

STEPPING OFF: REWILDING AND BELONGING IN THE SOUTH-WEST

THOMAS M. WILSON

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YEAR LEVEL: Y9–12

CROSS-CURRICULUM PRIORITY: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures; Sustainability

ABOUT THE BOOK

As I grew up, it became apparent to me that I didn't really understand the natural environment of the place where I was born. I found myself wishing that my parents had given me a book that revealed to me my homeland beyond the suburbs and the city.

Stepping Off is a book for locals and travellers alike. It is the story of the south-western corner of Western Australia: an environmental history, an invitation to reconnect with the land – and in doing so, to reconnect with ourselves.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thomas M. Wilson has spent his life writing about the human relationship with the natural world. He has a PhD in literature and the environment, and is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Western Australia. As well as being the author of *The Recurrent Green Universe of John Fowles* (Rodopi, 2006), Wilson has made numerous contributions to environmental journalism.

THEMES

- Environmental history of the south-west of WA
- The history of Indigenous peoples in the south-west of WA
- European colonisation
- Destruction of biodiversity; negative short/long term environmental consequences
- Endangered and extinct native flora and fauna
- Conservation efforts to facilitate the return and maintenance of healthy ecosystems
- Personal rewilding: reconnecting with the natural world in the current era of modernity
- Developing one's bioregional consciousness

AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

Y9–12 Biological Sciences

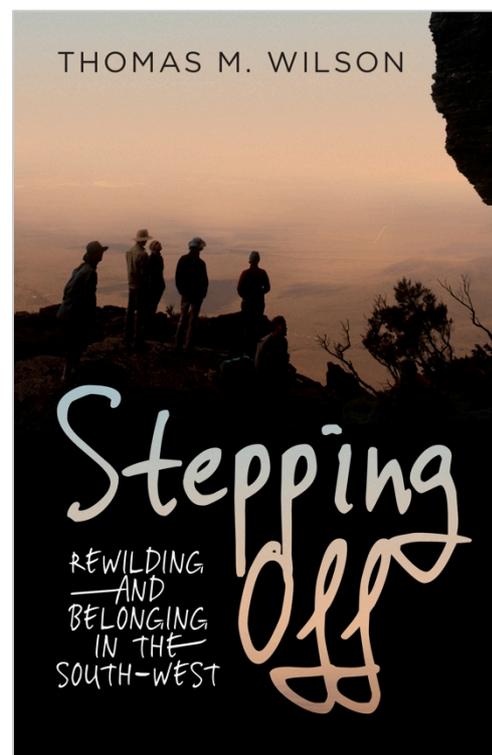
Y9–12 Geography

Y11–12 Earth and Environmental Sciences

Y9–12 Modern History

USEFUL WEBSITES

- Author's website: tmwilson.org
- Author's podcast: tmwilson.org/category/podcast
- Conservation Council of Western Australia: www.ccwa.org.au
- *Understorey* – a radio show dedicated to environmental current affairs: rtrfm.com.au/shows/understorey



CLASSROOM IDEAS

Discussion questions

1. What does the term 'rewilding' mean? Is this something you would like to do? What strategies could you try to reconnect with the natural world? Create a list in pairs.
2. Discuss the connections between spirituality and nature, and between personal identity and nature.
3. The author argues that unlike the European colonisers, the first Australians were 'eco-literate'. (p. 12) What does this mean?
4. What is sustainable population growth? Why is it politically unpopular? (p. 144)
5. What does the author claim is 'the unfortunate irony in Perth's choice of symbolic bird?' (p. 127)
6. What are the causes and effects of the salinity crisis? (p. 174)
7. The author states that the impact of farming 'has rarely, if ever, been challenged by the state's majority of citizens.' (p. 175) Why do you think that is?
8. What does the term 'kalip' mean and why is it important? (p. 231)
9. List three new facts you have learned about the south-west of WA after reading this book.

Creative writing

1. Write a free-verse poem exploring one of the following themes: environmental destruction; environmental conservation; personal rewilding.
2. Write a creative non-fiction piece about your connection to a place in the natural world. Why do you feel a strong tie to this place? Consider how you might use figurative language that draws upon all five senses to evoke for the reader what it feels like to experience this natural landscape.
3. Futuristic fiction: write a short story set in your region fifty years from now. You may choose to present an optimistic outlook, describing how environmental conservation has improved. Or you may choose to write a dystopian piece. Issues explored can include: salinity; soil erosion; air pollution; extinct and endangered plant and animal species; drought; unsustainable farming.

Report writing

1. Research and write a report on an extinct or endangered plant or animal species from the south-west of WA referenced in this book. You should provide in-text citations and a reference list, and structure your report using the following subheadings: habitat; diet; physical characteristics; labelled diagram of species; life cycle; reasons for extinction/endangered status.

Biological sciences: sustainability

1. 'Counting bird numbers in an ecosystem can act as an indicator of the health of that ecosystem.' (p. 101) Conduct a survey of your school and home. How many bird species can you find? Which are native?
2. The author advocates eco-conscious, sustainable approaches towards everyday life. Research ways in which you can personally contribute to sustainable living. In pairs, create a poster or pamphlet advertising this information to your school and wider community. Suggested topics: sustainable shopping; car and air travel emissions; water consumption; energy consumption; reduce – reuse – recycle; green building design; ethical and responsible investment.

History and Geography

1. When the British arrived in Australia, many Indigenous place names were replaced with English words. Find examples where this has happened in your area. What effect do you think the renaming of Indigenous place names had on Indigenous communities? How is language linked to power?
2. How many Indigenous languages are currently taught in Australian schools? Is one taught at your school? If not, take the time in groups of four to learn and practise pronouncing some of the greetings and names for local places, plants and animals in the Indigenous language of your region.

Visual art

1. Go on a class nature walk close to your school. Students should take a sketchbook and/or camera with which to record scenes that inspire them. Upon returning, have students create an artwork on one of the following themes: my favourite place; a unique Australian setting; environmental conservation in my local area; environmental destruction in my local area. Students may create in a variety of mediums including sculpture, photography, painting, illustration, digital media etc.

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

In the introduction, you describe Stepping Off as the book you wish your parents had given you. What difference does it make to a young person to be equipped with such information? Whose responsibility is it to impart?

A bit over 100 years ago the French artist Paul Gauguin painted a canvas when he was living in Tahiti. In the corner of the painting he wrote *D'où Venons Nous / Que Sommes Nous / Où Allons Nous*. (Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?) When you're growing up, or at least this was my experience, you scratch your head now and again and ponder such questions. To answer the first of these big questions, you need to know a bit about the land you live on. If you live in Perth, then this book tells you the story of where we come from.

You can chart a family history here in the south-west that runs back generations. Can a new arrival achieve the same kind of connectedness as you have done?

Some of my ancestors have been here since the first few months of white settlement, and yes, my family history has a thread I have followed to help me connect to this place. But if you've just arrived from Sudan, from Malaysia, or from Chile, it is still possible to build a connection with this place. It just takes the willpower to spend some time in Bold Park, or Kings Park, or camping in one of our national parks, and combine this with some reading about the history and nature of this place. You could read my book, or one of the other books I recommend at the end of *Stepping Off*. I think I've synthesised a lot of different genres that save the reader having to look around, but there are other great books, like George Fletcher Moore's *Diary of Ten Years in the Swan River Colony*, which can give you some deep insights into the identity of Perth and Western Australia.

What do you see as the greatest cause of our current disconnectedness? Do you see this as improving or becoming worse?

Humans in the west are largely removed from the sources of their food and water. We live in suburbs full of exotic species of plants and animals. The stories we tell ourselves generally don't help. Looking at their track record, I don't have much confidence in the world of journalism or the contemporary media to convey the deep truths about the land in Western Australia. Generally media coverage is too superficial or preoccupied with Kim Kardashian. Perhaps our hunter-gather ancestors were ecologically literate, but from the Old Testament statement that 'man was made in the image of God' forwards, to today's Snapchat illusions, we in comparison appear to be a self-preoccupied bunch. The world of smartphones and Facebook doesn't seem to be taking humans very far out of our hall of mirrors.

Are you optimistic about the future?

Stepping Off is a call for the old spirits of this place to return. The actions it calls for are about more than planting a vegetable garden or putting solar cells on your roof. They are about shifting our identity through education and providing ourselves with a deeper narrative. Anybody can start to do that.

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