

Participants perform a Moving Field Guide activity in the park.



Moving Field Guides

STEWART T.A. PICKETT / BALTIMORE ECOSYSTEM STUDY LTER

**CASSIE MEADOR, MARK TWERY,
& MEAGAN LEATHERBURY**

“Jump to the north!” calls out the dancer in the park. A dozen fifth- and sixth-grade bodies respond, jumping into the air to face a new direction. “Now, get real low to the east,” he says as each of the students finds a way to kneel, squat, or lie in an easterly direction. Passersby might mistake the activity as an outdoor game, but this is much more. These students, accompanied by dancers and naturalists, are beginning to relate to the park around them in a way they never have before. In the span of two hours, they will have created the first ever Patterson Park Moving Field Guide.

The Moving Field Guides (MFG) project is a creative take on site interpretation. Cassie Meador,

artistic director of the Maryland-based dance company, Dance Exchange, conceived the project after leading students from Wesleyan University through a rain forest of Guyana, South America. Meador discovered that an artistic-based experience of the forest inspired science students to think about their own research in new ways. For Meador, the experience generated new inspiration for movement.

Since this initial inspiration, Meador has coordinated scientists, naturalists, and Dance Exchange artists in Moving Field Guide collaborations. From the United States Botanic Gardens to Arizona State University to Patterson Park in Baltimore, MFG is helping people in parks and public spaces appreciate those spaces both for artistic inspiration and scientific value.

Mark Twery, a researcher with the U.S. Forest Service, is an MFG collaborator. As a scientist and veteran of technical theater, one of his goals has been to find ways to link scientific inquiry with artistic expression. Twery began exploring MFG with Meador after being inspired by an earlier Dance Exchange production.

“Moving Field Guides look at how the arts can offer creative tools for knowing a place, not just using a place,” Meador said. “The project provides people across generations an opportunity to get outdoors and discover the natural world through an artistic and ecological approach.”

So how does it work? Let’s jump back to Patterson Park and those fifth and sixth graders. Twery questions the students about where they get energy to dance and play, then

describes how trees get energy. As Twery describes how trees produce food, the students remain attentive. Unbeknownst to the students, the dancers are studying gestures of the naturalists and the physical reactions of the students, movements that are the origins of the Moving Field Guide.

Moving Field Guides combine characteristics of a guided hike and a rehearsal in which a new dance is being choreographed. If Freeman Tilden were alive, he'd be fascinated at how Moving Field Guide programs express his own preference that interpretation be an art that combines many arts. The students involved with the Patterson Park Moving Field Guide listen to stories of the park and its resources told by naturalists. They use their abilities as movers to create gestures and phrases that will become dance. They even integrate a musical ear, finding rhythms and sounds in the park that can be incorporated in their dance. The Moving Field Guide that results is by no means taught—it is born out of the students' own discoveries.

As all good interpretation does,

the Moving Field Guide gathers inspiration not only from the park itself, but from the stories of its visitors. While participants are awed by the migration of the park's waterfowl, the waterfowl would be equally impressed by the stories of travel told by these children. By combining their own stories with the story of place, the visitors are linked to the site through a dance that explores both the natural and the human worlds inside the park.

Moving Field Guides provide an example of how scientific and artistic endeavors work in parallel. Both begin with keen observations that produce information that must be analyzed, understood, and interpreted. That interpretation then needs to be communicated to others to complete the process. Creating a Moving Field Guide is an original path through that process. Using motion and storytelling, it creates an opportunity for lasting understanding of the environment.

Moving Field Guides are made possible with generous support from the U.S. Forest Service, National Endowment for the Arts, and Met Life Foundation. Through this funding, Moving Field Guides are reaching diverse communities in parks, botanic gardens, forests, along rivers and oceans, and elsewhere.

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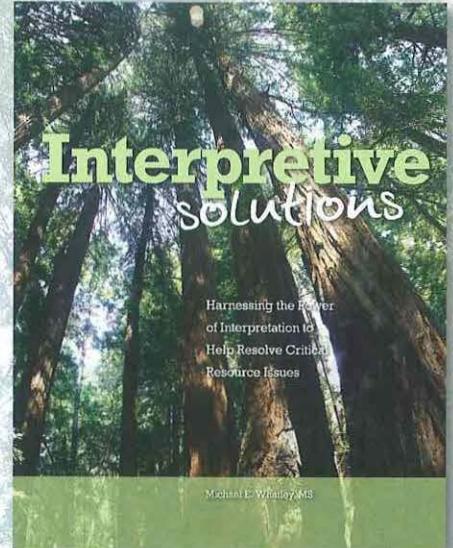


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