

# PAYING ATTENTION TO A MORE-THAN-HUMAN WORLD

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**In this article Sharon and Helen consider ways pupils can be invited to pay attention to the more-than-human world.**

Investigating the more-than-human world requires a shift from thinking of geographical fieldwork spaces as sites for human action to places where geographical knowing and doing emerge in relation to an assemblage of things within a lively world. This article builds on the notion of human/more-than-human assemblages shared by Chris Martin (2018) in *Primary Geography*. These ideas, which have emerged from Sharon's doctoral study and our '@attention2place' work, invite geographers to participate in a shared world by exploring relational approaches to fieldwork.

## Taking a different view

Times of climate change, species loss, decline of natural eco-systems and land degradation demand an educational response. These issues change what really matters and how geographers engage within fieldwork spaces. Our relational approach to fieldwork has been inspired by Taylor's (2017) notion that we should seek to avoid 'human rescue and salvation narratives', rather we should learn from pupils' 'low-key, ordinary, everyday' encounters with places as they can be 'generative and recuperative'.

Pupils develop attachments to place as they feel part of the world and want to look after it. Relational fieldwork in geography seeks to acknowledge and deepen existing relationships with the physical world and provide opportunities for pupils to engage with their senses and emotions to create and explore connections. Current National Curriculum requirements state that 'pupils will be taught... to use fieldwork to observe, measure and record' (DfE, 2013). A relational approach suggests that fieldwork spaces could be more than sites for knowledge extraction and skills practise, rather they may become sites of animation, engagement and involvement. This establishes geography practices where we learn *with* rather than learn *about* the more-than-human others in fieldwork spaces.

## The liveliness of the more-than-human world

The term 'more-than-human' is inclusive of living organisms such as animals and plants and also, significantly, dimensions often considered inanimate including rocks, weather, imaginings, memories, dreams and associations. It may seem like a clumsy term, but more-than-human has been chosen carefully to honour diversity within the fieldwork space. Fieldwork spaces become places where the more-than-human/human interact. In these meeting places connections happen; knowledge, skills, values and emotions develop through stories, experiences, encounters and entanglements. More-than-human others, such as streams, fungi, trees and clouds have the capacity 'to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle' (Bennett, 2010, p. 6) in relation with humans in fieldwork assemblages. Engaging with more-than-human dimensions encourages lively, spirited geographical explorations.

## Invitations of place

Fieldwork is specific to the moment and requires both teachers and pupils to be open and attentive to notice what invitations are being offered within a place (Figure 1). Places invite us to engage in certain ways, encouraging geographers to be present in the physical world. Through being attentive to more-than-human invitations, it is hoped that pupils will ask questions, think differently, engage empathetically and attune to elements, building reciprocal relationships within fieldwork spaces.

Fieldwork spaces are full of wonder, potential and enchantment. They have much to teach us, if only we are willing to pay attention and engage with more-than-human invitations of place. In venturing on a relational fieldwork journey the teacher embraces serendipitous moments that emerge and provide opportunities for pupils to engage through their senses.

In a relational approach, a teacher's role is that of an 'animateur' – someone who models openness, curiosity, enthusiasm and attentiveness, valuing opportunities for learners to immerse themselves in natural environments through sensory exploration, thinking and creativity.

- The call of the...
- The smell of the...
- The sound of the...
- The sight of the...
- The touch of the...
- The taste of the...
- The movement of the...
- The feel of the...
- The colour of the...
- The push of the...
- The pull of the...

**Figure 1: 'Thingly' invitations – a relational frame to support pupils' explorations.**

## Coming to know the world

What follows are examples of practice you may like to explore and adapt to build relations with fieldwork places.

### Find your tree

The first activity is called 'Find your tree' (MacLellan, 1995). This activity supports pupils to establish a personal and unique connection with a tree within a woodland environment. Pupils can discover their own special tree by drawing along the main lines on the palm of their hand so they can see the pattern clearly. The teacher asks the pupils to find a tree whose branches have a similar pattern (Figure 2).



**Figure 2: Pupils finding their unique hand pattern in nature. Photo © Sharon Witt.**

## A tree's view

Activities that invite pupils to take a different view can help to provide new perspectives. In Figure 3, eyes have been drawn on to hands to help pupils to think about the questions:

- What might the tree see?
- What might this tree feel?
- What local knowledge does this tree possess?

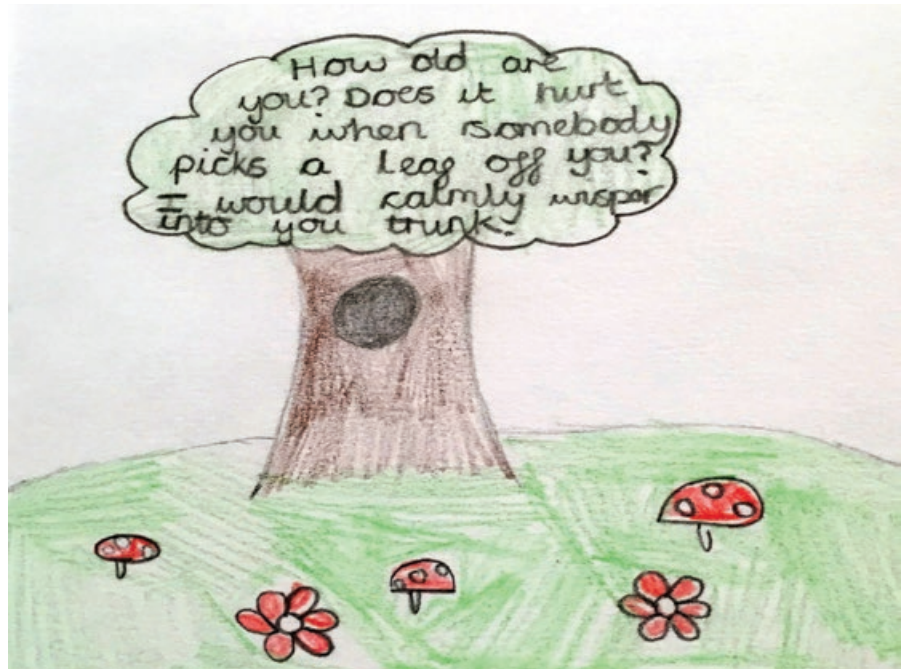


**Figure 3: Drawn eyes help the pupils to make a real connection to their tree. Photo © Sharon Witt.**

Pupils also considered questions they would like to ask the tree (Figure 4).

The pupils were fascinated by the age of their tree and wondered what sorts of events the tree might have witnessed given its proximity to a recently discovered Roman settlement. The tree-pupil encounters offered opportunities for the pupils to engage in sensory activities noticing the texture, colour and shape of their tree's bark, leaves and branches. Figure 5 shares the pupils' ideas about the perspective and responses a tree might make in response to their attention.

You can download for free a table of further relational activities that reveal ways teachers can foster geographical fieldwork spaces where pupils are brought into relationship with a more-than-human world (see web panel). This table offers ways to position pupils within a more-than-human world providing a context in which they are ready to accept the invitations of place. The responsive actions column is designed to support teachers as they nurture pupil/more-than-human relations.



**Figure 4: What questions would you like to ask a tree? Image © Chiara Gattuso.**

What would the tree like to communicate?

'Please don't pull off my leaves! I get really hurt when people bother me. Thank you for taking care of me' (Anna, aged 11).

'Why do you chop my precious wood down? It makes me feel lonely' (Lucy, aged 10).

How did the tree feel after being hugged?

'Touched, peaceful, loved, respected, cheerful, safe' (Anna, aged 11).

'It felt valued... it didn't feel lonely' (Lucy, aged 10).

**Figure 5: Thoughts of pupils following tree encounters (with thanks to Chiara Gattuso).**

## Conclusion

In our experience, focusing attention on the material and more-than-human dimensions within a fieldwork space can enhance and deepen pupils' relationships with local places. We recognise that relational encounters can be risky because you cannot be certain what thoughts, feelings, actions and possibilities may be present in the field. However, in a time of unprecedented global challenge it is time to make pupils' worldly encounters richer as well as place relational thinking and understanding at the heart of geography

fieldwork practice. Take a moment to look at places differently; we would love to hear about your relational engagement with geographical fieldwork (see web panel).

## Acknowledgement

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## References

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## WEB RESOURCES

Download further relational activities:  
<https://www.geography.org.uk/Journals/Primary-Geography>  
 Post your stories: @attention2place

**Sharon Witt and Helen Clarke are researchers in place attention and responsiveness, relational material encounters with landscapes seeking to connect pupils to environments.**