

Towards Ecopedagogy: A Fiction-based Approach to the Teaching and Learning of the Environment

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Abstract

The contemporary world faces imminent environmental crises perpetrated by industrial and technological advancements, lethal warfare and neoliberal modes of development. The ecological concerns are gaining great academic attention all over the world. In this pursuit, the role of literature especially literary fiction in making visible as well as offering solutions to the escalating environmental crises cannot be overemphasized. This article, by showcasing and analyzing Uzma Aslam Khan's novel *Thinner than Skin* (2012) as an ecopedagogical text, explores the implications for an education system that is mindful of the changing ecological conditions and offers the students a model for encountering and solving environmental issues afflicting the ecologically-vibrant northern areas of Pakistan. The article advances an educational philosophy that, by employing literary models and by using classroom as a forum, strives to give birth to an environmental consciousness that can provoke in the students a better understanding of the issues plaguing the physical and the living environment, paving the way for environmental praxis. As college and university students study literary characters' interactions with the phenomena of nature, they become more aware of their own developing or deteriorating relationship with their physical and living environment. The paper examines how militarization and ecocidal development projects have disrupted the tranquil environment of northern Pakistan. It further explicates the rationale and repercussions of the modern neoliberal and capitalist economy by examining the following processes: material and ideological co-optation of the environment within the rhetoric of development, deforestation, erosion of grazing land, shrinking and contamination of water bodies, and the impact of tourism on environmental stability.

Keywords: Nature, fiction, environment, Uzma Aslam Khan, ecopedagogy

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Introduction

With the onset of the modern capitalist and neoliberal economic system, humankind's relationship with the physical and living environment is on the decline. With the rise in the anthropocentric activities, the phenomena like climate change, deforestation, melting of glaciers, extinction of animal and bird life and erosion of food resources are being focused upon with increased frequency. The escalating environmental crises call for reflection on humankind's relationship with their environment, not only on the social level but in modern class rooms. Amidst the growing discourse on our ecological issues, the role of literary fiction in highlighting and offering solutions to our environmental issues can be crucial. As a reaction to the environmental precariousness, ecopedagogy is growing as a field, offering academic solutions to environmental issues.

Formal and informal education has a role to play in generating response to the escalating environmental crisis all over the globe. Chapter 36 of the *1992 Earth Summit Report* foregrounds the role of education in addressing environmental issues:

Education is critical for promoting sustainable development and improving the capacity of the people to address environment and development issues....It is critical for achieving environmental and ethical awareness, values and attitudes, skills and behavior consistent with sustainable development and for effective public participation in decision-making. (p. 2)

The current education system needs to integrate environmental education into the syllabi to counter environmental challenges. According to Fassbinder (2012), we are in need of "a form of environmental education which would prompt solutions, both in terms of dealing with the physical manifestations of pollution, depletion, climate change and so on, and in terms of the social structures which underlie environmental problems" (p. 2). Though people become familiar with their environment through various ways, literary fiction offers an important means of environmental socialization, providing the readers with models of good and bad relationships with their environment. The research primarily explores the intersection of literary fiction, environmentalism and ecopedagogy.

Literature Review: From Ecocriticism to Ecopedagogy

William Rueckert (1996) is often credited with the coining of the term "ecocriticism". In his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism", Rueckert asserted that ecocriticism offers an "application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (p.107). Westling (2014) opines that ecocriticism seeks to revive "pastoral and romantic attitudes towards the natural world, but informed by modern science and responding to alarm about the fragility of biological environments increasingly devastated by human technologies" (p.5).

A close association with and an awareness about environment have been part of the human consciousness, and “the passing on of knowledge about nature is what has counted as education over most of the human race’s 200,000-year existence” (Fassbinder, 2012 p. 1). Palmer (1998) suggests that the 1968 UNESCO Biosphere Conference, in Paris, laid the foundation of ecopedagogy as it “called for the development of curriculum materials relating to studying the environment for all levels of education, the promotion of technical training, and the stimulation of global awareness of environmental problems” (p. 5). Ecopedagogy combines “the philosophies of teaching of the critical pedagogy movement...with the urgency of an environmental education dedicated to the current environmental crisis” (Fassbinder p.2). It questions the backgrounding and the invisibility of environment in all its manifestations, and underscores the need for a confluence of environmental theory and practice.

An ecopedagogical perspective based upon the selected Pakistani Anglophone fiction can offer an insight into the ecological issues faced by northern Pakistan especially in the wake of 9/11, growing militarism, China’s development projects in Pakistan, eco-disruptive tourism and deforestation. Challenging and undoing the current ecocidal mode of development require narratives of human connection with the living and physical environment. A literary fiction-based approach has the potential to mobilize the readers to take appropriate actions to strengthen their bond with nature by identifying and contesting the ecocidal attitudes and forces. The paper further analyzes the idea of environmental respect as an alternative mode of relating to nature for the sake of creating new ways of belonging and identification in the modern capitalistic world.

Research Methodology

The unit of analysis in this research is literary fiction. Through a textual analysis, the study explores the indicators within Pakistani novelist Uzma Aslam Khan’s *Thinner than Skin* that produce meanings about the condition and exploitation of the natural environment in the north of Pakistan. Using ecocriticism as a theoretical basis, the research explores how the narrative is inscribed with the environmental indicators such as setting, forests, water bodies, characters’ association with the environment and the role of the neoliberal development and tourism in disrupting the traditional environment. The research draws on what Buell (1995) considers the four main points in an environmental literature: the presence of a non-human environment not merely as a framing device, where the human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest, an engagement with the idea of human accountability to the environment, and an understanding of the environment as a process rather than as a constant, at least implicit in the text (pp. 7-8).

Data Analysis

A reading of Khan's *Thinner than Skin* for ecopedagogical purposes makes the readers idealize the beauty of the landscape in the snow-capped mountainous areas of Pakistan. The novel "captures the stark beauty of the Kaghan Valley and its pastoral inhabitants" (Kabir 2011:183). The plot begins with a nomadic woman Maryam and her family who move from the plains to the highland in summer to graze their cattle. They return to the plains in winter. On the other hand, there is a Pakistani photographer Nadir Sheikh, returning from the USA. He, along with his childhood friend Irfan, his German-Pakistani girlfriend Farhana and her friend Wes, wants to photograph Pakistani glaciers. The novel exemplifies a society that has mostly faced no intrusion from the outside world. The love for place is foregrounded to show the indigenous people's proximity to nature, environment, flora and fauna. The novel is set with a backdrop that is scenic as well as mystic: Pakistan's Kaghan Valley, the Karakoram and Pamir Mountains, forests of deodar and pine gazed upon by owls, rivers and lakes born of "mating of glaciers". The Kunhar River runs like a vein of blood in the Naran and Kaghan Valley "cupping nine lakes in its curves, sprouting thick forests of deodar and pine" (p. 19-20).

The grazers in Khan's novel exemplify the physical, emotional and spiritual relationship with their natural environment. The mountains, the rivers and the landscape are revered not only as sources of livelihood but also as intrinsic parts of identity. For Maryam and her family, nothing is comparable to the rich satisfaction of seeing the well-fed cattle, the abundance of pure water, people conversing with the cattle, and the provision of milk and butter for the family. The indigenous people have complex and specialized ecological knowledge that comes from a careful observation and intuitive knowledge of nature. They hope to pass on this knowledge about the land, climate and animals to the younger generation. Maryam's mother taught her a lot about the ambient nature, and she wants to pass on the same knowledge to her daughter.

Counter-Narrative

Developing counter-narratives to the dominant Western notions about the Eastern environments is part of the novel's ecopedagogical discourse. Through Farhana and Wes who are actually students and researchers in America, Khan builds a counter-narrative to the negative and misleading portrayal of the Pakistani environment in the Western media. Nadir, a Pakistani landscape photographer in the USA, seeks to fight the stereotyping of Pakistan in the American social and academic discourse. In an interview, Nadir is told not to photograph US scenery but to go home and show the backwardness of Pakistan if he wants to be acceptable in America. This "conversation between Nadir and the interviewer emphasises the general perception about Pakistan as a country that has almost always been portrayed in a negative light by the Western media since 9/11" (Kanwal, 2015 p. 104). These insulting remarks coupled with Nadir's girlfriend Farhana's insistence that he take her to Pakistan to show her its scenic beauty force Nadir to return home.

The farther Nadir, Farhana and their friends move into the natural landscape of Pakistan, the farther behind is left the stereotypical representation of Pakistan in the Western discourse. In fact, the richness of the Pakistani landscape becomes more and more pronounced as the journey moves on. Nadir knows that the common boast about his country is that there are “five mountain peaks over 8,000 meters, fifty over 7,000” (p. 9). These huge glaciers are the source of rivers in the region. Colopy (2012) writes of the importance of glaciers in the hydrological balance in Pakistan. He believes that the seventy large glaciers in the Himalaya and the Hindu Kush in Pakistan, along with thousands of small ones, serve as a great source of water for the rivers like the Indus and the Ganges.

Challenging the biased American opinions about the Pakistani landscape, the narrative offers an engaging reading to the students of fiction and the environment. It is a rich tribute to the lush green valleys, snowcapped mountains, glaciers, the water bodies, the Old Silk Road and the hospitable nomadic people of the northern Pakistan who have stuck to their traditional way of life for centuries, defying the political and socioeconomic changes taking place in the region. In the context of the rising world temperature and the melting of the glaciers, the beauty and the volume of the Pakistani glaciers are reinforced. Farhana and Wes think: “Glaciers in the eastern Himalayas are receding. Some day the Alps will be ice-free by 2100. Greenland’s glaciers are melting so fast they could sink southern California and Bangladesh. But in parts of Pakistan, glaciers could be expanding” (p. 43-44). By providing these details, the novelist seeks to unsettle the Western notions about Pakistan and its landscape.

Water Bodies

The readers of Khan’s novel get to know that fountains, streams, lakes and rivers in northern Pakistan are an integral part of its natural beauty and economic stability. Like the river Kunhar, Lake SaifulMaluk is also presented as a character in the novel. “It was Malika Parbat’s snowmelt that created the lake that reflected her. Her melt, tossed in with that of the surrounding mountains” (p. 63-64). Ill-planned construction of roads, hotels, restaurants and houses along the River Kunhar and the lakes has polluted its water and damaged the ecosystem. The logs felled by the militants or the people bribing forest inspectors, sometimes, destroy the water wells which are the source of water for the nomads. Nadir and Farhana’s act of boating in Lake SaifulMaluk and the subsequent drowning of the local girl Kiran establish the tourists as intruders into the aquatic sphere and the traditional life of the grazers. This lake also stands for the other lakes in the area which are severely affected due to the flow of tourists. During his stay in Gilgit, Nadir hears people saying that everyone wants to possess their land and their rivers (p. 240). The idea is reinforced that the rivers and lakes are integral to the ecological stability of the region and the identity of its people.

Eco-therapy

The description of the therapeutic power of the natural elements reinforces the ecopedagogical impact of the novel. Eco-therapy seeks to strengthen human relationship with nature which has been weakened by technology and climate change. Clinebell (1996) talks about the impact of a healthy holistic interaction with nature and describes different eco-therapeutic methods recommended by eco-therapists such as ecological awareness, story-telling, gardening, ecological retreats, pet animal therapy, rituals, restoration projects, and plant therapy. The process of healing works on different levels: physical, emotional and psychological. The physical aspect of healing involves all senses: visual, auditory, tactile, gustatory and olfactory. The river Kunhar provides tactile therapy. It has traditionally been called 'Nain Sukh' (comfort of eyes) locally, which means it possesses the quality of curing sore eyes. Legend has it that Noor Jehan, the queen of the Mughal emperor Jehangir, suffered from an eye infection on her way to Kashmir. She dipped her hands in the water and washed her face. The pure and cool water of the river cured her eye infection. (p. 11) Ghafoor also admires the "pure filtered water of the cascading" (p. 248) Kunhar. Through her mother, Maryam has learnt how to cure different maladies by using forest herbs, fruits and wood. She knows "plants whose rhizomes and leaves cured ailments from insomnia to gonorrhoea, and even cancer" (p. 259). She always "cured the coughs of all her children with the tissues of pistachio bark" (p. 294). On emotional and psychological level, Farhana seeks an ecotherapy by coming to the country of her father's birth.

China Pakistan Economic Corridor and Environmental Challenges

The developmental projects have far-reaching impact on the ecology of the region; therefore, they need to be examined from an ecopedagogical perspective. The novel underscores the possible environmental hazards brought by China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The estimated length of this network of railways, roads and gas pipelines in CPEC is more than 2000 kilometers. Projects of such magnitude cannot be matured without cutting trees, eroding green spaces, disturbing the cattle and bird life, dislocating the less privileged people and polluting the air. While the physical infrastructure and energy generation projects in the CPEC have the potential to boost the economy of the region, they will also result in an irreparable loss to the biodiversity and the traditional way of life in the mountainous areas. It is feared that terrestrial and aquatic wildlife, plants, and the grazing areas for the animals will be greatly damaged by this project. The project will not only disrupt the traditional living style of the people but will also mar the ecology of the area.

The narrative traces the precarious lives of the Gujjar tribes whose ways of life are continuously being trespassed by the neoliberal greed for land and resources. The slogan of development and modernization legitimizes the indiscriminate pillage of the physical and living environment. The novel portrays the fragility of the ecosystem of

Pakistan in the face of the social and political forces disturbing the traditional relationship between man and nature. The story provides new insights into how the political and social system has become so cumbersome for the natural environment with destructive socio-ecological effects especially in the under-developed areas inhabited by the poorer section of the society. The acquisition of the land on the part of the government, the construction of roads and other structures, and the movement of heavy traffic disturb the indigenous modes of life. Nadir and his fellows think that the project may give the local people jobs for the time being. However, the biggest cost would be that they would be deprived of their homes and their past marked by a close association with nature. Eventually indigenous modes of existence like grazing and farming are imperiled. Ghafoor expresses his extreme anguish at the treatment meted out to the herders by the convoys that come searching for the attackers on the foreign tourists:

They want us. Our way of life. Our horses. Our children. Our freedom. They want to own us. It is happening to the east, in Kashmir and in Turkestan. To the south, in Waziristan. To the west, in Afghanistan. If not the Russians, it is the Chinese. If not the Chinese, Indians. If not Indians, Americans. And Pakistanis?...If they do not send us there, look what they do to us here, killing our sheep, fencing the land, looting our forests, insulting our women. They know nothing of us, the way we work the land. (Khan p. 221)

The process of human and natural possession by the system is caused by the capitalist freedom to control, economize and exploit nature. It is demonstrated how economic and capitalistic considerations take precedence over environmental considerations resulting in a continuous erosion of the natural resources. The novel disrupts the myth of progress associated with the projects like CPEC. It emphasizes the need to give attention to the problems of the less privileged people of the northern Pakistan. Unless their problems are addressed, the dream of economic progress will remain elusive.

The new roads zigzagging through the placid atmosphere of the ecologically diverse areas of northern Pakistan are bound to disturb the ecology of the region on account of noise, pollution caused by gas emissions, and animal and bird habitat destruction. All this will lead to massive climate change. The indigenous farmers and herders are concerned about environmentally-damaging technologies and the disfigurement of their landscape. The smoke-emitting vehicles present a stark contrast to the serene landscape vibrant with different forms of life. This emission of smoke and pollutants will eventually accelerate the melting of glaciers. Birds, cattle, wild animals will face the threat of extinction. If the ecological balance of the areas through which CPEC passes is not seriously considered, the project will cause a large-scale depletion of habitats, species and grazing land, and an increase of diseases in wild animals, pest attacks, melting of glaciers, floods and irregular weather patterns.

Marginalization

The novel points out that the study of an environment is incomplete without the study of its inhabitants. It brings into visibility how nature and the people living close to nature have been relegated to the position of unnecessary and irrational. A centuries-old mode of being is disrupted by the advent of the government's developmental agenda in the region. In the words of Eder (1999), "the problem of nature is not simply a technical problem of the functional integration of the material needs of the modern social system with its environment, but is also a cultural problem, in that it questions the moral dimensions of the notion of progress, which has itself begun to threaten the 'conditions of life' themselves" (qtd. in Rutherford p. 102). These people are gradually distanced from their land and their way of life in the name of progress. This alienation of the people from the knowledge of their natural surroundings serves the capitalistic agenda of capturing and reshaping the land in accordance with their ecocidal designs. In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993), Val Plumwood points out how "the whole set of dualisms can be mobilised for this purpose of inferiorising the sphere of nature and those human-beings who may be counted as part of nature" (p. 47).

The neoliberal mode of progress and prosperity is subverted in *Thinner than Skin* as the life of the herders keeps on becoming harder and harder. In an interview with Mustaq Bilal, Uzma Aslam Khan emphasizes the need to "question what we are doing here and what our being here has done to those who were here before us, and we need to be more empathetic to their stories and understand that Pakistan didn't begin with us" (Bilal, 2012 p. 68-69). By highlighting the claustrophobia, fear and insecurity of the people living a hard life in the Kaghan Valley and Gilgit and Hunza, Khan unsettles the notion of advancement which takes its toll on the people who are already living at the margins of the society. The novel gives voice to the concerns and misgivings of the grazing people for whom the proximity to the developmental schemes and modern roads is suicidal. Physical and psychological violence is constantly deployed against the local communities in order to ensure submission. Governmental control over the landscape is a major menace for them as it has resulted in the depletion of grazing areas and has compounded the anxieties of the herders whose sustenance solely depends on the availability of the green patches. Maryam's mother told her that the English colonizers started "the whole revenue-generating forest policy that bound the herders, forcing them to pay a grazing fee and tree-cutting fee. Before the Angrez, they had been free to graze and chop" (p. 250-51). There are disputes between different herding tribes over the right to the grazing land. Once Maryam's husband was wounded by the men of a rival tribe when his cattle entered the pasture claimed by the other tribe. Maryam's parents' family thought that depending "solely on cattle rearing was extremely difficult as the restrictions on their grazing areas were increasing gradually" (p. 214). They leave herds and try to become cultivators. However, her husband's family resisted the change and continued relying on herd-tending for sustenance.

Overgrazing

Overgrazing can also lead to an imbalance in the ecosystem and cause shortage of pasturage for the cattle at a time when it is most needed. Maryam's family has to move back to the plains for the burial rites of Kiran. They have migrated to the highland with their cattle in April with the intention of spending the summer there. Their cattle need to graze in these hills for the whole summer in order to let enough pasturage grow for the cattle before returning to the plains for the whole winter. But Kiran's death upsets all their plans. It would mean the cattle would starve in winter, or they would graze in the forbidden areas causing heavy fines or confiscation. Kiran's death serves to highlight the fragility of the herders whenever there is a death in the family. Their cattle "were meant to graze high in the summer pastures, not down here in the plains. The lowland forests would be overgrazed, with no time to regenerate through the rainy season. And the rain was coming. They could sense it" (p. 207-8). It also shows the callousness of the forest officials to the sufferings of the grazers.

Deforestation

Creating awareness about protecting and planting trees is an essential part of any education on environment. Khan highlights how deforestation is one of the major fallouts of the conflict and modernization process going on in the Kaghan Valley and its surrounding areas. The forests are being cut and the grazing grounds are being eroded. Homer-Dixon (1999) points out that the "timber mafia is now ravaging Pakistan's dwindling forests....They have acquired leading roles in forest institutions and are deeply entrenched in the state's administrative machinery" (p. 119-20). Nadir is bewitched by the beauty of the forest in Kaghan with an abundance of tall pine and deodar, "towering over 4,000 meters before halting abruptly at the temples of the Himalayas and the Karakoram" (p. 19-20). Through the characters of Maryam and Ghafoor, the novelist provides a picture of the landscape that faces unending deforestation at the hands of the militants and the people having a nod from the forest authorities.

The Afghan war "has precluded any effective control with timber export as well as increased the need for alternative cash income among the resident population and, even more so, the local warlords" (Knudsen, 2013 p. 222). The inspector of the forest department is in collusion with the timber mafia. He and his subordinates are bribed by the timber mafia, and the forests keep on disappearing. Even the police whose job is to ensure the safety of the public property play in the hands of the forest officials and timber merchants. Maryam knows very well the policemen who facilitated the forest department officials by taking their own share. Once a friend of Ghafoor's is murdered for "filing a case against the timber mafia" (p. 196).

Climate Change

Climate change perpetrated by deforestation is one of the major ecological issues raised by *Thinner than Skin*. The frequency and intensity of floods have increased in the wake of deforestation, making the town of Balakot more vulnerable to the fluctuations of weather and the mood of the river Kunhar. "The field had been rotten because the land was easily destroyed in the floods the previous year. The land was easily destroyed because it had no trees" (p. 212). Moving along the river Kunhar, Ghafoor recalls how the river had wreaked havoc on its neighbouring areas a few years back.

Tourism

The novel's ecopedagogical discourse also extends to the ethics of tourism. The narrative has the potential to make the students aware of their responsibility when they visit such a place. Khan's aim is to depict the beautiful country life which seems threatened by the tourists who do not show respect to the local environment and customs. The expansion of globalized neoliberal capitalism has provided foundation to commodify natural spaces. With the expansion of tourism in the last decade of the twentieth century, questions about the environmental impacts of tourism have begun to be raised widely, and its negative impacts have become more prominent (Holden, 2000p. 66). Despite its financial benefits, unplanned tourism can be a huge burden on the environment. The access of the indigenous people especially women to rivers, lakes and pastures is restricted by the movement of tourists. In *Thinner than Skin*, Maryam is not happy with the invasion and intrusion of the tourists into their serene and reserved way of life. The narrator talks about the overflow of tourists especially on the glacier leading to Saiful Maluk Lake. They leave "brown scud marks across the glittery white expanse" (p. 44) of the glacier. He also observes "the filth left behind by those transgressing against the glacier's beauty" (p. 44). While moving up the glacier, Nadir reflects how the people visiting the area lack the basic tourism ethics. They senselessly litter the area with plastic waste. He notices "broken Coca-Cola bottles, biscuit wrappers, plastic bottle caps" (p. 155) on the way. Later, he again comes across such waste material and laments that the tourists "could not know this is a sacred shrine" (p. 344). That intrusion has many external manifestations in the novel. The tourists' camera is also the symbol of intrusion as it captures different moments of the private lives of the local people. Nadir sees "half a dozen tourists" (p. 65) following the grazers' daughter Kiran in order to photograph her. The boating in the lake serves as a symbol of the tourists' intrusion into the pristine order of nature. When Farhana expresses her wish to take Kiran in their boat for a ride of the lake Saiful Maluk, the girl's father cannot refuse because of the traditional notion of respect for guests. Their guide Irfan is displeased with the idea of taking the girl in the boat. He says to Nadir: "Teach her something. She'll be putting them in a very awkward position. They won't want their

child going off with a group of strangers and they won't want to say no to Farhana, who's a guest" (p. 108). He further says that Farhana "should accept their hospitality" (p. 108) instead of putting them in trouble. Tragically, the girl falls and drowns into the lake, causing a lot of bitter feelings for the tourists on the part of the local people. The rest of the story is at least as much to do with the inner journey of guilt and revenge on the part of Nadir and Kiran's mother Maryam respectively as with the outer journey to Gilgit and onwards. Maryam gives vent to her fury when she is alone: "He said we could not refuse them. He said they were guests! They were not guests. They were thieves!" (p. 209). Besides, the grazers fear that there might be some spy or terrorist among the tourists. That is why some locals, though traditionally very hospitable, "want the tourists to leave" (p. 70). The novel emphasizes the ethics of tourism in order to protect the environment of northern Pakistan and the people inhabiting it.

Conclusion

The article provides an educational framework about how literary texts can be used to create awareness among college and university students about the issues related to the environment. It has further sought to establish the role of literary fiction in teaching environmental values to students. The research has used Uzma Aslam Khan's novel *Thinner than Skin* as a model text for engaging with ecopedagogy. The study has highlighted the centrality of land, air, water, animals and birds along with human beings for maintaining the ecosystem. Human lust for wealth and power, and the liberties with nature have posed an existential threat to the ecosystem. The novelist's ultimate goal is a pluralism which calls for a sense of respect not only for that which is different, but for the conservation of the biological diversity of nature. Modernization is not to be detested, but it should be implemented in a way that does not disrupt the lives of the people living in proximity to nature. There is a need for a holistic understanding of human relationship with the environment and the development process. In line with most environmental writings, the novel aims to increase readers' awareness of their natural environment and the issues it faces with a view to promoting ecological protection. Above all, the study has sought to provoke an environmental ethics that must guide the students' understanding of and interactions with the environment.

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