

# The Natural Community

## Investigate and Conserve



### focus artwork

Robert S. Duncanson (1821–1872)

United States (Cincinnati)

*Blue Hole, Little Miami River*, 1851

Gift of Norbert Heermann and Arthur Helbig, 1926.18

### focus book

Lynne Cherry

*A River Ran Wild*

San Diego: Voyager Books, 1992.

## teacher information

### unit overview

The natural environment is an important part of everyone's life. Learning about the natural environment is the first step in protecting and conserving it for years to come. In this unit, students will understand natural communities that exist within and around their neighborhood. Students will be exposed to artwork and literature revealing natural communities, and will learn how mankind has changed the environment over time. Students will be encouraged to have a role in positive changes to their natural community.

**grade level: first**

# unit objectives

- Students closely examine several works from the Cincinnati Art Museum's permanent collection, including Focus Artwork *Blue Hole, Little Miami River* by Robert Scott Duncanson.
- Students explore the Focus Book *A River Ran Wild* by Lynne Cherry and participate in a discussion regarding the book's themes of natural community and conservation.
- Students engage in a role-playing activity, gaining knowledge and understanding about natural communities and how they function.
- Students participate in creating an artwork based on their knowledge of the natural community.

# about the artist

Robert S. Duncanson was born in Fayette, New York, around 1821. The son of free African-American parents, Duncanson's paternal grandfather, the illegitimate son of a Virginia slave owner, had been given freedom as a young man. The Duncanson family later settled in Monroe, Michigan, and became skilled in house painting, decorating, and carpentry. Desiring to become an artist, Duncanson left Michigan around 1840 for Cincinnati, which was at that time the economic and cultural center of the United States west of the Allegheny Mountains.

Upon his arrival, Duncanson settled in Mount Healthy, an area northwest of the city known for its abolitionist sympathies and home to a tightly knit group of African Americans. Although he was aware of the struggles he would face as an African American working in a city so close to the South, he soon received several commissions from Cincinnati citizens.

Among those interested in Duncanson was Nicholas Longworth (1783–1863), the city's greatest patron of the arts. Longworth commissioned Duncanson to create a series of landscape murals for his home, Belmont (now the Taft Museum of Art), and also financed Duncanson's trip to Europe to further his artistic studies. During April of 1853 to June of 1854, Duncanson became the first African-American artist to journey through Europe, making stops in London, Paris, and Florence. While on this excursion, his interest in painting landscapes increased.

After returning to Cincinnati, Duncanson continued to paint landscapes in addition to portraits of local abolitionists, including Longworth. His style of landscape painting was influenced by the Hudson River School painters, as well as a group of Cincinnati painters, including Worthington Whittredge (1820–1910) and William L. Sonntag (1822–1900). Duncanson would often go on painting excursions throughout the Ohio River Valley, accompanied by Whittredge and Sonntag.

With the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, Duncanson traveled through the northern United States and Canada, hoping to escape the turmoil of the fighting and anti-African American fervor. Duncanson went on a second excursion to Europe in the summer of 1865, traveling to Scotland. While there, he received international acclaim from the British press.

By the late 1860s, Duncanson struggled with mental illness and believed that the spirit of a master artist possessed him. His delusions may have been brought on by his continuous exposure to lead-based paint, first as a housepainter and later as an artist. This exposure eventually led to the poisoning of his mind and body. Having spent his last years in Michigan, Duncanson died in a Detroit sanatorium on December 21, 1872.



## about the art

Robert S. Duncanson was greatly influenced by the Hudson River School painters, including such artists as Thomas Cole (1801–1848) and Asher B. Durand (1796–1886). The Hudson River School painters likened America to the Garden of Eden. These painters saw the country's untamed wilderness as a source of national pride. Many Hudson River School artists lived and worked in the Hudson River Valley (New York) and in New England. Locally, Duncanson was influenced by a group of Cincinnati landscape painters, including Worthington Whittredge and William L. Sonntag.

The geography of Cincinnati and the surrounding region, with its lush river valleys and woodlands, attracted many landscape painters to the area. Duncanson and Sonntag would often wander throughout the area searching for locales to inspire their work. Since the 1830s, one popular spot for artists to paint near Cincinnati was a pool of water on the Little Miami River, known as Blue Hole. This picturesque area is located in what is now John Bryan State Park, near Yellow Springs, Ohio. Duncanson painted *Blue Hole, Little Miami River* in 1851.

In the painting, the waters of Blue Hole are calm and serene. The mirrorlike pool reflects the trees in the background as well as the clouds in the sky. At first glance this scene appears untouched by humans, until one observes three fishermen in the central foreground. In this area of the painting, Duncanson also included plants, flowers, and rocks as well as a few dead tree limbs. The foreground is darker than the rest of the painting, which draws the viewer's eyes toward the lighter middle and background areas, such as the water and the sky. Duncanson used a palette of cool colors, silvery blues and greens, to depict the water and especially the treetops in the background. He painted *Blue Hole, Little Miami River* with a feeling of softness and tranquility, which is apparent in the sensitive handling of the tree foliage.

## information on focus book

Lynne Cherry, *A River Ran Wild*

In *A River Ran Wild*, author Lynne Cherry shows the environmental history of the Nashua River Valley in Massachusetts. This book enables students to see the natural progression of environmental change, and how a few people became empowered to make a difference and clean up the natural community around their homes.



# Lesson #1

## Environmental Education 101

## materials

large board, chalk or dry-erase writing utensils  
permission slips (from parents and administrators)  
outdoor space

## procedure

1. Introduce students to their natural community. Natural communities can be as large as an entire rain forest, or as small as a sidewalk crack, but include the same basic elements: food, water, shelter, and space. Remember that space is relative. A sidewalk crack is not the right kind of space for the natural community for an elephant, but is just right for an anthill.
2. Explain to students that changes made to a natural community can be both good and bad. Pair students to help them remain focused on the exploration at hand. Explain what the boundaries of the outdoors exploration will be and where they are allowed to explore.
3. Take students outdoors to the natural community around your school. Allow students to explore natural communities looking for food, water, shelter, and space.
4. Return to classroom. Invite students to join in a brainstorming session about the natural community. Introductory questions may include:
  - What is the natural community?
  - What kinds of natural communities did you find?
  - What kinds of changes can happen in the natural community? Natural changes? Humanmade changes?
  - What kinds of changes did you see in our natural community?
5. Chart responses to questions on the board.

## national standards

### SCIENCE

Standard 6: Understands relationships among organisms and their physical environments.

### LANGUAGE ARTS

Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

### THINKING AND REASONING

Standard 5: Applies basic trouble-shooting and problem-solving techniques.

## time/setting

Lesson setting: outdoor area and indoor classroom space

## objectives

- Students understand the concept and composition of the natural community.
- Students analyze the natural and human features of the community.
- Students evaluate the effects of change on the natural community.
- Students complete chart by relating relevant solutions to environmental changes.

## vocabulary

(Definitions from Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary [www.webster.com](http://www.webster.com))

environment: *circumstances, objects, or conditions by which one is surrounded*

habitat: *place or environment where a plant or animal naturally or normally lives and grows*

woodland: *land covered with woody vegetation*

wetland: *land or areas (as tidal flats or swamps) containing large amounts of ground moisture*

grassland: *land on which the main plant forms are grasses*

animals: *any of a kingdom (Animalia) of living things including many-celled organisms and often many of the single-celled ones (as protozoans) that typically differ from plants in having cells without cellulose walls, in lacking chlorophyll and the capacity for photosynthesis*



## Lesson #2

# Learning to Look Blue Hole, Little Miami River

## time/setting

Large Group Time

## objectives

- Students closely examine the Focus Artwork *Blue Hole, Little Miami River*.
- Students learn and are able to place animals in appropriate natural community.

## vocabulary

(Definitions from Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary [www.webster.com](http://www.webster.com))

environment: *circumstances, objects, or conditions by which one is surrounded*

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woodland: *land covered with woody vegetation*

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animals: *any of a kingdom (Animalia) of living things including many-celled organisms and often many of the single-celled ones (as protozoans) that typically differ from plants in having cells without cellulose walls, in lacking chlorophyll and the capacity for photosynthesis*

## materials

large reproduction of Focus Artwork  
*Blue Hole, Little Miami River*

animal images (taken from magazines or the website – possible sources include [www.netvet.com](http://www.netvet.com))

## procedure

1. Arrange students in a group with Focus Artwork visible to all.
2. Ask students to look carefully at the painting and consider the following:
  - What do you see?
  - How does this picture make you feel? Why?
  - What time of day do you think it might be? Why?
  - What are the people doing in the painting?
3. Explain that this image depicts a natural community. What kind of natural community do we see (a grassland, wetland, rain forest, tundra, etc.)? The Focus Artwork *Blue Hole, Little Miami River* depicts a woodland habitat, the natural community of the Little Miami River, an area near Cincinnati, Ohio. Share background information about the painting as appropriate.
4. Distribute the images of animals to the students and ask them to think about what kind of natural community each animal needs and why. Ask students to look for clues about where the animal might live (color, size, shape, etc.). When students are familiar with this concept, ask students who they think may have an animal that belongs in the woodland habitat. Ask these students to place the animal in front of the painting. Ask the group to help self-correct, if necessary.

## national standards

### LANGUAGE ARTS

Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

### VISUAL ARTS

Standard 4: Understands the visual arts in relation to history and cultures.

Standard 5: Understands the characteristics and merits of one's own artwork and the artwork of others.



# Lesson #3

## We Know!

### A River Ran Wild

*lacking chlorophyll and the capacity for photosynthesis*

## materials

- large reproduction of Focus Artwork  
*Blue Hole, Little Miami River*
- Focus Book *A River Ran Wild* by Lynne Cherry
- writing materials    scissors    tape
- large board

## procedure

1. Introduce the Focus Book *A River Ran Wild* by Lynne Cherry. Ask students to do the following:
  - Make a prediction about what story this book tells.
  - Look at the pictures on the cover and discuss.
  - Do a picture walk, and talk about what might be happening in the story.
  - Ask how it makes them feel to see the changes as the story progresses?
2. Read the Focus Book.
3. Have students create a visual time line using the major time frames of the book. Draw a large "river" on the board and ask students to draw animals or items they remember seeing from the book. You may wish to give examples, such as a beaver or a farm tool. Students will cut items out and place tape on the back of the items. Explain that the river stands for the story. Ask students to place items on the "river" in the order that the items appeared in the story.
4. Look at items placed on the board and discuss what students remembered from the book, and what they did not. Add to the river time line as necessary to convey the basic theme of the book.

## time/setting

Large Group Time

## objectives

- Students read and discuss the Focus Book *A River Ran Wild*.
- Students make predictions and interpret the message of the Focus Book *A River Ran Wild*.
- Students compare details in the Focus Book and Focus Artwork discussing the natural communities represented in each.
- Students recall an item from the Focus Book *A River Ran Wild*, draw an image of item from book, and place item on the time line.

## vocabulary

(Definitions from Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary [www.webster.com](http://www.webster.com))

environment: *circumstances, objects, or conditions by which one is surrounded*

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grassland: *land on which the main plant forms are grasses*

animals: *any of a kingdom (Animalia) of living things including many-celled organisms and often many of the single-celled ones (as protozoans) that typically differ from plants in having cells without cellulose walls, in*

## national standards

### LANGUAGE ARTS

Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

### VISUAL ARTS

Standard 4: Understands the visual arts in relation to history and cultures.

Standard 5: Understands the characteristics and merits of one's own artwork and the artwork of others.

## Lesson #4

# Be the Natural Community

### A Role-Playing Activity

single-celled ones (as protozoans) that typically differ from plants in having cells without cellulose walls, in lacking chlorophyll and the capacity for photosynthesis

## materials

space for a group of children to stand in a circle  
large reproduction of Focus Artwork *Blue Hole, Little Miami River*, by Robert S. Duncanson  
Focus Book *A River Ran Wild* by Lynne Cherry

## procedure

1. Display Focus Book and Focus Artwork in a visible place.
2. Ask students to arrange themselves, standing in a circle.
3. Assign each student the following titles: animal, food, water, shelter, and space. Explain to students that these are very basic things in a natural community.
4. As students are standing in the circle, ask if the water supply in their natural community is being polluted, what would happen to the water? Ask students who are water to sit down. How would this lack of water affect the other elements? This is what happened in the Focus Book *A River Ran Wild*.
5. Ask students to stand up again. Examine *Blue Hole, Little Miami River*. Point out the rotting tree in the background. Propose that there is a tree virus spreading through the natural community. Ask all students labeled shelter to sit down. Discuss the consequences to the other elements.
6. Present other scenarios to students to demonstrate the connection between the basic elements of a natural community. Ask students to present scenarios.

## national standards

### VISUAL ARTS

Standard 4: Understands the visual arts in relation to history and cultures.

Standard 5: Understands the characteristics and merits of one's own artwork and the artwork of others.

### SCIENCE

Standard 6: Understands relationships among organisms and their physical environment.

### LANGUAGE ARTS

Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

### THINKING AND REASONING

Standard 5: Applies basic trouble-shooting and problem-solving techniques.

## time/setting

Large Group Time

## objectives

- Students participate in a role-play activity about the natural community.
- Students reference the cause-and-effect relationship seen in the natural community in the Focus Book *A River Ran Wild*, and in the Focus Artwork *Blue Hole, Little Miami River*.
- Students respond in an appropriate manner to the role-play activity, demonstrating an understanding the interaction between components of the natural community and how those components work together.

## vocabulary

(Definitions from Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary [www.webster.com](http://www.webster.com))

environment: *circumstances, objects, or conditions by which one is surrounded*

habitat: *place or environment where a plant or animal naturally or normally lives and grows*

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grassland: *land on which the main plant forms are grasses*

animals: *any of a kingdom (Animalia) of living things including many-celled organisms and often many of the*

## resources

- Asch, Frank. *The Earth and I*. Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1996.
- Cherry, Lynne. *A River Ran Wild*. San Diego: Voyager Books, 1992.
- Davis, Wendy. *City Parks*. New York: Children's Press, 1998.
- EarthWorks. *50 Simple Things Kids Can Do to Save the Earth*. New York: Scholastic, 1998.
- George, Jean Craighead. *Everglades*. New York: Harper Trophy, 1997.
- Gibbons, Gail. *Recycle: A Handbook for Kids*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1996.
- Kalman, Bobbie. *The Colors of Nature*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions; 1st edition, 2002.
- LaMarche, Jim. *The Raft*. New York: Harper Trophy; Reprint edition, 2002.
- Locker, Thomas. *The Land of Gray Wolf*. New York: Picture Puffin, 1996.
- Lyons, Dana. *The Tree*. Bellevue, WA: Illumination Arts Publishing Company, 2002.
- Scieszka, Jon and Smith, Lane. *Science Verse*. New York: Viking, 2004.
- Tolmn, Marvin. *Hands-on Life Science Activities for Grades K-6*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996.
- Yolen, Jane. *Welcome to the River of Grass*. New York: Putnam Juvenile, 2001.



# Art-Making Experience Natural Community Landscapes

## time/setting

Prepare the classroom by covering tables or desks with newspaper; set each place with high-quality paper, watercolor paint, and brushes. Clean water should be within arms' reach to each student.

## objectives

- Students apply knowledge of the natural community to a work of art of their creation.
- Students work collaboratively in using landscape resources.
- Students demonstrate knowledge of landscape painting.
- Students create a landscape painting by using watercolor media.

## vocabulary

(Definitions from Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary [www.webster.com](http://www.webster.com))

watercolor: *paint of which the liquid is a water dispersion of the binding material (as glue, casein, or gum)*

masterpiece: *outstanding work of art or craft*

landscape: *paintings that deal with the representation of natural scenery*

## materials

- |              |   |                  |
|--------------|---|------------------|
| paintbrushes | watercolor paints                       | watercolor paper |
| plastic cups | old newspapers                          | scrap paper      |
| pencils      | magazine pictures of various landscapes |                  |





# procedure

## DAY ONE

1. Discuss the definition of landscape. Share various pictures of landscapes, including the Focus Artwork *Blue Hole, Little Miami River*.
2. Assign and group students together according to landscape choice, and provide images of this type of landscape for inspiration. Be sure to include *Blue Hole, Little Miami River* and *A River Runs Wild* as part of available images. Collaborative groups may include landscapes such as seascape, woodscape, skyscape, grassland, rainforest, cityscape, etc.
3. Ask students to sketch the scene on a scrap piece of paper cut to the same size of the final painting. Practice using very little pressure on the pencil so the lines do not show through the paint. Work on using all of the paper and drawing images to the proper proportion. Finally, model and practice using watercolor paints by demonstrating different ways the brush moves and the marks it can make.

## DAY TWO

1. Ask students to carefully and very lightly sketch the same image on the piece of quality paper. Remind students to take their time and try their best.
2. Send home a note with students to tell the parents that we will be painting with watercolors tomorrow and make sure they dress in old clothes.

## DAY THREE

1. Prepare the environment as directed in teacher preparation section above.
2. Ask students to print their names on the back of their paintings before work is started.
3. Ask students to begin painting using light colors and plenty of water. (Students who overuse water can blot it with a paper towel.)
4. Encourage students to take breaks and look at the work from a distance to evaluate.
5. Encourage students to work through "mistakes" by blotting the problem area, or layering the painting to disguise the problem, etc
6. Dry painting flat; if warping occurs, flatten it by placing large books on top of the dry painting.
7. Frame the painting by mounting it on tag board and secure all the edges with colorful masking tape.

## EXTENSION

Create an art show of the finished paintings, inviting other students and parents to view them.

# national standards

## LANGUAGE ARTS

- Standard 6: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts.
- Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

## SCIENCE

- Standard 6: Understands relationships among organisms and their physical environments.

## SOCIAL STUDIES

- Standard 2: Understands the history of a local community and how communities in North America varied long ago.

## VISUAL ARTS

- Standard 1: Understands and applies media, techniques, and processes related to the visual arts.
- Standard 3: Knows a range of subject matter, symbols, and potential ideas in the visual arts.
- Standard 4: Understands the visual arts in relation to history and cultures.



Robert S. Duncanson, *Blue Hole, Little Miami River*, 1851, Gift of Norbert Heermann and Arthur Helbig, 1926.18

## Dear Adult Friends and Caregivers,

As you know, your child recently participated in an art-integrated curriculum created by the Cincinnati Art Museum that explored the natural community. During this series of lessons, your child had the opportunity to discover this painting by famed American artist Robert S. Duncanson. The painting, entitled *Blue Hole, Little Miami River*, inspired a variety of responses and conversations.

We hope that you will look at *Blue Hole, Little Miami River* together with your child and talk about it. Below please find a variety of extension activities that you and your child may wish to try to expand the learning they have begun in class.

1. Create a Happy Earth Day card for our planet. Draw elements of your favorite natural habitat and use them to decorate a card on which you've already drawn planet Earth.
2. Do leaf rubbings using chalk or crayons on paper.
3. Do an experiment to see which uses up more water...a 10-minute shower or an average bath.
4. Are you a carnivore, herbivore, or omnivore? Look up the definitions, then research three of your favorite animals to see what they eat.
5. Recycled art supplies...create a collage using flattened boxes, wrappers, bottle caps, etc.
6. Visit the Cincinnati Art Museum. Call (513) 721-ARTS for more information, or go online at [www.cincinnatiartmuseum.org](http://www.cincinnatiartmuseum.org). You can see the original *Blue Hole, Little Miami* while here!

Not from Cincinnati? Visit your local museum and look for images of different natural communities in landscapes, cityscapes and seascapes.



**Robert S. Duncanson (1821–1872)**

United States. (Cincinnati)

*Blue Hole, Little Miami River, 1851*

Gift of Norbert Heermann and Arthur Helbig, 1926.18