How Writers Help Save Nature: Perspectives on Effective Ecological Writing

Nature writers paint word pictures of the natural world. How can writers most effectively save nature? Should we describe nature as beautiful to inspire humans to protect it, or be as accurate as possible about the flora and fauna of the wild?

Should we focus on reconnecting people with nature through ecosystems they can sense and touch in their own towns and backyards or get them to think beyond their own lives and lifespans to address big issues such as climate change? Is 'good' nature writing aesthetic, educational or political – or some combination of all three?

And, finally, can authors who write nature point to ways to integrate humanity and culture into natural ecosystems in a sustainable and workable way? We are organisms, after all – carbon-based Homo Sapiens, with a long evolutionary history of adapting to and living within Earth's ecosystems.

I've interviewed six modern emerging and more established authors whose works represent possible answers to these questions.

San Francisco poet and novelist Joan Gelfand has become known for her poetry about the natural world and ecological concerns. Most recently, her poems were included in the anthology *Fire and Rain: Ecopoetry of California* (Scarlet Tanager Press, 2018, edited by Lucille Lang-Day and Ruth Nolan).

She describes her entire life's output of writing as 'inhabiting that space between dreams and realizing the world of activism through art.'

When asked if writers could make an impact on society concerning environmental issues, she was cautiously positive.

'I feel that writers could save the earth. It's like any movement - can a writer publish a convincing enough story, an expose that grabs the zeitgeist? Then yes, we can probably help, but this is such a massive issue.'

To Gelfand, in order to make progress with environmental conservation, we must also at the same time find better ways of caring for the people around the world whose survival or comfort currently depend on technologies that pollute. Pursuing ecological goals without considering human needs won't get us anywhere.

'The real problem here is that we have a class issue. Poor people need to eat, and stay warm. Coal is a cheap fuel.'

Gelfand also firmly believes that poets who seek to write about nature and ecology must pursue literary craft and avoid lecturing readers. The story of how she wrote one of her signature pieces illustrates that conviction.

'One of the most challenging poems I've ever crafted was 'Requiem for a Dying Planet.'

The looming question was: How to talk about global devastation without being pedantic or polemical?

One of the ways I found to get into the poem was to make it as specific as possible. I sketched the situations of rice farmers in Bali, a mother in the United States, the pollution that creeps from China across the seas to the US.'

"Requiem for a Dying Planet" was published in Joan Gelfand's collection *A Dreamer's Guide to Cities and Streams* in 2009. It's received a very positive reception from reviewers and from audiences where Gelfand has performed.

She cites Stephen Dunn's essay 'On Complaint, Outrage and Complicity' in his collection *Walking Light* as an inspiration. Dunn posits that writers must approach political poems as they would any other piece, employing the same creative and literary techniques – and most importantly, surprising the reader.

Since then, she has written several environmental poems with the same aesthetic philosophy.

"Russian River Watershed" addressed the impact of tearing up fruit and nut orchards to grow wine grapes in Sonoma County, "Ghazal for Baiji" talks about a rare river dolphin going extinct in China. All of these poems had to be scrupulously crafted so that, while I am determined to 'make a point' the poem still possesses beauty, rhythm, creative use of language and line. All of these poems have been published multiple times in anthologies."

As to whether environmentally themed writing should focus on global or local ecologies, Gelfand says it's important for a writer to cover the subjects with which they feel most deeply connected.

'For example, if you're writing about the fires in the Amazon, did you personally see them? Or resonate with them in some way?'

She came up with her 'Russian River Watershed' piece when she was staying in Sonoma one summer and feeling sad at the loss of apple orchards.

Another of Gelfand's inspirations is Stanford professor John Felstiner, whose anthology *Can Poetry Save the Earth?* (Yale University Press, 2009) Felstiner's collection presents American and British poems about, for, and to the natural world and argues for the importance, power and beauty of each piece he includes.

Yale University Press' website highlights the core message of Felstiner's book.

'In our own time of environmental crises, he contends, poetry has a unique capacity to restore our attention to our environment in its imperiled state. And, as we take heed, we may well become better stewards of the earth.'

Gelfand heartily seconds Felstiner's assertion concerning ecological poetry, and sums up her own thoughts on the subject in this way.

'I think it's important for poets and writers to reflect on and find words to express the sadness, frustration and powerlessness we feel as the earth rebels against our mistreatment. Our work helps readers find words for their feelings, solace for their pain and creates community.

At the same time, we need to bring people in gently. Hitting a reader over the head is never a good option.'

Massachusetts children's writer Jodi Dee also seeks to 'bring readers in gently' on environmental issues. Her recent book *The Dirt Girl*, about a young girl who loves to play outside, but gets teased for having dirt on her face and twigs in her hair, was a finalist in the National Indie Excellence Awards and The Next Generation Indie Book Awards.

'Zafera loves herself from within and that being different is what makes each of us special. It is also okay if others are different and don't understand her. She doesn't have to stop being herself.'

The Dirt Girl offers a realistic look at nature that is refreshing for children's books. Rather than being sanitized and cute, the outdoors can literally get you dirty, and that's okay! The lush, colorful illustrations encourage wonderment in as well as appreciation of nature.

Ecological themes show up in Jodi Dee's other work, such as *The Green Jacket,* where children donate clothing to other children around the country and the title jacket ends up with a survivor of a natural disaster rather than getting thrown away. This is at once a celebration of sharing and building community and a demonstration that giving to others by recycling and repurposing what we use is an important part of our culture.

Recent awareness of clothing recycling, including Jane Fonda's thrifted dress at the Oscars, has started to shift the industry towards greener practices, and Jodi Dee hopes to take part in that. Jodi hopes by raising awareness and educating through her children's stories she will help increase the amount of donations and continue to keep textiles out of landfills.

Jodi Dee's primary interest, inspired by over 20 years of work in children's education as well as her experience as a parent, is in helping children reach greater levels of personal development and emotional intelligence and maturity.

Towards that end, she addresses all of the topics in her writing, including ecology, through the lens of easily relatable childhood themes and situations.

'I became disenchanted that very few stories addressed real life issues children face and experience. There are many stories about imaginary characters like Dora, but few about real children and the magic in just being alive.'

The Dirt Girl is about self-esteem and also about the joy of being in nature and the enchantment of it, while *The Green Jacket* takes both a local and global perspective, depicting the journey of a little green jacket that experiences being a donation, and the importance, power, and magic of giving.

Jodi Dee believes that the specific characters and real-life situations ground her stories, and help children to understand both interpersonal and ecological issues.

Patricia Ravasio, author of *The Girl from Spaceship Earth,* works to restore global and local ecology within a specific place: Corte Madera, CA. She's been involved in parks and beautification and has founded a community café and a dog park to help bring townspeople together.

Yet it was her encounter with Buckminster Fuller in Chicago, where she lived in her twenties while working as an advertising copywriter, that awakened her interest in ecological and life-sustaining values. The famed architect and polymath spent over ten hours sharing his wisdom with Patricia for an article she wrote but could not get published, about ideas such as his conviction that Americans needed to wean themselves off of fossil fuels as soon as possible. During the 1980s, this was not yet a popular sentiment, and was one of many ways Fuller was ahead of his time.

Ravasio's book shares her life story, from her childhood immersed in nature in rural Indiana to when news coverage of the 9/11 attacks brought back Buckminster Fuller's warnings on how human societies urgently needed to change in order to ensure our compatibility with nature and her design principles. Endorsed by Bill McKibben, her story chronicles how the once famous Bucky inspired her to advocate for a more sustainable human experience.

She completely agrees with Jodi Dee about rethinking our production and purchasing on a personal and societal level.

'We focus so much on recycling,' she says, 'but all our trash is just a symptom of a larger problem of buying and producing and consuming so much more than we actually need.'

In her book, the value of personal and individual connection with the local natural world comes through clearly.

'Way too many Americans rarely spend time outside,' she laments. 'We're somehow afraid of nature, even though our bodies are much more like the trees and grass and fish than the inorganic materials we turn into our urban cocoons. And that's a pity because we won't prioritize being good stewards of nature until we get outside and fall in love with it.'

Ravasio believes that writing that inspires people to physically experience the natural world for themselves is instrumental to our bonding with nature, which is critical to our future as a species.

She describes a camping trip to Yosemite when her daughter Alyssa was a child: 'She was playing in the river, and thought she heard beautiful music playing on a radio, classical music, but it turned out to be the sound of water gurgling through the river rocks."

Alyssa Ravasio went on to found HipCamp, a growing internet company that has opened up thousands of private lands to camping and glamping, on a mission to get more people outside.

The Girl from Spaceship Earth uses storytelling to integrate artistic and aesthetic elements. Literary craft and having an engaging and even funny story was important to Pat. As Bill McKibben wrote, 'It is proof that serious is not necessarily synonymous with solemn."

'Realigning ourselves with nature involves only subtle shifts in our thinking,' Pat explains. 'We are biological creatures, with a real-time impact on the natural world.'

She definitely affirms the place of humans within nature, urging us to become more compatible with the natural world. 'We're like molecules within the ecosystem,' she says. 'And everyone, even babies, needs to get out and bond regularly with Mother Earth. So get your children out staring up at the stars!'

Pat Ravasio agrees with Joan Gelfand that in order to live sustainably within nature, we also have to consider how to sustainably meet the material needs of the world's population.

'Is scarcity, the idea that life always has to be a struggle and that some people will always be in poverty, really true? Buckminster Fuller and I think that's a myth. We can create a world with

enough for everyone if we shift our energies from fighting over what we have to figuring out how to make enough.'

Elika Ansari, humanitarian professional who works with refugees in camps for migrants in Greece, also encourages people to come together to preserve the environment – and each other – in her middle-grade children's book *Seacity Rising.*

She believes that fiction was the most effective vehicle she could use to express this message.

'Fiction has the power to make any idea accessible and understandable through identifiable characters and introspective writing. For instance, it is powerful to create a microcosmos where animals have to make sense of a global phenomenon that throws their entire world off-balance.'

She invested special thought and creativity into writing for children, as she believes it is especially urgent to reach them while their minds, hearts, and worldviews are still developing.

'Writing for children has always been more fused with imagination for me, like coming up with a way to say things without actually saying them in so many words, if that makes sense.'

In her writing, narrative craft and aesthetics work to enhance the ecological themes.

'In *Seacity Rising*, I spent a great deal of time visualizing ways to capture climate change in a symbolic way that captured the severity, the urgency of the issue without compromising the flow of the narrative. I came up with a personified black smog as the metaphor for climate change, that would strike sporadically and wreak instant destruction on different land and waterscapes.'

Elika's book aims to convey the psychological experience of encountering a spectacular new environment for the first time, which the personified animals do in her story on their journey to save their world. That joy of discovery, to her, is the aesthetic element within her book.

‘For me, beauty in nature is found in the way our characters experience the world. When my characters in *Seacity Rising* rise out of their sheltered home under the water to experience land for the first time, everything is new for them. I tried to capture this by instilling sensory descriptions in the way Babak the Frog experiences life on land, like the rustling of branches in the breeze, or the vibrant colours of nature, or the droning of wasps and twittering of robins, in an attempt to transform the very things we ourselves take for granted.’

Yet, the story continues to underscore Ansari’s main point.

‘This beauty is, however, fragile and is often overshadowed by the impending threat of the black smog striking at any time and destroying everything, and this is where the truth of climate change comes in.’

She and Patricia Ravasio both believe that ecological restoration can come if we take both personal and political action.

‘There are tons of ways to reduce your carbon footprint, like for me, the most effective way has been to change my diet, but that is not enough. We need to start pressing our governments and political leaders to take the matter much more seriously. This is more than an individual endeavour, we need global unity to be able to tackle the problem.’

While Elika Ansari’s *Seacity Rising* focuses on communicating larger global phenomena through fiction and symbolism, *Elvira DiBrigit’s Why We Farm: Farmers’ Stories of Growing Our Food and Sustaining Their Business* focuses in on the realistic, practical details of small agriculture within California’s fertile Capay Valley.

Farming, especially for the people DiBrigit has interviewed, involves a close and active relationship between people and nature.

‘Definitely human beings are part of the ecology here. My husband worked with native people here in the Capay Valley and they’d been living here for thousands of years. And the farmers I’ve talked with, many of them were motivated by their love for nature. Farming involves financial risk, it’s a small business. And it can take a lot of capital to set up a farm, so doing it involves a lot of commitment to something that’s going to bring you close to nature.’

Why We Farm, while it’s presented with photos and sidebars for artistic effect, acknowledges the hard work and the financial challenges that can go into farming. Yet it conveys beauty by expressing the farmers’ clear love of their craft and of the land that they work.

‘When I saw your question about whether your writing presented nature as beautiful, I thought immediately of Full Belly Farms. A woman who worked there had shown me the boxes of fruit and vegetables that she packed for the place’s Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) subscription program and she’d said that the presentation of them had to be beautiful, that that was part of the job.’

DiBrigit went on to point to other examples of how aesthetics intersect with the business of farming.

‘There’s awareness now about making habitat for bees and butterflies and other pollinators, so farmers are planting hedgerows of colorful flowers. And what we think is beautiful can change over time, as science shows that different practices are more beneficial for crops and the land and we adopt them. People used to prefer neat weeded rows of crops, but now we’re moving towards lower-till agriculture for the sake of the soil, so we’re getting used to different ways that farms and gardens can look.’

Elvira DiBrigit, a farmer herself formerly with the Gettleschetl Gardens, where she and her husband grew olives and other vegetables, says that she always found nature beautiful.

‘Not always in a flowery way, but because I loved being outside and being connected with nature and birds and plants.’

She believes that it’s important to connect to our own local natural environments by getting outside and going for walks and appreciating the scenery. But we also connect by educating ourselves about the science and ecology of where we live.

‘We should learn about our watersheds, where our water comes from, and share that with our children.’

She says that writing about the details of specific places is a more natural way to inspire readers to care about the natural world than taking a more global and abstract perspective.

Still, though, farmers are part of the larger planetary ecosystem and she says that they often have concerns about what’s happening on a larger scale.

‘Farming can be either a help or a hindrance to mitigating climate change, depending on how it’s practiced. And some of the people I interviewed touched on that in their interviews, on sustainable agriculture and things like nitrogen fertilizers that can disrupt ecosystems.’

She also pointed out that figuring out how to feed people healthy food is also an ecological issue in her mind and that of many of her fellow farmers.

‘Humans are also creatures within our ecosystems!’

To DiBrigit, writing about food and where it comes from can be a gateway to helping people learn about and connect to ecology and the natural world.

‘Food is such a central part of our lives, people who don’t think they are interested in nature might be interested in food. And writing about what we eat is a way to talk about farming, and nature, in a way that’s accurate but also appeals to our human aesthetics.’

Farming, as depicted in *Why We Farm,* is hard work and not always what we’d consider ‘pretty.’ But food, and food writing, can engage other senses along with sight: taste, touch and smell.

Producing local, healthy and sustainable food was a big part of what motivated several of the farmers DiBrigit profiled to go into their line of work.

While conducting her interviews, she found many different sorts of people in the industry: urban farmers working on pieces of land within cities, people who had left other careers in midlife to become farmers, young people who wanted to be interns on existing farms. She met people who had recently graduated from college and wanted a different sort of career that let them spend more time outside, and farmers who struggled to pay their bills and had taken second jobs.

All of the people she met loved farming, and mentioned the ‘space, freedom and opportunities’ the career had provided.

In a completely different way, author and world traveler Kiran Bhat’s story cycle *we of the forsaken world* also presents people, mainly indigenous and in developing countries, seeking ‘space, freedom and opportunities.’

As Bhat says, ‘In *we of the forsaken world*… I have imagined four places that could be anywhere in the world, albeit specifically to perhaps the Global South, or the parts of the world economically deemed ‘forsaken’ by the narrative of globalisation. I did this so that I could discuss a very real problem - the worlds being left behind or have already been left behind - but

without having to name specific cultures, because as an Indian-American of privilege, there are a lot of things I'm just not suited to discuss.'

He further explains that his characters and settings, while local and specific, reflect broader human and global concerns. These include ecological issues, such as pollution from industrial waste and climate change, which become a recurring motif throughout the book.

'I think one of the things the book discusses very well is how people are a product of their natural environment, and yet can share similarities and synchronicities to people who are in a completely different part of the world.'

Kiran Bhat himself has seen much of the world, as he lives a seminomadic lifestyle by choice, teaching English to corporate employees to earn a living while traveling. He's visited 132 countries, lived in 18, and speaks 12 languages.

'I feel extremely transient, and often connected to one thing: the self. As I have traveled, as I have learnt to discard the shards of me which have made me connected, to either my nation(s), my friend(s), my family(ies), and even my sanity(ies), I have found that the only eternal, the only thing unvanquishable, is the connection between my spirit and my mind. That allows me to weather the loneliness, or the anxieties, or the sense of solitude, as well as the vastness of existences. I have learnt over time that I know very little about anything, that I often feel like I belong to nothing, and yet it is in this space I feel the most at peace, and the most able to negotiate myself with the outside world.'

we of the forsaken world was designed to be at once local and global, grappling with the ups and downs of individual lives while showing how individual people's stories connect to form part of a worldwide human, and ecological, narrative.

‘I think my book is groundlessly grounded. I think I made sure that each of my four imagined regions are very fleshed out and thought out, but they are made so that they can resemble any such region which looks like theirs. I think it is possible to think globally but remain grounded. To be a global citizen, in my opinion, is to be aware of the space one inhabits, but rather than connecting it to a greater national narrative, one connects it to a global narrative. So, I can be from a suburb of Pittsburgh, and know all that space and only that space alone, but rather than simply calling myself an American, I choose to learn about other cultures, I choose to digitally connect with people who aren’t my own, I choose to place myself in the global narrative, and in doing so, I can call myself Global.’

Bhat accomplishes this through a unique story structure that reflects the greater world connectivity possible through worldwide economic activity, communication and travel. The narrative entwines the lives and separate stories of sixteen different people in various parts of the world, each story written in a different style by a separate narrator. ‘Observers’ follow the characters and help signify switches in locale and narration.

Kiran says this is a way of bridging the gap between the local and the global in the book, and also of representing the way that we can discover and read about episodes in faraway people’s lives over the Internet.

‘I think I am very interested in what it means to represent The Globe in literature, but we also have to remember that The Globe is made up of over seven billion individuals, each with very particular psychologies, cultures, and landscapes of being. I think in order to do justice to the Great Global Narrative is to recognize that this very narrative is made up of billions of stories, being told simultaneously. Think of it is all of the atoms that make up a whole, or the wavelengths of the various atmans which are all part of Brahma, but in order to represent that, I

have felt that I have had to compress a multitude narratives into a panoramic yet singular narrative, using unique and abnormal literary structures.'

This book centers the stories of humans facing a variety of challenges, some which are part of the human condition and others which stem from rapid introductions to modernity as we know it: dislocation and ecological degradation.

Issues that seem 'global' and abstract – climate change, waterway pollution, waste disposal in 'out-of-the-way' places near where indigenous people live, loss of biodiversity – affect real people who share our planet, and who have human feelings and lives and relationships similar to our own. The story structure, while elegant and artistic, renders 'the rest of the world' as identifiable human beings and underscores Bhat's point that when we care for nature, we also care for ourselves and each other.

That is what each of these different narratives – Jodi Dee's *The Dirt Girl* and *The Green Jacket,* Patricia Ravasio's *The Girl from Spaceship Earth,* Elika Ansari's *Seacity Rising*, Elvira DiBrigit's *Why We Farm: Farmers' Stories of Growing Our Food and Sustaining Their Business,* Joan Gelfand's collections of eco-poetry, and Kiran Bhat's *we of the forsaken world* – has in common.

The natural world is comprised of a web of connections that include humans. People who, like the personified animal characters in *Seacity Rising*, must venture out of our comfort zones to save our world from climate change. People who struggle through the consequences of the choices we can make when we forget that they exist, that they are fully human with their own thoughts and loves and foibles, as in *we of the forsaken world.* People worldwide who depend on

the earth for their sustenance and suffer when we degrade the ecosystems, as Joan Gelfand depicts.

Yet, also, people who can find beauty, grace, and dignity in living closely with nature, growing nourishing food, like Elvira DiBrigit's community of farmers. Children who wear, and share, recycled jackets and have fun playing in the dirt, as in Jodi Dee's books. And whom Buckminster Fuller, and Patricia Ravasio, believe could work together to create sustainable abundance for all.

In highly individual and unique ways, each of these titles addresses both local and global matters, discusses humans' roles within and connection to nature, and integrates or finds beauty in some aspect of our lives on this planet while communicating the need to both understand and protect nature.