

# TIPS AND TECHNIQUES FOR EXPLORING PLACE

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Place-based education is inherently based in learning about the place where you live. But how do you begin to untangle the stories of your town or city? Initial questions such as “What is the history of this region?” and “What plants and animals make their home here?” or “What is the economic basis for this town and what is its potential future?” open a Pandora’s box of infinitely deeper and more complex questions. Once you start to piece together the region’s human history, you discover that indeed, human history is inextricably linked to the landscape. Similarly, once you start to look at the

distribution of plants and animals upon the landscape, you see that their presence is dependent upon and influenced by the bedrock geology, the location and health of the region’s waterways, and current and historic human presence upon the landscape.

One approach to exploring your region is to use a landscape analysis method such as the one developed by the Place-based

Landscape Analysis and

Community Education (PLACE) program, an innovative program by the University of Vermont and Shelburne Farms. PLACE works with Vermont towns to provide local residents with a forum for exploring and understanding the natural and cultural history of their town landscape.

Since landscapes are such inherently complex systems, PLACE recommends you begin your journey by dividing the analysis of a town into three main focal areas: the physical landscape, the cultural landscape, and the ecological landscape.

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*Drawing by Claire Dacey.*

- ❖ The *physical landscape*: The physical landscape should be the starting point for your investigation of your town's natural and cultural history. We can think of the physical landscape as the stage that supports the cast of human and non-human characters, the actors in an ever-unfolding story. Built of bedrock, surficial sediments, soils, topography, hydrology and climate, the physical landscape has been shaped by enormous geologic forces over millions of years. For example, since the retreat of the glacier from the Vermont landscape 12,000 years ago, many casts of characters have interacted and migrated across this relatively stable backdrop; plants and animals continually shift and evolve in response to their stage, the physical environment. Indeed, the nature of the physical landscape often defines and limits the distribution of plants, animals and people across the landscape. Climate and topography are two major factors that control a landscape's exposure to sunlight and precipitation. Even locally, the shape and character of bedrock and surficial sediments will determine where certain plants and animals can thrive.
  - ❖ The *cultural landscape*: The cultural landscape of any region is a rich text waiting to be read. It has deep layers of meaning and many stories to tell, but most people need to be taught how to read it. If you want to understand the human side of a landscape, the first thing you'll have to do is to learn to look at it in a different way. You'll need to learn to stop and really see all the human features in the landscape, even the most ordinary and easily overlooked objects, whether it's a telephone pole or woods road or an old brick house, and the one-of-a-kind features, whether it's a Native American pictograph or a grand hotel or a three-story round barn. All of these human structures and objects are there for a reason. Reading the cultural landscape means having a clear vision of the human features that are really there and understanding why they are there.
  - ❖ The *ecological landscape*: Ecology is the study of organisms and their environments - and the interrelationships between the two. While the focus of a cultural landscape analysis is on the relationship between humans and the land over time, your ecological landscape analysis will emphasize the non-human organisms with which we share the local landscape. This distinction is not meant to promote humans as being separate from nature, but rather to draw attention to ways in which we influence (and are influenced by) the non-human components of our landscape.
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Looking at a landscape through these three lenses is the starting point. Bringing these processes together to discern how they interact with and influence one another guides and deepens our understanding. Landscapes are more than just the sum of their parts. The patterns we see on the land manifest a complex set of interactions at multiple temporal and spatial scales. The physical, cultural, and ecological aspects of the land are strongly linked and intertwined. To truly understand and tell the story of a landscape our analysis and interpretation must be integrative.

The advantage of utilizing this framework is that it allows you to both efficiently organize your research, while drawing attention to the ways in which the stories and processes inherent in each focal area are closely intertwined with those of the others. For example, the agricultural patterns in a given town are largely determined by the underlying geology, and, in turn, exert tremendous influence on the type and quality of wildlife habitat. Using this approach, people can begin to move from looking at their local landscape as a mix of scattered and unrelated pieces, toward seeing it as an integrated set of patterns shaped by a series of natural and human processes.

The key to a successful landscape analysis is in finding the relevant details within the larger story. When using your community and the landscape as a launching point for developing curricula and other educational programs, it will help to choose a focus for your investigations. Returning to the interplay between the physical, cultural, and ecological landscape as a touchstone will enrich your investigations and understanding of place.

To increase your understanding of this approach to reading the landscape, go to the PLACE website, [www.uvm.edu/place](http://www.uvm.edu/place). Here you will find detailed descriptions of each of the focal areas described above, as well as brief examples of how the landscape analysis method has been applied to a Vermont town. The site also includes numerous technical, content, and curricular resources.

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