

Lawyers spend their lives among tree slices (using 20,000-100,000 sheets of paper per attorney annually), but distressingly little time among whole trees. This became evident when I hauled a class of bemused clinical environmental law students up a wooded slope near the UC Berkeley campus this spring for a lesson spanning ecology, agency jurisdiction, and oral presentation techniques. *Why*, their facial expressions and inappropriate footwear seemed to ask, *would an environmental law class be taking place in . . . the actual environment?*

While my own former-park-ranger heart thrilled to see California's verges bursting into Maxfield Parrish orange poppy-scapes (our State Flower, Gov't Code § 421); contemplated gray whales' astounding return migration from Mexico to the Arctic (our State Marine Mammal, Gov't Code § 425.5); and thrilled at California's recent designation of the nation's first State Lichen (Gov't Code § 424.6, effective Jan. 1, 2016), it became sadly apparent that the evolutionary miracle that is *Ramalina menziesii* would go unnoticed and uncelebrated by our future planetary advocates.



Lace Lichen (*Ramalina menziesii*). Shelly Benson/California Lichen Society (used by permission)

This fungal/algal partnership, commonly known as "lace" or "fishnet" lichen, was a strategic choice for state designation. It's native to California, and sufficiently abundant that its formal recognition won't pose hiccups for development projects. Lichens are also good indicators of environmental stress. They've long been used to monitor sulfur dioxide

pollution from fossil fuels; they were employed to measure the extent of radioactive contamination from the Chernobyl nuclear accident; and they are now utilized across California to monitor climate change. Lichens also generally resist cultivation — a sober reminder that much of the biological richness we are losing cannot be readily replaced. And perhaps most important: they are stunningly beautiful. But as my hillside class session made clear, an obscure lichen is unlikely to capture the imagination of environmental law students when *scarcely one among them is able to identify both a redwood tree and a eucalyptus*, much less explain the ecological implications of replacing fog-capturing fire-resistant natives with water-guzzling, highly flammable exotics at landscape scale.

Why should we care? In [a recent opinion piece](#), biologist E.O. Wilson urged that we can only avert ecological catastrophe if we “vastly increase the area of refuges . . . from large and small fragments [of relatively natural land] around the world,” and expressed grave concern that in our focus on biophysical decline — rising temperatures, water shortages, and pollution emissions — we are paying insufficient attention to “the living environment of the Earth.” My experience talking to law students confirms this trend towards articulation of environmentalism as a set of abstract and mostly physical propositions (proper atmospheric gas balance, and reduced pollution and toxics exposure levels), rather than as an orientation founded, most fundamentally, in personal experiences of awe in the natural world.

[Emotion researchers](#) describe “awe” as the sense of wonder at a vastness that transcends our rational understanding. The experience of awe, available across all theologies and atheologies, is associated with a variety of behaviors they term “prosocial” — positive, helpful, non-egoistic, and focused on the well-being of others and community. Among awe-inspiring agents, nature is the most celebrated and reliable. Awe, reciprocally, induces nature-protective impulses. But nature’s capacity to affect requires direct engagement. In modern American culture, political discourse, and even environmentalist training grounds, this is an engagement we are rapidly losing.

Why does awe matter? Lasts week’s *New York Times* reported the first confirmed [mammalian species extinction due to anthropogenic climate change](#) (a rodent on the Great Barrier Reef), at the very same time a wholesale denier of planetary peril mounts of a credible White House bid. As we sit with this cognitive dissonance, I hope that as environmental advocates and academics, we will engage soberly and strategically with the [“world of post-truth politics,”](#) in which the empirical data of which we are so fond are increasingly impotent as instruments of persuasion — at least, with those not predisposed to share our values.

Where, then, is the solution? I believe that exposing our students directly to natural experiences and urging them to engage others in the enterprise is more relevant than ever: awe-inducement is normative, in its capacity to change perspective, and therefore behavior, in a preferentially life-promoting direction. The induction of awe is thus a critical tool of persuasion to teach alongside the styling of briefs, white papers, opinion pieces, and expert argument.

Awe is why I plan to keep hauling students up steep slopes to look at plants and animals and sunsets, even though it's more complicated than teaching in the classroom. Otherwise put: there is power — and curriculum - not only in the substantive mandates of AB 32 and the process dictates of CEQA, but in the simple declaratives of Government Code sections 405-429. I hope we will all endeavor to teach it.