

Matthew Craig Interview

Some times affection for the Natural World is innate, but in many people this love has to be learned. Matthew Craig discovered the environmentalist inside him after the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill. He says such an accident could have happened to any oil company, but the arrogance that followed the disaster illustrated for him the lack of appreciation modern society has for the Earth. Craig is a musician, cartoonist, and radio personality who thinks the earlier children are taught about the Earth, the more respect they will have for it, as children and later as policy making adults. To this end, Matthew Craig created the Magic Woods, a children's television show, which uses puppets, cartoons, and outdoor scenery to teach children about their Earth.

How do you teach small children about science and the Earth?

MATTHEW CRAIG: We break it down. (In the show) we use the analogy of a trail. So we start at one end (and) we get the quest as it were. Where do butterflies come from? Why do leaves change? How can you find nature in the city? And we just go from one segment to the next.

So say in the first segment we watch a caterpillar turn into a butterfly and we wonder, "How does that happen?" Then, we run into some urban gardeners, (in the Magic Woods) and they say,

"Oh that's a Monarch Butterfly. It's a specific kind of butterfly."

Next, we've got Miss Lydia's nature lesson and she has a metamorphosis puppet and she walks us through this. Then, the next piece we get tells us that they actually migrate to Mexico. At the end we have a song that brings it all together. And I have to tell you it's great to hear a three-year-old use the term metamorphosis. Some people say they're too young to learn that. Well, no, I think you do it in little bits you'd be very surprised in how much they can retain and really hold on to.

From your show what are the things you've noticed about children and how they relate to nature?

I think that the significant thing that I've noticed is that children have a natural curiosity for the world around them and in essence it's just sort of feeding them that information that they're so curious about....

You know I remember once in grade school, when a flock of Canada Geese flew by. And I looked out the window to see them and was yelled at,

“Pay attention!” Instead of “Let’s stop and talk about the migration.” “Those are Canada Geese.” Where they’re going, etc. Right? There’s a real moment there to attend to. Sometimes in our society we can get so locked into ‘I’m supposed to be teaching this and only this.’ One foundation asked me “Why aren’t you guys dealing with literacy?” Well, you know there are lots of shows that do that. But are there any show dealing with natural science for young children?

Was that the reason for starting The Magic Woods? That some educational opportunities are being lost in formal education?

For me it all came from a sense of appreciation. Unfortunately when you get into the Environmental world, a lot of what people are talking about is not the Environment but the destruction of the Environment. And if you don’t have an innate sense of how beautiful things are and an appreciation of it, well you don’t care if it gets destroyed or not. So I thought as a remedy, how nice it would be to try and tap into this younger age, so when they grow up that can make more informed decisions about environmental policies because they have an appreciation for it.

Do you think natural science should be taught at an earlier age, than say Junior High or High School, for people to develop this natural affinity to the Earth?

Well you know I’m a college graduate and there are things that we talk about in our first episode, that I didn’t learn until I was 36. It’s not because I had a bad education, but for some reason, natural sciences get pushed to the background. You’re taught skills you would need so you can go out and get a job. Not to say that that’s bad, but we need to talk about some of this other stuff too.

There was a sense before in Isaac Newton’s time that there was in interconnectedness of everything. Then, for some reason that started to get chopped up. ‘I’m only going to learn about biology.’ ‘No, I’m only going to learn about mathematics.’ When before it was all seen as Natural Philosophy and it was all seen as connected and important. That’s the way I see it. They are all connected and they are all important. To not know about the life cycle of insects or the Earth, I think you really do yourself a disservice by not being connected to things. That’s what we’re trying to do, is start a nice quite revolution of love for the Earth.

You shoot your shows outside in a real forest, rather than a set. Why not use a studio?

I think it gives us really beautiful sets. ... The thing that’s good about our program, it feels real, because of the way we shoot it. I think the depth we have and the variation of colors and textures, that kind of stuff informs the whole experience. And we really want to encourage kids to go outside. Especially now with childhood obesity becoming a real concern. (Because) it’s odd to drive by a playground and not see and children playing in it...So it is kind of an odd thing to use television as a tool to remind kids and parents go do outside. But if that’s what we have to use, then that’s what we use.

Why is it important to you to teach children about nature?

You know that's a lovely question, because it just seems like just a beautiful way to pass on what has been so graciously been given to me. I think that's the only way you can ever repay the people who have been so kind to share the best of who they are and what they know with you, to then turn around and give it to children. But boy what a great gift it is to teach a child about the world.

And the part of it too is on my own spiritual level as well, that the Earth has sustained every person who's walked on it, from all time, (it) can sustain every person from now until forever. If we preserve and protect it, it will preserve and protect us. Chief Seattle said "what we do to the Earth we do to ourselves." It that recognition of the incredible vibrate nurturing gift that we've been given to spend our lives in. You know it's a pretty beautiful garden we live in. If we at take care of it, if we can teach people to respect and appreciate it, then in turn it will serve us every need we could ever have. ...You know the two things we need most to survive, air and water, literally fall from the sky. If, in our course of becoming more sophisticated, we pollute the air and we pollute the water that doesn't make any since. It's about recognizing that we can do better than this. Robert Kennedy said, "Some people see the world as it is and ask 'Why?' I see the world as it could be and ask, 'Why not?'" I envision a whole generation of children in tune with their surroundings and adults that recognize that the forest is there for use to utilize and not abuse. We can take wood from there (the forest), but we don't have to clear cut the entire forest. In what ways can we be good stewards of this but not be so greedy and hoard everything? Because, if we have that kind of approach, literally, it (the Earth) will sustain us forever.

The Magic Woods airs on Public Television in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where the show is produced. DVD's of the show's 3 specials are available at public libraries in Pittsburgh and New Orleans. More cities plan to participate in 2008. More information can be found at www.themagicwoods.com