



Nature, Nurture, and Childhood

Books as Bridges: Using Award-Winning Children's Literature to Connect Young Readers with Nature

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Keywords: children's literature, children's literature book awards, environmental education, nature education, science education

Abstract

As children spend less time outdoors and more time engaged with digital media, educators are seeking effective ways to foster environmental awareness and meaningful connections with nature. This article explores how children's literature can serve as a bridge between young readers and the natural world. The authors examine major environmental and nature-focused children's book awards, identify common characteristics of award-winning titles, and discuss how these books can support environmental education. Practical examples illustrate how literature can reduce apprehension, build anticipation for outdoor experiences, activate prior knowledge, develop vocabulary to support science learning, and foster environmental stewardship. By intentionally pairing award-winning literature with outdoor exploration, educators can help children develop curiosity, confidence, environmental understanding, and a lifelong connection to nature.

Introduction

In his book, *Last Child in the Woods* (2005), Richard Louv coined the term *nature deficit disorder* to describe the growing concern that many urban and suburban children do not have opportunities to play in wild or untamed places. It is believed that these children do not have a connection to nature because they have no experiences with nature. Compounding this issue, research shows that teaching children about nature through a lecture or textbook is ineffective. Children do not change their behaviors and do not remember the information several months after the class lessons (Monhardt & Monhardt, 2000).

This disconnect from nature is exacerbated by a significant rise in digital media consumption (Larson et al., 2019). Over 75% of parents express concern about their children's media usage (Common Sense Media, 2025), yet "one in five families use technology to manage bedtime routines, meal times, and emotional regulation" (para. 3). Children's screen use by age varies, with children two and under experiencing roughly one hour of screen time, children two to four years old having just over two hours of screen time, and children five to eight spending three and a half hours of their days engaged in screen time. Notably, 60% of screen time is dedicated to watching TV, followed by 26% of screen time spent gaming for all children zero to eight years old (Common Sense Media, 2025). Demographics also influence these habits: boys, on average, spend 30 more minutes a day engaged in screen time than girls. Additionally, children from homes earning less than \$50,000 annually experience twice as much screen time as children from homes earning over \$100,000 annually (3 hours and 48 minutes versus 1 hour and 52 minutes per day).

To address these trends, educators can utilize instructional tools that foster both intellectual and emotional connections to the environment. O'Brien and Stoner (1987) argue that engaging stories can effectively bridge environmental and science concepts and emotional development, making complex ecological topics highly accessible and meaningful for young readers. In this way, children's literature can be used as a bridge (Giorgis & Johnson, 2003) that can take readers from what they know to something new. Through pictures and story, children's literature can clarify, elaborate, and extend ideas and concepts. For decades, parents and teachers have understood that quality, diverse children's books can act as a mirror to themselves, a window into something real or imagined, or a door to new experiences to children (Bishop, 1990).

Consequently, using children's literature is one of the best ways to incorporate environmental education into the classroom. Children's books, both fiction and nonfiction, can serve as a knowledge building and meaning making bridge to the academic language and domain specific language "expected" in school (Davis, Schrod, & Lee, 2024). Books provide safe, familiar entry points into unfamiliar experiences, which can reduce anxiety and increase curiosity about the outdoors (Burke & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2014).

The approach of using children's literature as a scaffold for learning aligns with pedagogical practices in other disciplines. Science and math teachers and teacher educators have long been using children's books to bridge the gap, reticence, and fear of teaching and learning concepts via children's literature (Ansbury & Morgan, 2010; Moyer, 2000). It seems a logical progression that we can use children's books to do the same for children in nature (O'Brien & Stoner, 1987).

In this paper, the authors explore how children's literature can serve as a bridge between children and the natural world, provide practical strategies for using literature to support nature-based learning experiences, and highlight major children's book awards that recognize outstanding environmental literature.

If children's literature can serve as a bridge between children and the natural world, educators must first identify books that accurately portray nature, foster curiosity, and encourage environmental stewardship. The challenge, however, is locating high-quality titles among the thousands of books available each year. Teachers have long relied on the Mathical Book Prize (Mathical, 2026) and NSTA's Outstanding Science Trade Book (OSTB) (NSTA, 2026) lists when seeking quality children's books for math and sciences. However, sifting through dozens of science titles on the OSTB list to find books specific to nature and the natural world can be daunting. Where and how do we find quality children's books and young adult (YA) novels specifically for nature?

There are seven book awards that relate directly to children and their relationship with the natural world listed below. While a couple of awards listed below include both fiction and nonfiction titles for adults, each award listed includes titles appropriate for early, elementary, and young adult readers. The authors suggest that starting with vetted lists like the ones described below can ease the burden of time to locate and evaluate books for use. The authors of this paper do encourage educators to read and evaluate all books before using any book in their classrooms.

The Awards

Green Earth Book Award

The **Green Earth Book Award** (GEBA) began in 2004 and is hosted by the Nature Generation or NatGen (<https://natgen.org/>). Each Earth Day, NatGen announces the GEBA awards (Figure 1) with great anticipation. Nat Gen award winners are best described as children's and young adult literature that share the elements and the importance of environmental stewardship. The award levels include Green Earth Book Award Winner, Green Earth Book Award Honor, and Green Earth Book Award Recommended. In addition to each of these levels there are six award categories: Picture Book Primary (early childhood - 8 years); Picture Book Intermediate (ages 9-12); Children's Fiction (ages 8-12); Children's Nonfiction (ages 8-12); Young Adult Fiction (ages 13-21); and Young Adult Nonfiction (ages 13-21). You can find past and recent winners of this award at their website (<https://natgen.org/programs/green-earth-book-awards/>).

Figure 1

Green Earth Book Award



Blueberry Award

The **Blueberry Award** (Figure 2), established in 2021, is a literary prize created by the Evanston Public Library (<https://epl.org/blueberry-award/>) that celebrates outstanding children's books for children ages 3 - 10+. The awards are carefully selected by a committee to offer developmentally appropriate, scientifically accurate, and inspiring nature and climate stories that deepen young readers' relationships with the natural world and promote climate stewardship without inducing eco-anxiety. Each year, since 2021, the Evanston library has identified one or two Blueberry Award Winners along with several Blueberry Award Honor titles. In addition to awards being chosen by a committee, early childhood and elementary classrooms are encouraged to read several Blueberry finalists and to vote on their favorites. To find current and past winners and honorees, please visit <https://epl.org/blueberry-award/>.

Figure 2

Blueberry Award



National Outdoor Book Award

Since 1997, the **National Outdoor Book Award** (NOBA) has highlighted and encouraged outstanding writing and publishing that highlight the natural world. The National Outdoor Book Awards (Figure 3) is “the outdoor world's largest and most prestigious book award program” (NOBA, n.d., para. 1). It is a non-profit, educational program, sponsored by the National Outdoor Book Awards Foundation, Association of Outdoor Recreation and Education (aore.org), and Idaho State University (<https://www.isu.edu/>). Winners are announced in early November, one of which is the Children’s category. Although NOBA recognizes books for a wide range of audiences and interests, the Children’s category provides a valuable resource for selecting high-quality outdoor and nature-focused titles for young readers. In addition, some titles in other categories may be suitable for children and young adults. To view past winners by year visit <https://www.noba-web.org/PastWins.htm> and be on the lookout for the 2026 winners to be announced this November.

Figure 3

National Outdoor Book Award



Sigurd Olsen Nature Writing Awards

The **Sigurd Olsen Nature Writing Awards** (SONWA) were established in 1991 by the Sigurd Olsen Environmental Institute (<https://www.sigurdolsoninstitute.org/>). The award honors the literary legacy of Sigurd F. Olson who was a teacher, author, and environmentalist. His writing style painted lyrical descriptions of the wilderness. The award recognizes and encourages contemporary writers who seek to carry on his tradition of nature writing. It was not until 2004 that the organizers of this award expanded the award to include children's literature. The SONWA (Figure 4) award recognizes both winners and honorable mentions each year. To read more about the award and to see past winners, please visit <https://www.sigurdolsoninstitute.org/sonwa-book-awards.html>.

Figure 4

Sigurd Olsen Award



Growing Good Kids Book Awards

Each year the American Horticulture Society (<https://ahsgardening.org/>) in conjunction with the Junior Master Gardeners Program announces the **Growing Good Kids Book Awards** (Figure 5). This award honors outstanding children's books "focused on plant, garden, and ecology-themed children's literature" (<https://ahsgardening.org/growing-good-kids-book-awards/>). To find current and past winners, visit the Junior Master Gardeners Program page <https://jmgkids.us/bookawards/>.

Figure 5

Growing Good Kids Book Award



Karajia and Environment Awards for Children's Literature

The **Karajia & Environment Awards for Children's Literature** are both sponsored by the Wilderness Society (<https://wilderness.org.au/>). The Environment Award for Children's Literature which recognizes books that promote a love of nature in young people was established

in 1994. The Karajia Award was added in 2022 and specifically honors excellence in children's storytelling by First Nations authors and illustrators. To learn more about both of these children's book awards visit <https://wilderness.org.au/environment-award-for-childrens-literature>. To browse nearly three decades of nature books you can visit the Nature Book Catalogue at <https://wilderness.org.au/eacl-book-catalogue>. Additionally, you can find the recent winners (2025) for both the Karajia and Environmental Awards for Children listed here <https://wilderness.org.au/environment-award-for-childrens-literature#catalogue>.

Although these awards differ in sponsorship, history, and selection processes, an examination of their winning titles reveals several consistent characteristics. Understanding these common themes can help educators select books that effectively support children's connections with nature. Each of these awards recognized books that illustrated positive relationships between children and nature while promoting environmental awareness and stewardship. Additionally, appreciation of the natural world coupled with authentic outdoor experiences and exploration were common themes across winners. Furthermore, the books themselves exemplified literary excellence paired with high-quality illustrations or photos that support environmental understanding. And perhaps most importantly, winners of these awards, whether fiction or nonfiction, share hopeful, empowering messages that leave readers knowing they too can impact their environments, both locally and globally.

Identifying award-winning literature is only the first step. To maximize the impact of these books, educators must intentionally integrate them into outdoor learning experiences. When thoughtfully paired with nature exploration, children's literature can prepare students for outdoor experiences, deepen observations, and extend learning beyond the pages of a book.

Using Children's Books to Promote Nature and the Natural World

Teachers can use children's books before taking children outside or on field trips to natural areas to reduce apprehension and build anticipation, activate prior knowledge, and introduce or reinforce vocabulary, and foster environmental stewardship. As mentioned previously, some children, particularly those with limited access to green spaces, may be hesitant to explore the natural world. Read-alouds and self-selected books about outdoor exploration can help children vicariously experience nature through book characters, easing fears while building excitement for their own outdoor experiences. Literature can also activate prior knowledge by helping children make connections between new outdoor experiences and their existing understandings of the natural world. Additionally, exposure to nature-related texts introduces and reinforces disciplinary vocabulary, preparing children to observe, discuss, and make meaning of what they encounter outdoors. Children's books can foster environmental stewardship, the practice of caring for and improving the environments in which we live. Books that feature community gardens, pollinators, habitat restoration, and other conservation efforts can help children develop a sense of responsibility for the natural world while inspiring them to take action in their own communities. By thoughtfully selecting children's literature, teachers can prepare students both emotionally and cognitively for outdoor learning. The following section provides examples of award-winning books and suggests ways they can be used to reduce apprehension and build anticipation, to activate prior knowledge, introduce or reinforce vocabulary, and support environmental stewardship.

Children's books can help introduce vocabulary and create expectations for an experience. *The Soil in Jackie's Garden* by Peggy Thomas (2024), a 2025 Growing Good Kids Award Winner, provides an engaging introduction to gardening. For children who have never been to a garden or who may be hesitant to spend time outside, a picture walk can raise anticipation, ease anxiety, and establish expectations. Picture walks are simple, pre-reading activities in which the teacher covers the text of a picture book and invites children to "walk through" the illustrations, predicting what the story may be about (Clay, 1991). This process activates prior knowledge and experiences related to gardening while helping children envision what they may encounter during a garden visit.

Reading this book before taking children out to explore a school or community garden can not only build anticipation, but illustrate vocabulary associated with gardening. As you read the book, you will be greeted by simple, repetitive, yet engaging text (think *The House that Jack Built*). The text is coupled with delightful cross-section illustrations of the soil that supports Jackie's garden and later pictures of the plants as they grow. From things unseen like roots and worms beneath the soil to leaves and flowers that sprout from stems we are introduced to vocabulary specific to plants and gardening. Encouraging students to use vocabulary pictures, by illustrating a section of the garden they visit and labeling the illustration with newly learned vocabulary, can solidify the new gardening terms. Using vocabulary pictures utilizes both drawing skills and creativity, encourages visual memory, allows for learner uniqueness, and can help students see connections and patterns (Nuritdinovna & Toshpulat qizi, 2025).

For children who live in more urban settings the 2026 Green Earth Book Award Winner, *Mara Plants a Seed* (Furrow & Napoli, 2025) tells the story of a young girl who lives in the city next to an empty lot that is littered with trash. One day she picks up the trash and plants sunflower seeds. As the story continues, neighbors begin to enjoy the empty lot as well. Seeds from a discarded apple core and a picnic watermelon find their ways into the soil where they too begin to grow. Within weeks the sad, empty lot is now teeming with life and visitors—bees, butterflies, birds, and neighbors! This delightful children's book can help young children extend the story into their own lives by planting seeds in a classroom windowsill garden or temporary garden created with pots or raised beds, allowing them to experience firsthand the growth and transformation described in the book.

Gardens also provide opportunities for children to encounter the many living organisms that depend upon these habitats. For some students, however, interactions with insects and other small creatures can be intimidating. Children's literature can help replace fear with understanding by introducing these animals in familiar and engaging ways. Reading books about the creatures that live in these spaces before we explore can be a positive way to reassure students. Oftentimes a child's first response is to swat and duck. However, after reading *The Buzz on Wild Bees: The Little-Known Pollinators that Keep Our Planet Humming* (Vermond, 2025) a 2026 Green Earth Book Award Winner and *Lola Meets the Bees* (McQuinn, 2024) a 2025 Growing Good Kids Book Award Winner we discover insight on the lives and behaviors of both honey bees and wild bees, offering readers perspective and connection to these amazing and exceptionally important insects. The illustrations in *The Buzz on Wild Bees* (Vermond, 2025) are remarkable and provide students with scientifically accurate depictions of bees. This book could be used to encourage or

support science journal drawings or model creation and children learn about these pollinators that are so crucial to the foods that we eat.

Ella and the Amazing Frog Orchestra (Polimeni, 2024), the winner of the Wilderness Society's 2025 Environment Award for Children's Literature (Fiction), offers an accessible and inspiring introduction to environmental stewardship. Recommended for children ages 5-8, the story follows Ella and her classmates and they learn about frogs and the importance of protecting the habitats these amphibians depend upon. As the children become aware of environmental threats facing local frog populations, they take action to support conservation efforts, demonstrating that even young children can contribute to positive environmental change. The book helps readers develop empathy for living things, appreciate biodiversity, and understand the connections between healthy habitats and thriving wildlife populations. Because the story centers on a class project and local conservation efforts, it provides a natural springboard for stewardship activities such as creating pollinator gardens, improving schoolyard habitats, participating in community cleanups, or monitoring wildlife. These experiences help students practice the science process skills of observing changes in habitats over time, inferring how environmental conditions affect living organisms, and predicting how conservation actions may influence the health of local ecosystems (Padilla, n.d.). In this way, children learn about stewardship and engage in the same inquiry processes scientists use to understand and protect the natural world.

Conclusion

As children spend less time outdoors and more time engaged with digital media, educators play an increasingly important role in helping young learners develop meaningful connections with the natural world. Children's literature can serve as a powerful bridge between children and nature by easing apprehension and creating excitement for outdoor experiences, connecting new learning to existing understandings, strengthening science-related vocabulary, and nurturing environmental stewardship. Environmental book awards provide valuable resources for identifying high-quality literature that accurately portrays nature, promotes environmental awareness, and encourages positive action.

When thoughtfully integrated with outdoor learning experiences, award-winning books can help children prepare emotionally and cognitively for exploration while deepening their understanding of the natural world. Whether exploring a community garden, observing pollinators, restoring habitats, or simply spending time outdoors, children can use literature to make connections between stories and lived experiences. By pairing exceptional children's books with authentic experiences in nature, educators can help cultivate curiosity, environmental understanding, and a lifelong commitment to caring for the world around them.

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