Returning to the Water

Inspired by Rachel Cosford's relationship-centered learning with salmon and local waterways. This is an editorial adaptation, not her verified lesson plan or a guide to reproducing Indigenous teachings.

Purpose and suggested context

Notice change through repeated visits to one place, distinguish observations from questions, and consider responsibilities toward living things. **Suggested:** grades 3-8; science, literacy and place-based learning. **Time:** three 30-minute observations across several weeks, plus travel and reflection. **Cost:** existing paper supplies; transport or accessibility support may add costs.

Prepare a place and a way to participate

Choose an approved, accessible land-based viewpoint near a creek, or use repeated teacher-made photographs of one site. Follow school visit, supervision and permission procedures. Check weather, route and safe boundaries; stay out of the water and away from hazardous banks. Gather clipboards, pencils, a simple observation sheet and optional magnifiers for dry-land viewing. Do not collect or release organisms.

Return, notice and respond

1. Begin with attention. Ask: What do we notice here? What might change? Record the date, weather and viewpoint. Draw or describe three observable details.

2. Separate evidence from wonder. Make two columns: I observed / I wonder. Model the difference between seeing leaves in the water and guessing why they are there.

3. Visit again. Use the same viewpoint and prompts. Compare sketches and notes. Invite students to revise a question using new observations.

4. Share learning. Create a class display or explain patterns to younger peers. Label what is known, what is inferred and what needs an expert.

5. Plan a responsible next step. Choose another observation question or seek guidance from a local partner. Any habitat work requires appropriate expertise and site permission.

Access, assessment and local relationships

Offer large-print sheets, oral recording or adult scribing, drawing, home languages and a classroom photo sequence. Assess a dated observation, an evidence-based comparison and a thoughtful next question. Ask: How has returning changed what you notice? Indigenous teachings and protocols must be guided by the appropriate Elder or Knowledge Keeper. Hatcheries, eggs and releases require qualified restoration partners; a nearby creek is not automatically a release site.

Three AI Prompts for Teachers

Optional planning support, not a claim that Rachel uses AI. Replace brackets. Use school-approved tools and no identifiable student information. Never ask AI to invent Indigenous teachings, protocols or local history.

1 Plan repeated observations

Plan three [minutes]-minute observations for [grade] at [approved viewpoint] across [weeks]. Goal: [goal]. Materials: [materials]. Access needs: [needs]. Include a photo-based classroom alternative, evidence versus inference, and questions for the next visit. Use only this verified local information: [facts]. Flag unknowns; do not invent teachings or propose collecting, raising or releasing organisms.

Teacher check: Check local accuracy, timing, access and school visit procedures.

2 Make room for noticing and wondering

Create a printable observation sheet for [grade] with date, weather, viewpoint, drawing space, I observed and I wonder. Add a comparison box for the next visit and [language/access supports]. Keep it paper-friendly with room for student ideas. Do not supply observations or cultural content as if students or Knowledge Keepers provided them.

Teacher check: Check readability, writing space and whether prompts invite direct observation.

3 Use evidence to choose the next question

Using these anonymous class-level observations across visits [summary], identify patterns, uncertainties and two follow-up questions for [grade]. Separate evidence from hypotheses. Suggest one reflection prompt about caring for this place. Do not infer student wellbeing gains, ecological restoration or causation from these notes.

Teacher check: Compare every claim with the actual records; check suitability and remove unsupported conclusions.

Credits and research

Inspired by Rachel Cosford, Durham District School Board, and her work with Roger Daybutch and Ben Teskey. Natural Curiosity profile; official hatchery program.
Amy Marie Brown, Montana State University (August 2026): outdoor learning action research. Its abstract reports some science-practice improvement after outdoor experiences, but no observed attitude effect. It supports investigating observation-based learning, not claims about Rachel's outcomes or Indigenous Knowledges. Abstract reviewed only.