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Exordium: Lost Words, Lost Worlds

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Exordium: Lost Words, Lost Worlds



Graphic Art by Adam W.

“In a commentary on *The Lost Words* (Macfarlane & Morris, 2017), several studies are cited in which researchers attempted to “quantify children’s knowledge of nature.” In one Cambridge study, “Children aged eight and over were ‘substantially better’ at identifying Pokémon ‘species’ than ‘organisms such as oak trees or badgers.’” The researchers concluded that, “Young children clearly have tremendous capacity for learning about creatures (whether natural or manmade),” but appear to be “more inspired by synthetic subjects” than by “living creatures.” Indeed, a subsequent study demonstrated that “only a third of eight- to 11-year-olds could identify a magpie, though nine out of 10 could name a Dalek.”

This disconnect is at the heart of our loss of literacy of nature as described by anthropologist Beth Povinelli, and is directly correlated with the loss of natural spaces and broad stroke structural changes to culture and society (a topic beyond the scope of this article). As the authors of the Pokémon study conclude, we need “to re-establish children’s links with nature if we are to win over the hearts and minds of the next generation,” for “we love what we know ... What is the extinction of the condor to a child who has never seen a wren?” (Brunold-Conesa, 2022)



“There are experiences of landscape that will always resist articulation, and of which words offer only a distant echo. Nature will not name itself. Granite doesn’t self-identify as igneous. Light has no grammar. Language is always late for its subject” (Macfarlane, 2015)

“We lack a Terra Britannica, as it were: a gathering of terms for the land and its weathers, ... terms used by crofters, fishermen, farmers, sailors, scientists, miners, climbers, soldiers, shepherds, poets, walkers and unrecorded others for whom particularised ways of describing place have been vital to everyday practice and perception (Macfarlane, 2015).”

From Robert Macfarlane:

Afèith: (Gaelic) ... a fine vein-like watercourse running through peat, often dry in the summer.

Ammil: ... the thin film of ice that lacquers all leaves, twigs and grass blades when a freeze follows a partial thaw, and that in sunlight can cause a whole landscape to glitter.

Caochan: (Gaelic) ... a slender moor-stream obscured by vegetation such that it is virtually hidden from sight.

Crizzle: ... the freezing of water that evokes the sound of a natural activity too slow for human hearing to detect.

Eit: (Gaelic) ... the practice of placing quartz stones in streams so that they sparkle in moonlight and thereby attract salmon in the late summer and autumn.

Pirr: (Shetlandic) ... a light breath of wind, such as will make a cat’s paw on the water.

Smeuse: ... the gap in the base of a hedge made by the regular passage of a small animal.

Zwer: ... an onomatopoeic word for the sound made by a covey of partridges taking flight.



Brunold-Conesa, C. (2022). Lost Words, Lost Nature: A Dictionary's Controversial Choices. *Montessori Life: The Official Blog and Magazine of the American Montessori Society*, Wednesday, September 07, 2022. <https://amshq.org/Blog/2022-09-07-Lost-Words-Lost-Nature>

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Macfarlane, R. and Morris, J. (2017). *The Lost Words: A Spell Book*. UK: Hamish Hamilton/Penguin. <https://www.thelostwords.org/lostwordsbook/>

