

## Poking at Earth Day with a stick

by Matt Conner



*Poking things with a stick is a rite of passage for kids as they learn about Mother Earth (credit: M. Conner).*

Earth Day is next Wednesday. It reminds me of a program I taught last year to a 4<sup>th</sup> grade class in Minnesota before transferring to the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. We learned about Senator Gaylord Nelson, the founder of Earth Day, and how this event has improved our care for Earth's resources. Starting with a poem about Earth, we looked at pictures from the first 1970 Earth Day and then went outside with journals to think about our own contributions to the planet.

The journal was divided into four quadrants: sketch something new, earth creatures, EARTH DAY acrostic poem, and a writing exercise. The writing exercise was to complete the ellipsis of, "I know I make difference for the Earth because..."

I led the students to a willow tree occupied by hairy woodpeckers, redpolls and juncos, which I hoped would give the students some immediate success with their journals. The birds cooperated but after about ten minutes, the students' attention began to waver. A cursory inspection of their journals showed that most had recorded the birds under Earth Creatures but few had completed a sketch.

The group formed a circle in response to my quiet whistle, a prearranged signal. I asked if anyone had started on the "I make a difference" sentence. Nobody had. I realized that asking a 4<sup>th</sup> grader how they know

they make a difference for Earth was a bit daunting. After all, what had I done at age 11 to make a difference for the Earth?

I spotted a large burr oak tree and said, "let's go hold that tree up!" With little instruction, I sat down with my back against the tree. The students followed suit. As we looked out in different directions, the student next to me picked up a stick and started poking a rock with it. The student caught me looking at him and put the stick down in a sheepish manner as if caught in the act of being a kid.

I asked the group if they wanted to hear a stick-poking story. The group all agreed, so I told everyone to keep their back against the tree and watch the tree-tops for birds while I quietly told my story.

I described how my own two children were enthralled by the hundreds of migrating robins that had flown around our house last night. Armed with sticks, my kids went outside to hunt robins. Certain no robins would fall prey to the business end of their sticks, I wished them luck and told them to have fun. For the next couple hours, my wife and I would glimpse our son or daughter running by the window, excitedly screaming as they "stalked" the birds.

Later that night at the dinner table I asked for the robin expedition report. Both of my kids started talking excitedly at the same time about the headless bird they found! "Everything on that bird was perfect except its head was gone! We tried to figure out what ate its head and we looked for snakes or whatever animal did that." My wife looked slightly horrified by this report and she asked, "What did you do when you found the dead bird?" Before they could answer I raised my hand and said "wait, let me guess—you poked it with a stick!"

My children gawked at each other and said, "You were watching us?" I explained I wasn't spying, but reminded them I had been a child once too. "Everyone knows that if you find a dead bird, you have to poke it with a stick, it is just the rule of being a kid."

As I finished my story I could see smiles on the 4<sup>th</sup> graders' faces. I felt guilty for having gotten off topic from the Earth Day message, but I wanted to keep the positive energy we had created. "You might not be the

U.S. Senator that founded Earth Day, but I bet we could do something to teach people about nature in a fun and interesting way. Let's imagine that we are writing a funny children's book about poking things in nature with sticks," I said. "We can use our knowledge about nature but with our humor to get people to read the book and learn about outdoor discoveries."

We decided the book's title would be, "So, I poked it with a stick..." and began coming up with story ideas. One girl said, "I was walking in the woods and found a dead log, so, I poked it with a stick and discovered it was alive inside with insects and worms!" A boy said, "I found some coyote scat, so I poked it with a stick, and saw it had been eating...something with fur." "That's the idea," I said, "what else do we have?" We named fungus, lichens and cattail heads. We also decided that our book should focus on being kind to nature and that no living things would be poked with sticks in our story—only things that were dead, slimy, rotting or decomposing, and normal nonliving nature

things.

Upon returning to the visitor center, I confessed, "I feel a little guilty for not sticking to the schedule today. We never even worked on the 'I know I make a difference for the Earth' statement."

Within seconds one student said, "That's okay, if we could write a book or get people to learn about nature, that IS helping the Earth!" My coauthors and I agreed we needed to explore for more story ideas and think about how to share our discoveries.

As we walked back to the bus, one student asked, "Are we really going to write a book or is this just for fun and make believe?" I replied we might finish our book or perhaps just spend some time by a tree thinking about it. Either way, time outdoors is never wasted. The more time spent outside, the more things we can find to poke with sticks.

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