Concerning the Interests of Insects

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To the E.S. Board,

This is a copy of a letter to the T.A. concerning the Entomology Lab 108L, accompanying and explaining the film I completed in place of the assigned specimen collection. I think the letter raises issues about education and the goals of Environmental Studies which need to be addressed, so I am submitting this as a sort of class evaluation. I hope you will find it relevant and take the time to consider it.

Sincerely,
Robin Grossinger

COMMENT

I want to make clear the context in which this project arose. I am turning in this collection of insects on film not because I was incapable of doing the assigned specimen collection but because it contradicted my values. I took Entomology because I am interested in the life of insects as members of a complex living world. I found searching for, discovering, and observing insects of all different form and behavior in myriad habitats to be a wonderful, educational experience. But taking the step of appropriating their lives and watching them slowly die seemed to go against my beliefs and goals as a biology (the study of life) major oriented towards environmental issues and questions of how humans relate to the world.

I agree that in some cases it is important to possess a specimen to permit identification and that there is valuable scientific knowledge to be gained by collecting and examining insects, but this does not translate into an automatic validation of killing insects; it means we are dealing with a complex and non-clear-cut issue which can only be decided on the basis of the relative value one places on certain types of knowledge and different modes of experience and interaction. So I am not saying that my values are right and others are wrong, but I do want to bring attention to the fact that it is important, and an important part of college, to define and act upon one's own values. In that way this class has been a stimulating experience for me. I originally thought that I would persevere and do the project despite my distaste, so that I would understand what it was that bothered me about the assignment. But the sadness I felt after catching an active, lively bumble bee and watching it slowly cease to move made up my mind that this was not the right thing to be doing, for myself or the bee. Unfortunately, though, I think you have belittled me, for what you see is my not seeming to handle this conflict responsibly, because to you it is a *fait accompli*; you are an entomologist and have come to terms with the struggle—the case is closed in your mind. You also have been unaware of the fact that for many other people in the class the collection has been a powerful, thought-provoking experience, not nearly so light and inconsequential as the comment "Happy Hunting!!" on the assignment sheet implies. Both you and the professor have suggested that I am out of place, that I shouldn't have taken the lab, that "Maybe entomology isn't for you," but making it my problem is a simplistic solution to a complicated dilemma which, as it turned out, affected a substantial proportion of the

class. And saying that you hoped I stayed away from these types of conflicts in the future seems to bespeak a very narrow and twisted sense of what education is—what is education if it is not wrestling with difficult and significant questions?

When I decided I could not do this project I focused my energy on creating an appropriate, alternative project which would serve much of the same purposes as the original collection and not contradict itself by encouraging admiration and appreciation and then objectification and destruction. I first proposed a collection of structured, organized observations of each insect found, using terminology learned in the class and filling out an equivalent sheet for each and including a photograph. The response was that a photograph, or preferably, a slide would be acceptable. I bought slide-compatible film and spent hours trying to find a method of getting meaningful pictures with my 35mm camera, but was unable to get a close-up lens and could get nothing but a useless dot, or at best, smudge, in the center of the field.

Thus my dad's old 8mm camera with excellent close-up lenses seemed a much more effective solution since it actually had the capacity of re-presenting the observed insect and even had the potential to capture a glimpse of the insect's life by its movements, behavior, and surroundings. The movie camera was a risk since I had never used it before and its light meter is nonfunctional because the required batteries are no longer made. Consequently, the film has its problems, but not for lack of effort or time. Despite a late start, many subjects that are difficult to see and not identifiable, and all the ones that escaped as I tried to film them, my point total still approaches fifty. I also transferred the film to videotape for your convenience. This project (1) did not necessitate a disjunction between my values and my actions and (2) is less antagonistic to an attitude of appreciating and respecting the insects for what they are in their environment. The original project and (any collection) can obscure this way of relating to the natural world and easily degenerate into a focus on converting the insects into tangible, material possessions.

Clearly, by your uncomfortableness with it, though, this project is not what you want. It suffers in comparison to the original collection on several criteria, including gradability. It will be harder for you to judge exactly how many points I deserve because the film clips are not an absolute representation of what I saw

and based my identification on, as bringing in the actual insects would be. You may have to rely on less numerically tangible data to get a sense of how much work I put into this collection. Secondly, the film does not permit keying out, only comparative identification. Your main contention, though, involves my not contributing to the school's collection. You feel that I have been hypocritical in studying and learning from our insect collection while not contributing to it through my own collecting. If we had such a limited collection that it was difficult to learn from them I would have been more sympathetic to that cause. But I certainly felt there was sufficient material in all but a few areas to allow an excellent educational experience. I question how necessary the majority of the approximately one thousand specimens (20 students x about 50 per student) annually are needed to maintain the collection and make it more useful for students. Which is really the goal here—a more educational collection or a larger, more prestigious one? And if the overriding justification for individual collecting is, as the point has been made, to contribute to the college's collection, then would the assignment be discarded or modified if we ever finally have enough insects stockpiled to cover those that are broken in use? The emotional attachment and lack of consciousness implied in the "Happy Hunting" comment (which was pointed out to me by another class member who found it disconcerting) as well as the little attention paid to the issues involved in taking life lead me to think not.

You have the sense that these issues were addressed by a few sentences early in the class, before anyone had used a killing jar, telling us not to get duplicates and if we did, to trade them. On the contrary, the discussions I've had with about a half-dozen classmates about their own struggle with the assignment show that this is an important part of the class and should not be limited to discussion outside of class. Instead the questions should be addressed at points throughout the quarter, when people are really thinking about them. What I find really striking is that many people were actively examining the issues raised, such as the value of different types of scientific knowledge and ethical questions of taking life for human purposes, but nobody knew that other classmates were contending with and contemplating similar questions. This is an extreme disservice to the educational process of the students, denying an experience of just as much, if not more (and not

mutually exclusive of), importance than learning to identify the insects. Examining the basic assumptions of a collection may seem to be provoking havoc in an entomology lab, but mature, thoughtful college students ought to be given the respect to address a difficult issue instead of having it ignored. Everyone deals with it when they go out with their killing jar.

I know I would have responded differently had this class been endowed with a depth which allowed me to respond within its structure. Instead I wrestled with my seemingly "off-the-wall" intuitions (judging from the class' quietness—I was genuinely surprised to find other people were experiencing the same questions) that collecting was a debatable activity for a number of weeks, hoping that my distaste for the project would fade and I would not have to "make waves."

I think the crux of the problem was touched upon when you explained to me that we collect insects "for science." Science is a much more problematic entity than that justification suggests. While they are extremely valuable and powerful human achievements, science and scientific knowledge have also played a powerful role in legitimating personal prejudices and systems of domination from sexism and racism to Nazism and environmental degradation. The distinction between "values" and "science" is part of our scientific tradition and is not only false and misleading, but, historically, catastrophic (e.g., atomic energy). What appears to be a radical suggestion—to include this sort of discussion as an integral part of entomology lab—seems with further thought to be clearly appropriate. I think that, as an educational trend, bringing science into a position where it can be examined and discussed in an ethical, social, political, etc. context is of critical importance to developing an awareness and ongoing dialogue concerning our role and behavior in the world as the human species. This dialogue will be necessary to respond to the modern crises of an interconnected world in which issues of relation between countries (as in contemporary re-thinking of the usefulness of the traditional economic, political, and environmental disjunction accepted in the superpower alignments), or between species, can no longer be overlooked. If this type of analysis is not cultivated here, in an undergraduate class in Environmental Studies at UCSC, then where else?

In summary, that is why I am submitting this film. I hope you will see it not as a challenge to the teacher-student hierarchy, but as a personal response to an

unaddressed but real conflict. Because I feel it is important and relevant, I am submitting a copy of this letter to the E.S. Board, in the spirit of a class evaluation.

Sincerely,
Robin Grossinger

My son Robin found a particular entomology requirement in his biology program at Santa Cruz to involve gratuitous killing of insects. His own writing on that experience pretty much speaks for itself. However, I might add that the professor had a great deal of difficulty with his position. She (and the T.A.) felt that they should be immune to the animal-rights issue because bugs are not, to them, the type of animals worth expending political and humanitarian sentiment on (or for which the animal-rights cause is intended) and also because they were so politically liberal on other issues (for instance, the role of women in science)—plus they consider their position ecologically sound, hence unassailable—a clear evasion of the moral issue.

Robin ended up handing in an 8mm film which was really lovely, showing all different species buzzing and crawling around, two +10 close-up lenses capturing them and their movement precisely. They were alive in the assignment, identified, and remained alive afterward. He really fulfilled the requirement. The teacher and T.A. disagreed and treated him rather badly. Though he had a 95% grade average in the class, they have been trying to give him the Santa Cruz narrative-transcript equivalent of a C because of what he did on the project. They never were willing to deal with the issue he raised.

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North Atlantic Books
Berkeley, California