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Terrell A. Young  
*Washington State University*

Barbara A. Ward  
*Washington State University*

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Going Green: Books that Invite Wonder and Action about Earth’s Endangered Environment

Terrell A. Young, Ed.D. & Barbara A. Ward, Ph.D.

Concerned about the environment and delighted with the lush illustrations in Lynne Cherry’s (1990) classic picture book The Great Kapok Tree: A Tale of the Amazon Forest, Mrs. Belgarde decides to read it aloud to her third graders. The students love how the tale features the vivid inhabitants of the rain forest and the interdependence of the living things that depend on the tree for sustenance. Excited about the story of how the animals and a Yanamamo child come to a woodcutter in a dream and offer persuasive arguments for him not to fell the tree, several of the children eagerly tell the story to their parents. Deeply involved in recycling and preserving the earth’s limited natural resources, Francesca’s mother is thrilled with Mrs. Belgarde’s book selection since it may inspire the next generation to be more careful stewards of the earth. Dan’s father, on the other hand, is not so pleased with the story he hears from his son. After all, he makes his living as a logger, and doesn’t the book depict loggers and their livelihood in a negative light?

This vignette clearly depicts the dilemma many teachers encounter today as they struggle between ignoring the growing environmental crisis or risk offending parents whose very livelihood depends on practices harmful to the earth. It seems clear, though, that global warming is a complicated, hot button topic that needs to be explored in today’s classrooms.

Most scientists are united on the topic of global warming and the necessity for radical change in how we conduct our daily lives; yet they are not in agreement on exactly how to make those life changes or how long we have to remain indecisive. Just a few years ago, many of the planet’s leaders were certain that it would be up to the next generation to make those hard choices, but global warming has increased more rapidly than expected, forcing pivotal decisions about the Earth’s future to be made now. As always, books raise awareness, offer solutions, and inspire creative thinking. We have collected some of our recent favorites that just might spark the imaginations of young readers to make this a cleaner, greener, more sustainable home that we can share with the species that were here before us.
Please note the grade level recommendations are only starting points for teacher consideration. For example, we both feel strongly that *Animal Poems of the Iguazu* (Alarcón, 2008) and *Wangari’s Trees of Peace* (Winter, 2008), although listed for younger readers, would have a powerful impact when shared with upper elementary, middle, and high school students.

**Grades K-3**

*Animal poems of the Iguazu/Animalaria del Iguazu.*
Illustrated by M. C. Gonzalez.

Through gloriously alive paintings and perfectly pitched text, this lovely tribute to nature is a delight for all the senses. Surely one of these 26 poems will capture the imagination of readers and prompt earth’s caretakers to take note of the natural beauty of the world around us. Alarcón describes a vivid world where toucans have papaya slices for beaks and multicolored parrots use their demanding tones to challenge the stillness of the air. Established in 1934, Iguazu National Park touches on parts of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, and Alarcon’s poems make it even more essential that we do something to save the beautiful wild places that remain on this earth. The language is playful yet instills a sense of urgency in readers. As Alarcón uses his keen observer’s eye to raise awareness, he lets the creatures of the rain forest speak for themselves. The pages are as crowded with colors as the rain forest itself, reminding readers of what they miss by never looking closely at the world around them. The mixed media illustrations with eye-popping hues and cut paper give textures to the creatures that wriggle, flap, and swim through the book’s pages. Unspoiled places grow rarer every day, and this lovely collection of poems will remind readers of what we’re losing daily. Having the poems written in both Spanish and English is a bonus.

Providing young readers a personal year-in-the-life account of the ice bears of the Arctic, this timely book is sure to provide compelling reasons for the policy makers of today and tomorrow to pay attention to the plight of the creatures dependent on Arctic ice for survival. Gently but firmly, the mother ice bear teaches her two ice cubs how to hunt, swim, care for their fur, and to survive, but she can do nothing about the shorter winter seasons that are endangering her species’ livelihoods except wait restlessly for winter and ice. The stunning watercolor illustrations that fill this picture book’s pages pay tribute to these unique inhabitants of the Earth, and readers will probably brush their faces and slap their arms in sympathy at the detailed full-page close-up of a ice bear’s face covered with swarming mosquitoes in search of blood. Especially effective is a two-page spread showing the mother ice bear as she heads away from the sea in search of ice while her two cubs pace restlessly. Back matter includes a warning about the dire straits faced by these bears with a million square miles of Arctic sea ice lost to global warming. The book also includes a list of organizations working to save the environment. Through the bears’ interactions with other Arctic dwellers such as wolves, walruses, and ringed seals, readers are reminded of the interdependence of species.


One woman CAN make a difference, and this picture book biography of environmentalist Wangari Maathai shows young readers exactly how much of a difference one determined person with a vision can make. Born near Mount Kenya, Wangari misses the trees of her homeland while she is in the United States studying. Upon her return, she finds a desolate land where buildings have displaced the trees of her childhood. Determined to turn
things around, she plants nine seedlings and then persuades some of the neighborhood women to join her mission. The founder of the Green Belt Movement, Wangari ends up being jailed for protesting the government’s continuous raping of her country’s natural resources. Lauded for her exceptional work, she received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004. The acrylic illustrations used by Winter pay tribute to this woman who created an army for peace and reclaimed the landscape of Kenya for the next generation. Winter uses tones and tints that enable readers to see the individual leaves and delight in the rows of trees, 30 million strong, planted by her followers. Young readers are certain to applaud her efforts and may enjoy pairing this inspiring story with Claire Nivola’s *Planting the Trees of Africa* (2008). Many may even decide to plant a tree in their own backyards.


British author Melanie Welch has created a beautiful, straightforward book that will help even preschool children understand ways they can help care for the world. Die-cut pages, bold illustrations, and lift-the-flaps, remind children of ways of both conserving energy and caring for nature. People of all ages can see how simple things such as remembering to turn out the lights when leaving a room, or making sure to turn off the tap while brushing your teeth can save precious resources. Gently reminding readers to feed birds in winter, grow plants from seeds, and recycle garbage helps young readers better understand and appreciate our natural world and conservation.

**Grades 4-6**


Intrigued by the earth’s ocean currents, oceanographer Curt Elbesmeyer has been tracking the trash that travels along the sea since 1990. With the assistance of mostly amateur ocean observers across the world, he has tracked sneakers, soap
dispensers, hockey gloves, and LEGO pieces that accidentally spilled into the watery brine during transit from one port to another. Tracking the trash helps scientists understand more about the ocean. Protecting the marine environment is at the heart of this wonderful book about the journey trash takes across our world’s salty surfaces. To read this delightful account of one man’s interest in tracking trash is to ponder the world’s oceans as debris-filled bodies of water. The book’s splendid photographs, maps, and illustrations are sure to remind readers that trash doesn’t just disappear; it may find its way into the ocean’s Eastern Garbage Patch, a section of the Pacific Ocean between Hawaii and California that is about the size of Alaska. The author offers simple suggestions for how we can all make a difference in the amount of trash being generated by reducing, reusing, and recycling.


Environmentalist and children’s book author and illustrator, Lynne Cherry teamed up with award-winning photojournalist Gary Braasch to create an engaging, highly readable book explaining the science behind global warming. The book creates a sense of immediacy and reader involvement as the authors personalize this problem by introducing young readers to 44 scientists and the student “citizen scientists” who help them gather clues to “unravel the mysteries about our changing climate.” Divided into four sections, the book weaves Braasch’s striking photographs to support and extend the text. Section one, “Where We Find Clues about Climate Change,” explains how data was collected from flowers, trees, birds, butterflies, frogs, glaciers, and much more. The other sections, “Fitting the Clues Together,” What Scientists and You Can Do,” and “Resources,” are just as intriguing as the first section. Students learn how they can take action and make a difference in the
environment. For instance, using just one gallon of gas in a car, lawnmower, or blower engine adds 20 pounds of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere. Knowing this, children in Vermont created no idling areas around schools, at the same time, saving drivers money and helping the environment. Kids also helped plant trees since a mature tree can absorb nearly 48 pounds of carbon dioxide a year and release enough oxygen back into the atmosphere to support two people. Children and teachers alike will appreciate the resources in this highly informative book.

Gore, Al. (2007).
An inconvenient truth: The crisis of global warming.

Stunning, compelling, and urgent in its intent, this adaptation of Gore’s original book for adults is sure to make believers of any naysayers about global warming and climate changes. Filled with colorful photographs, charts, and graphs, the book’s fifteen chapters describe in vivid detail the future of the earth if we don’t take action soon. Gore’s explanations of the melting polar ice caps, the threats to endangered species, and the increase in tropical storms are troubling. Three maps showing the amount of glacial melting in Greenland during 1992, 2002, and 2005 are particularly horrifying for the consequences to the globe. The book features photos of the urban sprawl of Tokyo, clearcutting in Forks, Washington, and a garbage dump in Mexico City. The text describes the effects of greenhouse gases and our reliance on fossil fuels and explains that the heavily industrialized, most technologically advanced nations such as the United States, are responsible for much of the problems. If anything, Gore seems somewhat restrained when it comes to our reliance on fossil fuels, which has resulted in much of the damage to our planet. To realize that our nation emits more greenhouse gases than Africa, Asia, Australia, the Middle East, and South America combined is to feel shame and grave responsibility. Tellingly, Gore calculates the number of peer-reviewed articles dealing with change in the climate published during the past 10 years: 929. None of those articles disputes the cause of global warming yet fifty-three per cent of the popular press expressed doubts about the causes of global warming. Gore offers specific suggestions about what we can do about the looming crisis, leaving readers with a sense of immediacy but also a thread of hope.

Lonely after being displaced by his family’s move from Tucson, Arizona to Edenboro, Massachusetts, Ben Moroney misses the desert ecosystem, his best friend Tony, and his pet lizard Lenny. Desperate for the connections he had in his old home, the fifth grader begins walking through the woods near his house and spending time with his science teacher, Mrs. Tibbets, who teaches him about the habitat and critters that live right beneath their feet. Reeling from the death of her husband, Mrs. Tibbets is also looking for a place to fit in since her teaching methods conflict with the principal’s philosophy, and she and her sister-in-law are at odds about her husband’s wishes for the land he left behind. Ben is drawn especially to the plight of spadefoot toads, who have but one night a year to mate in a vernal pool that exists only briefly, before disappearing back into their natural homes. But even with his reawakened connection to the natural world, Ben faces several challenges: a school bully and the threat of development of the spadefoot toads’ homes, intended to be bulldozed and filled in. Readers will be inspired by Ben’s fight for the green spaces he has come to love while creating a new home, and they may be interested in the list of resources for lovers of toads and vernal pools found in the author’s note. Ben also has several secrets about the rattlesnakes he accidentally released.


First inspired by Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and then by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the author tells the riveting survival tale of Jose who lives in La Rupa, Honduras during the torrential rains and mud slides that engulfed his neighbors’ houses. As he works to free some of his neighbors and feed his siblings after the hurricane, Jose considers the toll that the mud caused in their town, covering every house between his family’s and one other on the edge of town, and makes note that the mud came down the hills where the trees had been clear-cut the year before. The worst Caribbean storm in two hundred years, Hurricane Mitch claimed the lives of 8,000 individuals and wiped out entire villages. Just as Katrina revealed the effects of coastal erosion along the Louisiana waterfront, this story illustrates the human cost of careless use of the earth’s natural resources. As Jose wonders, so will readers: Would the mudslides have happened without the clear-cutting?
Grades 6-9


*Up close: Jane Goodall.*


Although Jane Goodall originally planned to devote four months to studying the chimpanzees of Lake Tanganyika, Africa, she ended up devoting her life to their study. This is a detailed account of how a young woman without academic credentials or much background in studying animals became the world’s most famous primatologist. What she lacked in credentials, Goodall made up for in passion for the chimpanzees she studied on the Gombe Reserve, observing the chimps eating meat and using tools, something no one else had ever done. This detailed biography reveals as much about the human frailties of Goodall the woman as it does about Goodall the researcher, and it offers readers insight into the politics of science. For instance, Goodall was shocked to find that many of the baby chimps that were being harvested were paid for by researchers. Late in her career, she became a tireless activist for conservation. Readers are bound to be enchanted by the description of her journey to Africa and beyond. Some may also be interested in reading Ellen Levine’s *Up Close: Rachel Carson* (Viking, 2007), the biography of another woman who investigated the effects of pesticides on the environment.


*Investigating climate change: Scientists’ search for answers in a warming world.*

Minneapolis: Twenty-First Century Books/Lerner. 111 pages. $23.95, ISBN: 0-8225-6792-X.

This book, part of the Discovery! Series, invites readers to consider over two century’s scientific investigations regarding global warming. Johnson deftly leads readers on a trail of evidence showing how atmospheric gases affect Earth’s temperatures. Scientists studied glaciers, the greenhouse effect, carbon dioxide, ancient clues such as the width of tree rings, ices cores, and
climate models, melting ice and rising seas, altered ecosystems, endangered species, and extreme weather trends to forecast future warming trends. The final chapter documents strategies that can be used to both reduce and cope with global warming—strategies for both nations and individuals to consider.


Chip Martin and his best friend Luther Wilson have always loved exploring the Old Place, an abandoned farm near his Florida home. But when his mother’s budding romance with Luther’s uncle Booker angers Luther, Chip searches for solace in the place he loves best and begins exploring the marshy woods near the farm. To his delight, he spots two fuzzy kittens frolicking in the woods, kittens that turn out to be the offspring of a Florida panther, a critically endangered species. But the panthers’ habitat is threatened by the plans of Mr. Blake, who has rented the property as a site for a meatpacking plant. The owner, Mrs. Franklin, is in a nursing home, and has no idea of his plans. Desperate to save the panthers’ lives and the land he loves so dearly, Chip rallies Luther, soccer fanatic Lily, and several classmates who have been displaced by a hurricane, to prevent Blake’s bulldozer from wreaking havoc on the land. But the protest dwindles as the children’s families find more permanent homes and leave the area. Kate’s boyfriend, Brad, covers the protest for the local newspaper, and Kate finds out that some city officials were about to grant a variance to Blake so that he could do what he wanted to do with the property, regardless of the wishes of his neighbors.

Grades 9-12


In the not too distant future, Earth’s enormous ice caps are melting, and the world’s citizens are drowning, disappearing into watery graves as the sea relentlessly swallows up the land. Seeing no other way out, fifteen year old Mara, a resident of Wing, an island somewhere in the north, persuades some of her neighbors to
abandon the doomed island in search of safety. Through a primitive Internet connection, she has learned of cities built in the sky that are safe from the constant storms and ever-rising waters, and three boats head off to find sanctuary in New Mungo, the closest of the New World cities. After a challenging journey, Mara discovers that the new cities aren’t the sanctuary she once thought. In fact, the doors to the city are closed, and its perimeter is surrounded by hundreds of desperate refugees looking for shelter. Clearly, the lessons learned by earth’s citizens have created groups of have and have-nots. Safe drinking water is at a premium, and Mara must find a creative way to save herself and those who came with her. The author graphically depicts the possible consequences of human greed and excess and forces readers to wonder if we are at the brink of destruction right now, in 2008. Her description of a hot, fevered world followed by hurricanes and constant rain is as vivid and mind-numbing as the rains she describes. What would the consequences be?


The fate of the world rests on the muscular shoulders of seventeen-year-old Jack Danielson. In *Firestorm* (2007), book one of *The Caretaker* trilogy, Jack saves the Earth’s oceans while losing everything and nearly everyone he loves. In *Whirlwind*, the second book, Jack heads to the Amazon to rescue his girlfriend P.J., who is in the clutches of a colonel, the dark lord of the future. Fast paced and filled with descriptive, gripping passages that will have readers racing to its conclusion, the book vividly illustrates humankind’s careless ravaging of the rain forests, and the void caused by the loss of the creatures that live within the forests. Readers will be as disturbed as Jack is reminded of how quickly nature can be destroyed, and they’ll surely root for this eco-hero to save the world in this thriller with a conscience.

It is surely no surprise to today’s drivers that the world’s dependence on oil has affected political, economic, and diplomatic decisions. This concise guide to oil explains how oil became such a popular fuel and traces the rise and fall and rise of the price of gasoline at fuel pumps. Readers and their parents will feel somewhat nostalgic as they take note of the then-shocking price of a gallon of gas back in 2006: $2.53 in the United States, $5.63 in France, $5.86 in Germany. In addition to explaining why the price of gasoline has risen, Laxer also discusses the ecological damages being done to the environment by the overuse of fuel and that continues to damage the atmosphere. Laxer makes no bones in identifying oil as a limited resource, and how its use has contributed to catastrophic climate change. Most scientists agree that burning fossil fuels has increased the carbon dioxide in our atmosphere, trapping the heat from the sun, expected to cause a five degree temperature change by 2100. Citizens of the world can expect this increase to result in extinct species, larger deserts, sources of fresh water imperiled, sea levels rising, and flooding. In simple terms, Laxer explains how peak oil and climate change are connected. Readers can, however, take heart from Sweden’s example as two years ago, that country decided to phase out its use of petroleum over the next 15 years. Sweden’s nine million citizens are on track with alternative energy sources to become what Laxer calls both “post-petroleum” and “post-nuclear.”


The future is here in this highly original book set in West Africa in what was once called Niger. The Earth in 2070 is a very different place from the planet we know now. While Dieuri, a Haitian man bent on saving the world from itself, combines magic and science to create Peace Bombs to counteract nuclear fallout, his Grand Bois group of eco-terrorists wreaks havoc on oil refineries, clear-cut logging machinery, and animal slaughterhouses. The launch of nuclear bombs and Peace Bombs causes a green wave to sweep over the Earth, flooding the world with magic and inadvertently letting loose earthquakes, tsunamis, and tornadoes. No longer is it safe to travel anywhere alone, and although all the worlds have united, the
threat of a looming war propels fourteen-year-old Ejii, a shadow speaker, to cross the Sahara desert alone, embarking on a journey to save her people. Readers will be intrigued by Ejii’s unique abilities to hear the voices of those in the shadows and to see great distances, and they are sure to admire her determination to do her part to save the world.

References


About the Authors:

Faculty members at Washington State University, both Terrell A. Young and Barbara A. Ward have a great passion for the natural beauties of the Earth. Young is a member of the NCTE Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction Books for Children while Ward serves as chair of the IRA Notable Books for a Global Society.