! **Discover** new ideas that can turn your classroom into an innovative and dynamic hub of place-based learning! *The Best of Clearing* is full of fresh ideas and old wisdom to help you create powerful learning experiences for your students.

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## • INTERVIEWS WITH CONSERVATIONISTS



What is the link between conservation and environmental education? [Chris Gertschen](#), founder and former director of the Sawtooth Science Institute, talks to the leaders of conservation in the west to get their perspectives on the issue.

Read the interviews here:

[Lance Craighead](#), Executive Director of the Craighead Institute in Bozeman, Montana

[Jason Wilmot](#), Executive Director of the Northern Rockies Conservation Cooperative

[Wendy Francis](#), Y2Y (Yellowstone to Yukon) Project.

[Charles Saylan](#), author (with Daniel Blumstein) of *The Failure of Environmental Education: And How to Fix It*"

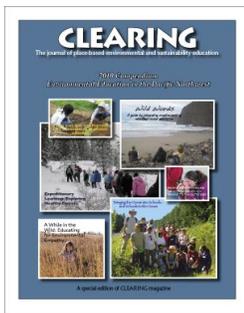
Coming soon: **Rick Johnson**, Idaho Conservation League.

## • ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY and the CLEARING COMPENDIUM

**Attention:** Clearing is currently compiling case studies that demonstrate what ideal school-based environmental literacy programs & activities can look like. These case studies will help teachers understand how to more effectively integrate environmental literacy into their classrooms, and will be featured in the 2011 Clearing Compendium published this fall!

[Tell us about a model program that you think deserves recognition!](#)

[Read the 2010 edition here!](#)



## • K-12 Activity of the Day

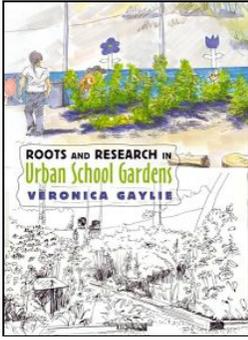
### **Sounds and Colors**

*Environmental Studies—Grades 6-12*

In a forest, meadow, marsh or park, sit or lie down on your back with both fists held up in the air. Every time you hear a new bird song lift one finger. This is a wonderful way to become aware of the sounds (and the stillness) of nature. For fun see if you can count to 10 without hearing a bird song. Vary the game by listening for general animal sounds - or for any sounds at all, like wind in the grass, falling leaves, rushing water. See if you can follow the wind as it flows through the forest. See how many colors you can see in front of you without moving from where you are standing.

—Reprinted from a past issue of *CLEARING*

## • Teaching Resource Spotlight



## Roots and Research in Urban School Gardens

©2011 Veronica Gaylie. This book explores the urban school garden as a bridge between environmental action and thought. As a small-scale response to global issues around access to food and land, urban school gardens promote practical knowledge of farming as well as help renew cultural ideals of shared space and mutual support for the organic, built environment. This book examines the practice and culture of the urban school garden as a central symbol for environmental learning. **Roots and Research in Urban School Gardens** can be purchased at [Peter Lang Publishing](http://www.peterlang.com).

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## • Guest Bloggers: Voices of the PNW



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North Wasco County School District, Oregon

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## • Recent Comments

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- [Riley Meinershagen](#): You were on the radio today. Good for you. KBOO was airing the VBC talks and yours caught my...
- [Melinda West](#): I just want to thank you for publishing this article. Since I wrote it, I've met so many...
- [JL Kennedy](#): Fantastic experience! Chris Brown is to be commended for making his students educational experience...
- [Karen Salsbury](#): Saul, what an eloquent nudge to help folks simply pay attention. Stopping long enough to recognize...

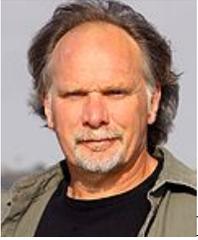
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## [Gertschen Interview: Charles Saylan talks about the failure](#)

## of environmental education

Filed Under [Chris Gertschen](#), [Conservation](#), [Environmental Education](#), [Interviews](#), [Perspectives](#)



Interview by Chris Gertschen

*Charles Saylan is co-founder and executive director of the California-based Ocean Conservation Society. He co-authored with Daniel Blumstein, a biology professor at the University of California-Los Angeles, “The Failure of Environmental Education (And How We Can Fix It)”.*

**CG: You have written about environmental responsibility as a goal of environmental education. It occurs to me that environmental responsibility is also a goal of conservationists as well. The OCS is that rare conservation organization that conducts programs that actually involve the local community in educational programs. I wonder why there is not more collaboration between conservation and EE?**

CS: This is a complicated question. In the book, we make the point that protecting the commons that support all of us (humans & others) is a shared responsibility of all people, whether or not we choose to accept it. Environmental degradation does not distinguish between democrats, republicans, conservationists or terrorists. We are all responsible.

In our experience, there is little collaboration between anyone. NGO's typically do not work together, government grants do not encourage collaborative relationships, many reports are not published in public journals and etc. Why this happens is likely due to a sense of territoriality, wherein conservation/environmental groups are worried more about self perpetuation than they are about making a measurable impact on any given problem. In my opinion, another problem is that academics tend to have tunnel-vision and focus only on their particular area of expertise, which tends to obscure comprehension and effective communication of the big picture. This tends to confuse the public at large and any broad-scale efforts are easily derailed by industrial, political & corporate interests that see environmental protection as an encroachment on the free market or corporate interests.

**CG: You have also written about the need for relevancy in EE. You tell a story about the difficulties of trying to interest urban kids who have never seen the ocean in marine ecology. I've been struck by the strangeness of teaching kids who live in an arid region about the diversity of the rainforest. Seems to me that there are interesting issues to study that are closer to home. Has globalization come to EE?**

CS: I think we need two separate but integrated approaches to EE.

One, on a national or state scale that establishes the general parameters of what ought to be taught. This structure is already in place as state and federal teaching standards but fails to stimulate action and engagement as our standards are generally based on student performance from a solely economic perspective. If we hope to grow into a healthy society able to maintain a participatory democracy and understanding of our human place in nature, we will need to look outside the economic viewpoint. There is more to living well than making money and we need to teach this in public education. With that said, it is important to cultivate functional and scientific literacy in a modern society if we hope to provide the necessary tools that citizens will need to understand the complex problems our planet faces. This type of curricula can be measured through testing, but ought also to be evaluated from qualitative aspect as well.

Secondly, it is critically important to take a local approach to EE that is relevant to the lives of the students in any given area. It

is also important to realize that local approaches will vary substantially from place to place. Rural agricultural communities have different values and motivators that do urban ones, and teaching needs to identify and build upon these cultural and regional differences. I think that community involvement projects are a good place to start. Things like school gardens that incorporate their harvest into the school lunch programs or, better yet, distribute food to poorer members of the community, can help build awareness while teaching practical skill for implementing ideas in a real way. This is, to use an overused concept, practical empowerment. In the book we have an appendix for greening schools that I think is a great beginning point for building better, greener and more effective schools (in the physical sense), while imparting organizational skills that will help build and maintain cohesive societies.

Finally, it is important to recognize that the “environmental movement” in America is mostly affluent, liberal and white. To be effective in mitigating the daunting threats we all face, this will have to change, and quickly. EE needs to be culturally relevant to a diverse society.

Curricula needs to be offered in multiple languages and build on the cultural cornerstones of any given community. It is not important why someone decides to use less energy or lobby their leaders for conservation legislation, it is only important that they do so. EE should make a global attempt to identify cultural motivators and act upon them.

**CG: Conservation organizations work to raise awareness but as you have written that that is only half the job of EE. I’ve always loved Baba Dioum’s words: “In the end, we conserve only what we love. We will love only what we understand. We will understand only what we are taught.” Do you have some ideas on how we can go about facilitating the understanding that is necessary to love enough to conserve?**

CS: I don’t think there is one way to stimulate change. The needs and wants of any given community will likely be unique. Motivating a community to embrace environmental conservation will require that teachers and leaders listen carefully to the needs and concerns of a given community, then act in ways that resonate with the respective group. When it comes to issues like climate change, why people decide to act is less important than the action itself. In other words, it isn’t necessary that any target group believe in environmental conservation if they cut back on energy usage for other reasons that hit closer to home. Approaching the problem from different directions, such as increasing national security or finding ways to cut household expenses for example, might go further in some communities than the traditional approach of EE (to raise awareness of environmental issues). I think the EE community needs desperately to get pragmatic about stimulating action first, by whatever means that provoke results, then go to work on building awareness.

**CG: The Children in Nature movement and the national and state by state environmental literacy effort that is currently underway might be the kind of pragmatic action you have in mind. Have you ideas on how this effort can be successful?**

CS: My familiarity with the Children in Nature movement is general. I am aware of some of the things that Richard Louv and David Sobel are doing and I think these are all good steps. The reality is, in my humble opinion, that these programs are not generally available, especially in poor communities. In the current economic climate, this is further exacerbated by cuts to state education budgets which, given our national focus on education as an economic utility, tend to hit the outdoor education and humanities programs the hardest.

Environmental literacy efforts, like the California Education and the Environment Initiative are good steps as well, but in California’s case, this program has been a long time coming and is facing obstacles to full implementation due to a lack of funding, even though it is legislatively mandated. Then, there is the point we make repeatedly in our book, that awareness may not lead to action and behavior change, as many of us in the environmental and educational communities think it will. I believe that teachers, parents, students across the social spectrum of public education systems, will need to move outside their respective comfort zones and teach and learn how to affect change, and quickly. Programs and efforts that do not include teaching us how to live well, how to treat each other fairly, how to listen to others and appreciate the natural world we take for granted, will likely not work. Education must emphasize important non-economic aspects of a well-rounded society by re-incorporating subjects like literature and poetry, history, philosophy, music and art, in any educational reform agenda.

Public education needs to cover the intangible aspects of our world. Such intangibles provide a connection to our primordial selves, which may aid us in recognizing that we are part of a vast web of life, and that our survival depends upon the resiliency of that web. This inter-connectedness is what we must stress in our classrooms, in ways that resonate with the lives of our students.

If public education taught students about moral systems, cultural diversity and cross-cultural similarity, it would help build more equitable and tolerant societies. Moral systems are cornerstones of human civilization and belong in the curricula of any responsible society.

Our democratic republic requires participatory citizenship to survive as a democracy. People, not politicians or industrial lobbyists, do still hold the power in this country, but many of us don't know it because our schools do not teach it. Public education, in my opinion, needs to step up and teach us how the political process really works, and how we, as individual citizens can practically influence it. Students need to know what remedies are available if their voices are suppressed or ignored, and these days all of us could stand to take an open-minded look at the role of civility and compromise in the political process.

Programs might encourage students to attend city/county council meetings to see firsthand how local government works, or doesn't. These same programs might help teach students they have the right to speak, to ask questions about the political process, to be heard, and to easily understand legislation that they are expected to live by. Effective educational programs need to encourage active, personal participation in the political process and help students to make distinctions between social issues of conscience and the non-partisan issue of protecting the environment. Those same programs then, should encourage students to help others, especially those who do not share their views, to make that same distinction.

I hope this helps a bit and is not too over-the-top. I am increasingly worried that our society is endlessly talking, yet doing little to affect change. Given the ticking clock nature of environmental degradation, this is not a good trend.

# # # #

*Chris Gertschen is the founder and former director of the Sawtooth Science Institute. She is conducting a series of talks with the leaders of conservation in the west to get their perspectives on the relationship between conservation and environmental education. Read her introduction [here](#).*

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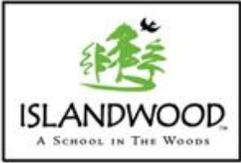
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- [September 2010](#)
- [August 2010](#)
- [July 2010](#)
- [June 2010](#)
- [May 2010](#)
- [April 2010](#)
- [March 2010](#)
- [February 2010](#)
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Contact Clearing Magazine at (503) 703-1943 or [editor@clearingmagazine.org](mailto:editor@clearingmagazine.org);