Biology 131

Biodiversity Laboratory

**Multi-week Natural History Essay**

(Assignment adapted from Steve Keffer, James Madison Univ.; Dan Perlman, Brandeis Univ., and Glen Adelson, Harvard Univ.)

You will write a five-page (double-spaced) essay about a particular place that you come to know over a six-week period. Over six weeks, beginning as soon as you can, you should return, once a week, to the same outdoors place. You can choose any outdoor location on or off campus; the area should be relatively unmanaged by humans. The woods comprising the Colby Arboretum and Wildlife Preserve are a nice option. There is even a large brook that passes through one area of the Arboretum. Detailed maps of the Arboretum are available on the laboratory webpage. There is also a sample natural history essay posted there to give you an idea of how others have addressed this assignment.

You should spend a minimum of one hour each week at your chosen place and record your observations about what is happening around you, particularly in the natural world, using all of your senses. Record these observations and any reflections that come to you in a journal. You don't have to return to your place at the same time each week. In fact, you might want to vary the time. At the end of the six week period, using the observations and reflections in your journal compose a five-page essay about the place you came to know over six weeks. Please include a map that will precisely locate the place that you are writing about. Photographs and drawings can accompany your essay but are not required.

You will submit your essay to me electronically, tjchrist@colby.edu, no later than 11:59PM, Friday, November 10, 2006.

The most critical piece of advice I can give you for this essay is: keep your eyes and ears wide open at all times. Inhale all of your field experiences deeply. There are certain times of your life that you remember more vividly because your senses were finely attuned to them: “images and memories that gleam in the landscape of the consciousness,” in the words of essayist Scott Sanders. I hope that your field experiences include many such images and memories; if they do, you will be able to write a valuable natural history essay without overexerting yourself.

The next two pieces of advice are nearly as important:

1. Capture the details of your experience on paper soon after they occur. Try to present them as vivid and immediate images of what you have seen or heard. Experiment with different ways of presenting these images; for example, first describe a waterfall by concentrating on the water as it crashes on the rocks; then describe the same scene concentrating on a bird that was flitting around the edge of the waterfall.

2. In your field notebook, keep a record of all of the interesting ideas that come into your head during your field experience. Play around with different ideas as possible central themes of your essay. Ultimately choose an idea that you can convey through a judicious use of the images that you have been gathering all the while. Start with a kernel of something that you saw, or heard, or otherwise experienced during one of your observation periods. You may find yourself
connecting this nugget to other experiences, thoughts, or feelings that you had during other observation periods, or you may find yourself connecting this detail with other parts of your life. Either route can bring you to a marvelous essay — but both begin with something that impinged on you while you were in the field.

There are other tidbits of advice that may help you to understand what I am looking for:

3. Identify the central, focused idea of your essay. Write the idea down again and again (outside the text of the essay), making it longer and more complex each time you try it.

4. Have you explored your idea, as opposed to merely presented it? Are there tensions, problem areas, with your idea that you are avoiding, refusing to acknowledge? No idea is unassailable; you have to be the first one to know the weaknesses of your own idea.

5. An effective method of exploring an idea by using the essay form is to compare and contrast images imbued with an idea from one place and time with other images, glossing the same idea, from other places and other times. Casting backward and forward in time for these images gives a dramatic texture to the essay that is missing from a linear narrative.

6. Sometimes you can enrich an essay by referring to other people, places, writings, works of art — i.e., something outside of your own personal experience. But this essay is not intended to be an academic, highly footnoted work. It grows from your experiences.

Good luck. Have fun.