

References

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Reviewer Biography

Anna Jarrett is a story consultant, professional storyteller, teacher and outdoor guide, living a bush and beach lifestyle on the south coast of NSW. With 30 years' experience as a storyteller and educator, Anna enjoys working locally on projects that care for our communities and our environment. Her storytelling work is recognised internationally, and she recently published her first children's book, *The Birds, the Sea and Me*, illustrated by Julie Sydenham and funded through the South Coast Shorebird Education Program, National Parks and Wildlife Service NSW.

The Power of Narrative in Environmental Networks

Raul Lejano, Mrill Ingram and Helen Ingram Cambridge, MIT Press, 2013
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The Power of Narrative in Environmental Networks successfully combines a rationale and framework for qualitative narrative analysis with case studies demonstrating this technique. Despite being primarily focused on environmental networks, there are pertinent lessons inside this book for environmental educators.

The introduction gives a background to the research field and also highlights the significance of this form of communication as a whole. I am sure that many environmental educators would be familiar with the engaging effect of a good story; by reading through this account, I found it both encouraging and informative for my practice. It also speaks to the potential for narrative to be put to greater use in the sciences, where an increasingly sceptical public can no longer be convinced by facts, figures, and evidence (p. 11). This is especially the case for emotionally charged issues such as climate change, or for environmental issues where there is conflict and opposing views.

The authors capture the capability of narrative to bind together an environmental network, and they introduce this point early on: 'Stories, or narratives, create the glue that binds people together in networks, providing them with a sense of history, common ground and future, thus enabling them to persist even in the context of resistance' (p. 2). We are encouraged to perceive the groups as 'narrative networks', with each actor offering their own perceptions and additions to the story. This is the 'many voices' or plurivocity of the network.

Lejano and the Ingram partners describe how a narrative analysis of a network can fill in the gaps of understanding left by a purely quantitative approach. The authors explain how typically, network analysis looks at the number, structure, and patterns

found within a network. This quantitative approach delivers important knowledge, describing the ‘what’ of the network. However, it misses in-depth qualitative knowledge of the network, or the ‘why’ (see Chapter 2). For example, why does one network persist longer than another? Why do individuals participate, and what is their role? How meaningful is the network?

Accordingly, the authors argue that using an analysis of a network’s narrative will complement traditional network analysis and provide a greater depth of understanding to research in this field. By using specific case studies that the authors have been involved with and developing pertinent tools to analyse a network’s story, the result is an elegant demonstration of this analytical construct. These case studies highlight how the narratives of the environmental networks can be used to disentangle complex issues and find successful policy outcomes for seemingly disparate parties.

The Turtle Islands or Tawi-Tawi (Chapter 5) at the extreme south-western tip of Philippine territory make for interesting reading. This is a narrative of multiple relationships with place, and details how the changing bureaucratic approaches to turtle conservation from a far-off government have an impact on this community. The narrative analysis reveals a nuanced and complex web of interactions between groups, perhaps most tellingly how the project officers brought in to enact the new conservation program needed to think creatively and work with the community to ingratiate their place in the story.

I found it fascinating to read about the intricate nature of this situation. Given that the community relied on some partial harvesting of turtle eggs, the project officers (biologists and experts in turtle conservation) needed to tread a fine line. Their culturally sensitive management approach ensured that they became respected as part of the community.

Some of these approaches would appear to be extremely bizarre, and perhaps even self-defeating from a Western perspective (with examples such as turning a blind eye to some egg poaching). The result was that good conservation rates were achieved, and for the first time over nearly a decade, scientific data could be recorded about egg numbers. The ability of the project group to understand the community and act in this way built a mutual respect between seemingly separate groups.

This work all came to an abrupt end when the Manila government enacted stricter conservation legislation, with complete bans on all egg harvesting. In a complete backfire, the local government evicted the project group from the islands. To this day, no data is gathered on egg numbers conserved or harvested, and it is considered highly likely the harvesting would have increased. In this regard, this text informs about effective environmental management options in culturally sensitive situations.

The Turtle Islands case study speaks to the oversimplification that often exists when situations are cast in a human versus nature dichotomy. The dichotomy is clearly false, with the narrative allowing us to see the intertwined way that humans interact with nature. Through analysis of the narrative we are granted insight into the way the community operates to manage their resource, insights that would not have been understood with other formal modes of analysis (p. 139). For example, the important, yet informal, arrangements that facilitate relationships between parties are not written down and would not be spoken about except in confidential interview.

As a Tool for Education

As mentioned initially, this text is focused on the use and role of narrative in environmental networks. Despite this, I found the major themes and analytics described could be applied to my practice as an environmental educator. In other words, the same

reasons that narrative is shown to be effective to bind and create focus in an environmental network are the same reasons that well-constructed and delivered stories can captivate and educate a classroom of almost any age group of students.

In the groups that I facilitate, I put myself in a storyteller role. I have used this technique as a way to engage students with place and communicate scientific concepts for many years. The narratives are generally personal stories of study and experience, and they give the students a context for where they are and what they are doing that day. It could be a discussion about nocturnal biodiversity when tracking possums and gliders through the bush at night. Or perhaps how adrenaline cancels out pain when a large hook penetrates your hand on a disastrous fishing trip: '... truths provided by the narratives in environmental networks offer scientific facts in the context of personal experiences and ethical considerations, emotions and values' (p. 7). For those familiar with place-based education, this text will encourage a narrative approach, both in practice and in the evaluation of programs: 'a narrative approach helps us ... see how peoples' personal identities become integrated into relationships with place' (p. 58). There is a lot of reinforcement for storytelling as a practice for engagement in this work. It really is no surprise that I got a lot out of reading it.

The Power of Narrative in Environmental Networks encouraged my reflection and helped me enrich my practice, using the tools to improve my own narratives. I am sure many readers of this journal will already appreciate and use narrative as a technique in their practice. If that is the case, it will be rewarding to read such an in-depth study surrounding narrative, its affect and analysis. If you, like me, enjoy telling stories, you will appreciate this work, and it will surely help to improve the messaging and delivery in your narratives. Alternatively, if you have wondered about story as an education technique or would like to use it, then I am sure you would find the rationale, descriptions and examples used by the authors convincing and useful. By reading this book you could open up an educational technique that benefits yourself and your students. I highly recommend it.

Reviewer Biography

Peter Crowcroft works with the Great Ocean Road Coast Committee in Victoria, coordinating an environmental education program with school groups. He is currently writing a Masters dissertation on how narratives can capture and engage a student audience in an outdoor setting, and how scientific concepts about the environment can be communicated within these personal stories of study and experiences.