

Natural Connections:

Building Empathy for Nature Through Language and Story



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Blog, podcast, newsletter, and *Natural Connections* books at:
www.cablemuseum.org/connect

Words have the power to change the way we think and feel about the natural world. This talk will cover ways to build empathy between our readers, ourselves, and nature by applying the grammar of animacy and by using the power of story to make science come alive. We'll also consider how the celebration of diversity in nature can be extended toward diversity in our human communities as we meditate of author Daniel Quinn's idea that "there is no one right way to live."

In my weekly Natural Connections articles, there is a consistent but subtle goal of building empathy for each other and the natural world. As I craft natural history essays about Northwoods nature, I think about how to present the scientific information so that my readers connect emotionally to the subject. While that's easy when I write about critters like loons and bears, it becomes more of a fun challenge when I write about insects, plants, and even bacteria and fungi.

Grammar of Animacy Resources:

- *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer
- <https://www.yesmagazine.org/issue/together-earth/2015/03/30/alternative-grammar-a-new-language-of-kinship>
- <https://xenoflesh.files.wordpress.com/2017/03/robin-wall-kimmerer.pdf>
- Webinar: The Language of Animacy and the Singular They
 - <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/owaa/472310787>

Ideas for building empathy for nature in your writing:

- Use the pronouns *ki* and *kin* for non-human animate beings.
- Avoid using *IT* or *THAT* for non-human living beings.
 - Use the singular *THEY* (or plural *THEY*) instead.
 - APA: <https://tinyurl.com/zt2en26s>
 - OED: <https://public.oed.com/blog/a-brief-history-of-singular-they/>
 - CMOS: <https://tinyurl.com/t55fc4j4>
 - MW: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/woty2019-top-looked-up-words-they>

Ideas for building empathy for nature in your writing continued:

- Avoid using IT or THAT for non-human living beings.
 - Do enough detective work to figure out the sex of a living being and use he or she.
 - Use WHO instead of THAT. <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/who-vs-that-guide>
- Don't be too worried about anthropomorphism. It is "The attribution of human traits, emotions, or intentions to non-human entities."
 - The degree to which individuals perceive minds in other animals predicts the moral concern afforded to them.
 - Acknowledging animacy is NOT automatically anthropomorphism.
 - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthropomorphism>

Finding the Stories in Nature

- Stories of Discovery
 - Yours
 - The adventure
 - The research
 - The revelation
- Someone else's
 - Scientist
 - Naturalist
 - Your friend
- Life cycles
- Food chains
- Phenology (study of the timing of seasonal events)
- Relationships
- Adaptations (something a plant or animal has or does that helps them survive in their habitat)
- Conflict and Challenge

"As Gary Nabhan has written, we can't meaningfully proceed with healing, with restoration, without "re-story-ation." We need to tell ourselves a different story about our relationship to place.

--Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*

"The words we use shape how we understand ourselves, how we interpret the world, how we treat others. Words make worlds."

-- Krista Tippett, *Becoming Wise*