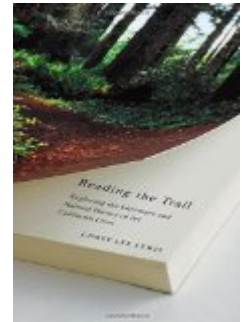


Corey Lee Lewis. *Reading the Trail: Exploring the Literature and Natural History of the California Crest.* Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2005. 256 pp \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-87417-606-3.



Reviewed by Dale E. Potts

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America's Pacific Coast Trail is a magnet for those with an interest in environmental science and literature as well as hiking, history, and cultural studies. In *Reading the Trail*, Corey Lee Lewis ably explores the balance between aesthetic appreciation and an activist perspective found in the literature of the region. This dual focus is mirrored in his career. Lewis is assistant director of the Core Writing Program at the University of Nevada where he teaches courses in environmental literature. He also conducts courses in wilderness survival at Truckee Meadows Community College.

The book provides a unique perspective on environmental literature by illustrating the utility of the writings and experiences of authors significantly connected with the Pacific Crest Trail. Through extensive discussion of Mary Austin, John Muir, and Gary Snyder, Lewis interweaves chapters of literary and cultural analysis with field methods necessary to achieve a fuller understanding of nature. Such chapters describe how

aesthetic appreciation and environmental fieldwork can inform the consciousness of today's environmental educators, students, and anyone interested in connecting to the natural world in a personal and meaningful manner. Austin, Muir, and Snyder have lent themselves to extensive literary criticism in the twentieth century, and Lewis effectively makes use of eco-criticism throughout the work. He is most interested, however, in how literature and environmental science might draw on their oftentimes opposing methodologies to provide practical applications of environmental ethics for educators and students. The fieldwork of the scientist informs the sometimes text-bound study of literature, while the aesthetic appreciation offered by the arts answers how and why landscape is perceived and utilized.

The opening chapter establishes the connectivity between writer, reader, and landscape. Lewis introduces these three authors and their associations with the Pacific Crest Trail by emphasizing their direct experience. Each writer became

environmentally active by establishing a sense of ecological literacy. The ensuing chapters stress the importance of environmental education that combines the study of the literary and the scientific. Today's ecological crisis, as Lewis notes, is also an educational crisis where the "opportunities for experiencing, understanding, interacting with and coming to value the natural world are decreasing" (p. 24).

Interdisciplinary environmental studies programs across the United States constitute one means of creating ecological literacy by uniting environmental science with the humanities. However, their approach is not yet felt in standard curricula across the country. The ecological/educational crisis stems, in part, from the long-standing lack of communication between the arts and the sciences. In the arts, environmental knowledge "is not based on direct contact with, and experience in, the natural world, and it is not founded upon the insights of the ecological sciences" (p. 35). Conversely, students of science remain "incapable of exploring many of the underlying causes of environmental problems and engendering action on their behalf" (p. 37). The positive message of this book is that nature appreciation and scientific study, in a reciprocal relation between the two sides of the modern college campus, can help create avenues for ecological literacy. Both the arts and the sciences are capable of learning methodologies from one another. For instance, providing students "trained within the sciences some experience with the 'control free' observation and interaction can serve as a much needed corrective to the position of dominion often necessitated by manipulative field studies" (p. 75). For literature students, fieldwork opens them to insights beyond textually confined approaches; these insights help to draw out the meanings behind the words.

Austin in her work *Land of Little Rain* (1903) wrote extensively about the landscape of the southern California region. Ahead of her time, she

pinpointed the necessity of protecting arid lands, landscapes previously viewed as uninhabitable. To Austin, the desert possessed intrinsic value that Lewis finds applicable for educators today. He notes that by "incorporating Mary Austin's work into environmental education curricula, we can include the aesthetic and non-utilitarian values of desert landscapes with the variety of economic values and uses that must be considered when making decisions about the management of our arid lands" (p. 71).

Subsequent chapters include the American Wilderness Movement's iconic figure, Muir, whose extensive journal writings provide students with different means of achieving ecological literacy. Muir's hiking excursions and cabin life in the Sierra Nevada Mountains contain extensive direct observations, self-reflections, and physical experiences that students can mirror in their own journal work. *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911), for instance, provides many journal possibilities. Alongside objective, scientific study, Muir wrote extensively of his "mountaineering exploits, philosophical ruminations, emotional responses, and aesthetic evaluations of the Sierra Nevada" (p. 120). In fieldwork exercises, students may choose a particular plant or animal and study it in detail, both objectively and subjectively. Other means to create journal entries may include historical, sensual, autobiographical, psycho-spiritual, philosophical-ethical, and literary approaches.

The final author in this study is the poet Snyder. As a nature writer and environmentalist, his inclusion is paramount to any discussion of the Sierra Nevada. Lewis makes an excellent case for the connection between Snyder's work and the concept of ecological literacy. His poem "Riprap" from *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* (1958) is particularly useful for student-hikers maintaining trails. The poem grants a deep appreciation for trail development as it helps readers become aware of the purposes of spur trails and switch-

backs. Lewis extols Snyder's attention to direct experience, noting that few eco-critics may actually engage in it. "Because of the vital influence of physical experience in the natural world of Snyder's thought," Lewis contends, "an interdisciplinary field-based methodology is necessary for coming to a full and accurate understanding of his work" (pp. 142-143).

The Desolation Wilderness area is an excellent place to provide students with firsthand knowledge of "the daily practices required by such a field-study expedition--simplicity, self-sufficiency, physical work, communal sharing, interdependence, environmental awareness, and wilderness experience--become occurrences for exploring Snyder's work both physically and intellectually" (p. 162). Through the process of "re-inhabiting" a landscape, therefore, the benefits to students and to society include increased bio-regional literacy, knowledge of the landscape, protected ecosystems, and a sense of responsibility toward the environment (p. 165).

The study makes use of recent scholarship in the fields of literary criticism, cultural history, and environmental education. Lewis utilizes recent literary criticism to ground his approach to textual analysis. General titles include David Mazel, *A Century of Eco-criticism* (2001) and Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination* (1995). Geographically specific titles include Ian Marshall, *Story Line: A Place-Based Study of the Literature of the Appalachian Trail* (1998). Author-specific monographs enhance the scholarly framework by illustrating their lasting literary and ecological impact. Although monographs that discuss Austin's impact are less common, Lewis uses recent articles, such as William Scheick, "Mary Austin's Disfigurement of the Southwest in *The Land of Little Rain*," published in 1991 in *Western American Literature*. Recent monographs on Muir and Snyder are more readily available, including Steven J. Holmes's *The Young John Muir* (1999) and Tim

Dean's *Gary Snyder and the American Unconscious* (1991).

Curriculum texts also constitute an important framework for the study. Lewis, for example, benefits from David Orr's *Ecological Literacy: Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World* (1992), John Elder's edited collection *Stories in the Land: A Place-Based Environmental Education Anthology* (1998), and the edited volume, by Jonathan Collett and Stephen Karakashian, *Greening the College Curriculum: A Guide to Environmental Teaching in the Liberal Arts* (1996). In addition, *Reading the Trail* has a significant historical component and Lewis makes good use of the cultural history of wilderness. Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967) as well as Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (2000) inform this study.

This work approaches environmental literature in a unique manner. Lewis insists that literature and science can learn much from one another in a practical and useful way. Students exposed to the natural world, with the tools of literature and science, gain greater understanding of nature and their own place within it. These authors contend that direct contact with the landscape demonstrates "the effectiveness of uniting environmental art and activism in an enterprise that can create permanent environmental protection" (p. 180).

Book learning, combined with direct experience, therefore, can lead to cultural transformation at the individual and societal levels. The positive message of the work is that it is vitally important that students and teachers engage not just the natural world, but also democratic processes where students become "guided through a three-step process that leads them from 'I know' to 'I care' and finally to 'I act'" (p. 209). He further writes that "our current educational system is failing to develop democratic competence in its graduates simply because it refuses to recognize

the need for moving beyond the first step in this threefold process of growth and development” (p. 209). In the United States, “most contemporary Americans,” as Lewis notes, “live estranged from the natural world surrounding them” (p. 215).

These authors of the past 130 years provide ways to connect aesthetic appreciation with scientific, field-based experience to create a deeper personal knowledge of place and a concomitant desire to protect it. This proactive stance suffuses the work, stressing the need for direct action and for reinvigorating personal contact with the lands of the Pacific Crest Trail. The book possesses a timely argument: connection to place is crucial. That connection begins with ecological literacy.

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