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Sponsored by:
The Student Sustainability Initiative
The Graham Environmental Sustainability Institute
The Center for Research on Learning and Teaching

“Living in Nature” Develops Observational Skills and Ecological Literacy Through Art

Teaching Strategy

Joseph Trumpey teaches a course called “Eco-Explorers” in which students have opportunities to take trips to places like Northern Michigan, Texas, and Madagascar in order to gain full immersion into nature and art. Professor Trumpey tries to engage students directly with nature and sustainability issues because 40% of the students who participate in his courses have never had any sort of outdoors experience.

Domestically, students visit national parks, such as Big Bend, Yellowstone, and the Everglades. For the international trips (e.g., Costa Rica) students visit villages suffering from ecological challenges such as deforestation. Students engage in a variety of activities ranging from species mapping and solar energy projects to creating murals at local schools. The trips also integrate service projects in order to give back to the communities that the students are visiting.

This class prepares U-M students to do substantive fieldwork and uses observational drawing to develop students’ skills for studying the environment. Students learn from conducting field experiments, collecting observational data, and creating detailed observations of the natural world through the practice of maintaining a sketchbook and reflective journal.

This course also features collaborative projects with local elementary schools. University students and elementary school students share their experiences studying natural ecosystems through art and the internet.

Faculty Perspectives

“We can talk about how many parts per million carbon dioxide are in the atmosphere now, or what it could be, or how we mediate it to get it to that, but ultimately that doesn’t have the same passion as being able to understand something differently because of having lived it and experienced it.”

“It’s about building a personal practice. Once you build the practice of paying attention, then the meaning starts to drive, and beyond meaning, then the idea of stewardship, and with the stewardship, then sustainability starts to happen.”

Student Perspectives

“Eco-Explorers has created a deep well of love in me for the planet and a passion for helping protect her future.”

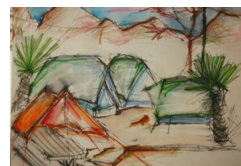
“This trip makes you think about how much you use - your global footprint - and really try to use only what you need.”

“This class was my introduction to the world of ecology and sustainability. You had to be conscious of your food, water, and waste. I never was in that mindset before. And that was very eye-opening for me.”

Examples of Teaching and/or Student Artifacts



Sketching at the Campsite



Sketch of the Campsite



Insect Observation



Field Notebook Sketch