

Through a child's eyes

Children's books about the natural world can help raise environmental awareness. The *Nature Ecology & Evolution* editors select some of their favourites, old and new.

The *Lorax* by Dr Seuss (Theodor Geisel) is perhaps the best known environmental book for children. The story pits the Once-ler, who chops down all the Truffula trees to fuel unsustainable industrial production, against the Lorax, who "speaks for the trees" and explains the folly of this environmental destruction. In this issue, [Dominy et al.](#) explore the origin of the eponymous Lorax and contend that he is less of a sanctimonious character than many interpreters have argued. Instead, they suggest that his resemblance to the patas monkeys that Geisel would have observed while writing the book makes him more a suffering member of the ecosystem that depends on the trees.

The balance between moral lecturing and instilling a sense of wonder and fun about the natural world is one of the biggest challenges when writing environmental fiction, especially for children. Inspired by [Dominy et al.](#), we have been thinking about some of the children's literature with environmental messages that we have enjoyed reading to young members of our families recently.

Several of us chimed in about one book: *The Snail and the Whale* by Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler. A sea snail hitches a lift around the world on the tail of a humpback whale until the whale becomes beached because of the noise of speedboats — and the snail, together with the local schoolchildren, acts to save her. Although the message about anthropogenic noise is clear, the tone is not preachy, and the description of the pair's voyage around the wonders of the world's oceans has an equally powerful effect. In a similar vein, for older children, one of us has recently been reading Arthur Ransome's *Coot Club*, from the 1930s, in which a group of children do battle with a noisy motorboating group of 'Hullabaloo's' on the UK's Norfolk Broads in order to protect the nest of a rare coot.

As in all Ransome's books, the sheer sense of excitement and adventure about being out in the natural world, and the description of specific natural places, shines through beyond any simple message.

Another favourite with a clear moral is *Tidy*, by Emily Gravett, the story of a badger whose desire for everything to be neat and tidy leads to the ecological collapse of the forest. But overt or underlying messages are not a prerequisite for environmental education: books that simply introduce children to aspects of the natural world can helpfully complement direct experience of it. We enjoyed *Neon Leon* by Jane Clarke and Britta Teckentrup, in which an orange chameleon is unable to change colour and struggles to fit in with his surroundings; *Pup's Supper* by Victoria Miles, a simple story for very young children about a sea-otter mum tempting her pup with clams and urchins; *Hooray for Hoppy* by Tim Hopgood, in which a rabbit uses all its senses to realize that spring has sprung; *A Busy Day for Birds*, an act-along showcase of avian diversity by Lucy Cousins; *The Ladybird*, by Bernadette Gervais, a skilfully illustrated look at ladybird biology, life cycle and the astonishing diversity of their wing patterns; *Dinosaur Roar*, by Henrietta Strickland and Paul Strickland, which has led to an entire series in collaboration with the UK's [Natural History Museum](#); *The Koala Who Could*, about a marsupial who learns to have a sense of adventure in the natural world; and *Cave Baby*, by Julia Donaldson and Emily Gravett, about an exuberant young Palaeolithic rock artist.

Exposure of children to nature, either directly or through books, has declined in many parts of the industrialized world. The loss of nature words from the *Oxford Junior Dictionary*, which caused [outcry](#) a few years ago, is perhaps a symptom of this decline, but also a missed opportunity to do something to rectify it. It is good that

authors have hit back, with *The Lost Words* by Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris providing a celebration of the words such as acorn and conker that are disappearing from children's lives. The persistence of children's literature from earlier generations can also help here. Many classics that don't have a strong environmental message as their primary focus, nor an overt aim of celebrating nature, are set in the natural world and use its rich vocabulary. Examples that come to mind include *Watership Down* by Richard Adams, *The Sword in the Stone* by T. H. White and *Fantastic Mr Fox* by Roald Dahl.

Non-fiction also has an important part to play, both on the message and celebration fronts. *George Saves the World by Lunchtime* and *The World Came to My Place Today*, both by Jo Readman and Ley Honor Roberts, show children that all their everyday objects and consumption depend on ecosystems around the world, and how the choices they make can have an effect. On the other hand, one editor's six year old has recently spent hours captivated by a marine biology guide that is not specifically targeted at children (*Oceans, A Visual Guide*, by Stephen Hutchinson and Lawrence E. Hawkins). It is great to see that both fiction and non-fiction are recognized in awards for children's environmental literature, such as [this one](#) in Australia. The *Nature Ecology & Evolution* editors are looking forward to exploring some of the books on the shortlist, and also to hearing about our readers' favourite children's books, especially those that expand our geographic horizons given that we are all currently based in the United Kingdom. □

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