

Earth-Based Art as Embodied Ecological Learning

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Why Earth-Based Art?

Earth-based art invites learners to encounter the natural world through direct, sensory experience. Soil, stone, clay, plants, water, and other natural materials become more than art supplies. They become participants in the learning process.

Grounded in ecopsychology, experiential learning, eco-art, and place-based education, earth-based art encourages learners to slow down, notice, touch, experiment, and develop relationships with the places and materials around them.

Rather than asking only, “What can I make with this?” earth-based practice also asks: **What is this material? Where did it come from? What can I learn by being in relationship with it?**

From Material to Relationship

- Develop sensory and embodied awareness.
- Strengthen connection to place and the more-than-human world.
- Practice curiosity, observation, and ecological attention.
- Explore creativity without emphasizing technical artistic skill.
- Understand natural materials through direct experience.
- Reflect on relationships among body, place, material, and environment.
- Experience art as a way of knowing rather than only as a finished product.

A Relational Learning Process...

EXPERIENCE → NOTICE → REFLECT → RELATE → APPLY

Experience: Encounter a natural material directly through touch, movement, observation, and creative exploration.

Notice: Pay attention to texture, color, scent, temperature, resistance, change, emotion, memory, and curiosity.

Reflect: Consider what emerged through the experience. What surprised you? What did you notice that you might otherwise have overlooked?

Relate: Explore the material's relationship to place. Where did it come from? What ecological processes shaped it? How are you connected to those processes?

Apply: Translate the experience through art, writing, storytelling, conversation, ecological inquiry, or action.

Reflection Prompts

- What did you notice once you slowed down and worked directly with the material?
- Did your perception of the material change during the experience?
- What did your senses teach you that a photograph or written description could not?
- What does this material tell us about the place from which it came?
- Where is your own body within this ecological relationship?
- What changes when we approach the earth as a relationship rather than simply a resource?
- What might you carry from this experience into your relationship with the places you inhabit?

For Learners Across the Lifespan...

Earth-based art can be adapted across the lifespan because the practice begins with experience rather than a prescribed level of artistic or academic skill. The core process can remain similar while the questions, complexity, independence, and reflection change with the learner.

Young children: Emphasize sensory exploration, curiosity, play, color, texture, and discovery.

School-age learners: Connect making with observation, local ecology, environmental processes, storytelling, and questions about where materials come from.

Adolescents: Introduce identity, belonging, environmental responsibility, cultural relationships with land, and social and ecological issues affecting their communities.

College students and adults: Deepen reflection through ecopsychology, place-based inquiry, ecological identity, reciprocity, environmental ethics, and relationships between human and more-than-human communities.

Across all ages: Avoid prescribing what the finished artwork should look like. Invite exploration, observation, choice, reflection, and relationship. Adapt the inquiry, not the experience.

Beyond Soil Painting...

Soil painting is one entry point. Earth-based ecological learning might also include natural pigments and dyes, clay and mud work, ephemeral land art, stone arrangements, plant-based mark making, ecological journaling, collaborative outdoor installations, sensory mapping, found-material sculpture, place-responsive storytelling, and other practices shaped by the local environment.

The goal is not to reproduce a particular activity. The goal is to design experiences in which learners encounter, notice, create, reflect, and build relationships with the more-than-human world.

Gathering With Care...

Gather only what is needed. Learn about the place before collecting. Avoid protected areas and culturally or ecologically sensitive materials. Minimize disturbance. Consider what organisms depend upon the material being gathered. When appropriate, return unused materials to the earth.

Ask not only, “What can I take from this place?” but also, “What is my responsibility to this place?”

Bringing It Into Your Learning Environment...

- Earth-based practices do not require wilderness. A schoolyard, college campus, neighborhood, urban park, garden, sidewalk, vacant lot, or small patch of soil can become a site of ecological inquiry.
- Begin with what is present.
- Invite learners to notice.
- Create space for direct experience.
- Allow multiple ways of participating and knowing.
- Make reflection part of the experience.
- Let relationship, rather than the finished object, become the learning outcome.

Continue Exploring...

***A Field Guide to Embodied Coexistence:
Exploring the Human and More-than-Human
World***

Jamie Moon

Created during Jamie Moon’s 2026 NAHR artist residency in Italy’s Taleggio Valley, the field guide extends many of the ideas explored in this workshop through photography, field notes, poetry, natural pigments, soil, minerals, plants, and embodied creative practice.

Available at Lulu.com
ISBN: 9780557926442



**Scan to view
or purchase**

Selected Resources:

Robin Wall Kimmerer. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions.

Claire Dunn. *Rewilding the Urban Soul: Searching for the Wild in the City*. Scribe Publications.

Joy G. Bertling. *Art Education for a Sustainable Planet: Embracing Ecopedagogy in K–12 Classrooms*. Teachers College Press, 2023.

Mark A. Graham. “Art, Ecology and Art Education: Locating Art Education in a Critical Place-Based Pedagogy.” *Studies in Art Education*, 48(4), 375–391, 2007.



Soil Painting with Jamie Moon, 2017