A Practice of Nature Writing: First Essay Assignment

Due dates:
Essay 1.1: Tuesday 2/12 in class (bring enough copies to class for me and for group mates).
Essay 1.2: Tuesday 2/26 in class (submit in a folder with 1.1, peer review copies, and any other brainstorming or drafts).

Format:
6-7 pages, typed, double-spaced, Times New Roman 12 pt font, standard 1” margins. First version of essay can be 5 full pages, with the idea being that you will be adding to it during the revision process.

Overview:
This essay is the first formal assignment of the course. It will require you to reflect on your own experiences of nature and on the arguments and conventions of the writers we have been reading, and to expand those reflections into a logically structured essay. We will be workshopping these essays in class. Thus, you should imagine the audience for your writing as being not just me, but your peers, and possibly even a wider audience at Stonehill or beyond. Remember that as we have seen in the readings thus far this semester, effective nature writing usually includes 1) a strong sense of place, 2) descriptive language that helps the reader see the world in new ways, 3) a clear story, or other narrative elements, that evokes rather than tells, and 4) an argument that challenges the reader to consider new perspectives on nature, society, environmental problems and solutions, etc.

Prompt 1:
Choose a place (or places) that 1) is, or has been, important to you (or one that you want to learn more about), and 2) has an intertwining of social and ecological histories. Write an essay that explores the nature and culture of this place, drawing on historical or ecological research, interviews, first hand experience, or your own memories, as a way of making an argument. In doing this, you might want to consider some of the following questions: what is it about this place that makes it important? How might various people, or even various species, experience this place differently? How is human history intertwined with ecological history in this place? Or more generally, how do places that are filled with both social and natural histories have such indelible effects on our lives? How and why have they become a part of who we are and how we think and act? Though your paper need not, and probably should not, answer these questions directly, you can use them as catalysts for your thinking.

This genre of nonfiction writing is called a descriptive or narrative essay. Essays perform several duties. First, they create a shared sense of history, linking people together. Second, they provide entertainment; like a thrilling movie or an intriguing book, essays should be poignant, entertaining, and have a point (aka: answer the “So What?”). Finally, essays present arguments—they help readers discover values, explore options, and examine motives. Your essay should be meaningful both to you and to your audience who may or may not share some of your experiences. The challenge of this essay is to ask a familiar question—what makes a place important?—and approach it with ingenuity.

Prompt 2: See contest description below—

Dear AESS community,

I’d like to alert you to an essay contest, organized by myself and Matt Kirby of the Sierra Club, which might be of interest to you or your students. This contest is sponsored by the Sierra Club. It will open
in late February. (Watch this space for the official announcement, which will contain instructions on submitting).

Wilderness 2.0

It is nearly 25 years since Bill McKibben declared “the end of nature.” What he really meant was the end of wilderness—the idea of wilderness. In the era of climate change, he claimed, we can no longer conceive of a natural world that is free of human influence—a pristine wilderness where our spirits can awaken to authentic nature. Generations Y, Z and beyond will never know that pristine wilderness; they will know only what humans have created. And the outlook has only gotten worse: in 2005, Richard Louv warned us that “nature deficit disorder” was on the rise. Today’s children, he worried, spend far more time in front of screens than they spend in the woods, and end up radically disconnected from the natural world. They may care about biodiversity, sustainability, and environmental justice—but do they care about wilderness?

So we pose the question: What does wilderness mean to the millennial generation? Does the idea of wilderness have any relevance for twenty-first century environmentalists? Is there still a case to be made for wilderness? If so, how can we make that case?

We invite essays on the idea of wilderness from writers under 30 years old. Essays should be no more than 1000 words.

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To read a range of contemporary nature writing and to get some ideas of what current nature writing magazines are publishing, you might want to check out these magazines:

http://flyway.org/
http://fourthriver.chatham.edu/
http://www.ecotonejournal.com/
http://www.orionmagazine.org/