Backwash of the River
Progress Discussion Guide

Provided by the Aldo Leopold Foundation
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A common refrain I hear when people visit the Leopold Shack and Farm is, “this is a special place.” On a surface level, I agree with the statement, but when I think more deeply, I am not so sure. Yes, the Shack is undoubtedly special but why is it special? Is there something particular about the combination of plants, soil, water, and a run-down chicken coop that creates the right alchemy for specialness? I think not. The conclusion I have arrived at is that there is nothing intrinsically special about the shack. It is the relationship that the Leopold Family and subsequent generations have with the land that makes the place “special.”

The purpose of “Backwash of the River Progress” is to look at a place that many people do not consider special and convince you that it is. As mentioned, a slough is shallow backwater cut off from a larger body of water. In this case, it is an abandoned river channel of the Wisconsin River, the “backwash of the River Progress.” Next to the famous and venerated Leopold Shack and Farm, this buggy, little swamp is seemingly nothing.

My hope is that if we can convince you that the slough is special, it will convince you of the importance of your own special places – whether they are a small garden, an abandoned lot, a wildlife refuge, or a park down the street. All of these places are worthy of restoration, conservation, protection, and love – it is up to you to commit your time to tell its story and engage your community.

This guide is a complement to the Backwash of the River Progress.

**Guiding Activity:**

Where is your “special” place in nature? What actions can you take to redefine what progress means in that space? What stories can you tell about it to engage other members of your community?

**Introduction:**

*Key Concept: Progress is subjective.*

- What is progress?
- Who defines it?
- Are we on a teleological path towards a destination?

**Teachings from a Turtle:**

*Key Concept: The human is a “plain member” of the ecological community rather than master.*

- What is an example of a time that you were taught a lesson by the land? What was the lesson?
- When is a time you felt wonder or love “as yet captured by language?” Why do you think you felt that way?
- Should we anthropomorphize other organisms? Why or why not?

**Passport to the Natural World:**

*Key Concept: To be present, you must engage your senses.*

- Think about your special place in nature. What do you see, smell, hear, touch and taste?
- What gives you joy in that place?
Daughter’s Perspective
Key concept: Sharing a place with a community or your family deepens your connection to the land.

- Who do you share your special place with? What fond memories do you have?

A Brief Timeline
Key Concept: The history of the land impacts our relationship to it in the present.

- What role does shared memory play in our relationship to land?

Retracing the River
Key Concept: Healing is possible through reconnecting with the land.

- What parts of history have we minimized? Why?
- How can we heal ourselves and the land?

Lighting a Fire
Key Concept: Being a passive observer of the land is not enough, we must take an active role in the community.

- What ways do you contribute to the health of your ecological community?

Red Cedar
Key Concept: The land changes and so do we.

- Have you witnessed changes on the land?
- How have you changed over time?

Further Reading


Question:
As a result of these reflections, what is one new perspective you will carry forward or one action you will commit to?