

## What Are Endangered Species? Found Poetry in an Extended Definition Essay

### Teacher Notes

**Grades:** 6 and up

**Subjects:** Language Arts

**Group Size:** Whole class, individual students, partners

**Duration:** 50-minute period

**Skills:** Note-taking, interpreting, distilling sentences, arranging words effectively in poetry, discovering the difference between prose and poetry, comparing rhymed and unrhymed (free-form) poetry, discovering effectiveness of repetition in poetry

**Vocabulary:** Endangered species, extinction, intrinsic worth, imperiled, diversity, evolutionary, metaphor, environment, Endangered Species Act, counterpoint, chaos, predator, prey, hunter, extended definition, connotation, denotation

### OBJECTIVES:

Upon completion of this lesson, students should be able to:

- Read and comprehend an essay
- Understand and apply an **extended definition** in their own writing
- Identify the difference between rhymed and unrhymed poetry
- Appreciate effective word choice in poetry
- Understand the difference between poetry and prose
- Recognize the effectiveness of repetition in poetry

### MATERIALS:

- *Valuing Endangered Species* essay
- Excerpt from Ray Bradbury's *A Sound of Thunder* (see *Mental Menagerie* lesson also in the **Writing** section)

### BACKGROUND:

Even though all of the elements of poetry can be found in prose, students often think of poetry and prose as entirely separate forms. To introduce students to poetic prose, read the excerpt from Ray Bradbury's story *A Sound of Thunder* aloud. Then review some of the elements of poetry with the class.

The essay *Valuing Endangered Species* by Defenders of Wildlife president Rodger Schlickeisen poetically makes the point that endangered plants and animals are indeed worth saving. The

author supports this opinion with a number of arguments. Yet the “voice” in the essay is intensely personal. A personal voice is one of the key elements in poetry and one of the things that makes poetry so powerful. Poetry is usually more condensed than prose. Sentences become phrases, as carefully selected words create sensory experiences and arouse emotions. Students will enjoy discovering the poetry embedded in the essay.

### **PROCEDURES:**

- Read examples of rhymed and unrhymed poetry to the class. Find somewhere the poet has repeated a phrase throughout the poem (one of the most famous is Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Raven” in which the words “nothing more” and “nevermore” are repeated at the end of each stanza). Ask students to find their own examples of repetition in poetry and discuss how they enhance the effect of the poem.
- Give each student a copy of the Schlickeisen essay. Read the essay with the students. Point out the thesis of the essay: plants and animals in danger of extinction are worth saving, in fact, it is critical that they be saved.
- Discuss with students the personal tone of this essay and how the author has chosen to make his point. Look for examples of words and phrases in the essay that arouse emotion or create specific images.
- Focus with students on the beginning of the third paragraph. The author asks the question, “What are endangered species?” In each subsequent paragraph, he begins with the words, “Endangered species are...” Point out to students how extended definition is the repetition that ties the essay together.
- Complete any or all of the following activities:

1. Have students work individually, in groups or as a “whole pack” with you to turn Rodger Schlickeisen’s essay into a “free-form” poem. Use the words, “What is an endangered species?” at the beginning of each verse or stanza or section of the poem. Or begin with the words, “What are endangered species?” and have each verse or stanza or line start with the words, “Endangered species are...”

2. Have students create their own original poem using the words, “What are endangered species?” and “endangered species are...”

3. Have students compose a poem about the endangered species of their choice. Rodger Schlickeisen gives students a good list to choose from in the second paragraph of his essay! For the Mexican wolf, for example, they could begin with the words, “What is a Mexican wolf?” Each section (or line - or every other line) could begin with the words, “A Mexican wolf is...”

### **EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:**

- \$ Have students search for examples of “found poetry” in newspapers, magazine articles and books. This is a good way to become aware of the importance of specific word choices and arrangements in all forms of writing.
- \$ Discuss connotation and denotation with the class. (Denotation is the dictionary definition of

a word. Connotation is the emotional associations we have with words.)

Then give them a list of animals and plants (or have them help compile one, for example: shark, donkey, lion, horse, vulture, eagle, butterfly, spider, ladybug, rose, rabbit, four-leaf clover. Have them practice writing denotative definitions for the organisms on the list by pretending they are compiling definitions for a new dictionary (they can refer to dictionaries to see how definitions are written).

Ask the class to list animals and plants for which we have positive connotations and those for which we have negative ones. Discuss the reasons for those connotations. Students can then choose a plant or an animal, or a term from the glossary, such as prey, parasite, pup, pack or scavenger, and write a denotative and then an extended connotative definition. This is often a good way to move them into writing poetry because the extended definition focuses on emotional associations and details.

## VALUING ENDANGERED SPECIES

By Rodger Schlickeisen

Some opponents of the Endangered Species Act see imperiled life forms as nothing but metaphors for excessive regulation, lost jobs, and foregone profits. They'd like nothing better than for them to go extinct and thus get out of the way of "progress." As the president of the anti-environmental American Farm Bureau Federation put it recently, "Take endangered species, please."

To anyone more slightly tempted by such a self-indulgent perspective, I suggest a simple exercise. Pick up the list of the more than 1,000 U.S. species now protected by the Endangered Species Act and run your eyes over the names. Consider America without the grizzly bear, gray wolf, ocelot, Florida manatee, woodland caribou. The bald eagle, whooping crane, peregrine falcon, brown pelican, piping plover, spotted owl, wood stork, white-faced ibis, roseate tern, snail kite, golden-cheeked warbler. The desert tortoise, California red-legged frog and American crocodile. Four sturgeon and seven trout species and several chinook, coho and sockeye salmon populations. A lengthening list of clams, snails, beetles, butterflies. Hine's emerald dragonfly and the Nashville crayfish. Hundreds of wildflowers and other plants, including more than a dozen fern species. And so many, many more.

What are endangered species? They are the warmth, joy and glory of being alive amid the vast diversity of living things - big and small, delicate and mighty. They are the vital ingredients of landscapes whose resulting harmony is welcome counterpoint to the chaos of modern human existence. They are the instruments that make the music of nature, producing a symphony delightful to the ears and soothing to stress-filled minds.

Endangered species are the memories of childhood, that carefree sunny afternoons were made of. They are the beetles and snails, butterflies and dragonflies endlessly pursued and carefully captured to be admired in mason jars with freshly picked grass and newly aerated lids.

Endangered species are the rhythm of the seasons. They are the migrating birds whose sweet songs announce each spring, the wildflowers that scent and color the summer meadow, the earth-toned leaves that fall on crisp autumn mornings, and the tracks of predator and prey acting out age-old dramas across the winter snow.

Endangered species are the inspiration for countless books, songs, poems, paintings, photographs and sculptures that enrich our culture beyond measure. They are Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Robert Service, John Muir, A.B. Guthrie, Emily Dickinson, Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold, Wallace Stegner, John James Audubon, Ansel Adams, Frederick Remington, Charlie Russell, Aaron Copland and many more whose inspiring works are tribute to a natural world now at risk.

Endangered species are the essence of wild nature. They are the hunter and hunted whose behavior has determined the characteristics of countless animals, making bison tough, antelope swift and mountain goats nimble. They are the excitement and adventure that only wildness can offer.

Endangered species are the frontier challenges that shaped the unique American character. They are the at-risk survivors of the clash between ever-advancing civilization and constantly retreating nature, but also the salvation of that civilization which gains perspective, vitality and balance from a world where nature's challenges still exist and where ultimate freedom and

independence still prevail.

Endangered species are a warning that the margin between existence and extinction is narrowing, and that millions of years of evolutionary processes are being forever altered. They are a signal that the web of life of the future will be much less rich and complex, with uncertain consequences for all species, including our own.

Endangered species are a reminder that all living things are part of creation and have their own dignity and intrinsic worth apart from any value that we might bestow. But they are also species threatened by a fate worse than death, now surviving only precariously in life's shadows, midway between being and not being-innocent victims of human actions at odds with true humanity.

This is what endangered species are today. Their tomorrow depends upon society's willingness to adopt a wiser, more compassionate and morally superior view of progress. So does our own.

*Rodger Schlickeisen is the president of Defenders of Wildlife. He will welcome your comments. Send him an email at [Rodger@Defenders.org](mailto:Rodger@Defenders.org)*