



# Interdisciplinary Catalyst Activities

This collection of activities is intended for interdisciplinary research groups, organisations, and classrooms to spark discussion and critical thinking around how to actively 'practice interdisciplinarity' in environmental research. For further information, visit:

<https://www.naturerecovery.ox.ac.uk/projects/innovative-methods-to-connect-and-communicate-between-disciplines/>

## Activity 2: Object of Significance

Three groups engage in role-play, each group independently develops their own 'rituals' around a provided object, and these are then shared. The activity helps think about research and decision making when meanings placed on objects and ideas in the environment are different or in conflict between groups of people.

### Goals of the Activity:

The goals of this activity are to catalyse discussion on:

1. How different groups of people place meaning in objects/ideas and create social norms around them, to varying degrees;
2. How different meanings lead to complicated conversations across disciplines and/or different groups of people, as they each have different expectations and understandings of objects/ideas being discussed and/or governed.

### Activity Directions:

*Optional Warmup (running time: 10 minutes):*

You have the option of running a warmup for this activity, called *Baby Bird*.

1. Introduce this activity as a warm-up, and make the participants (and you, the moderator) stand in a large circle. You have a folded piece of paper, which you introduce as a 'baby bird.'
2. Pass the baby bird around the circle, from hand to hand, having each participant describe what they will do to make the baby bird comfortable upon receiving the bird from the person next to them (e.g. I will put it in a box; I will stroke its head; etc.). On the second pass around the circle, instruct the participants to describe what they will feed the baby bird to ensure it lives, passing it around again.
3. When the 'baby bird' paper arrives back to the moderator after a second round, the moderator says 'all right, on to the main activity,' and callously crushes the piece of paper and throws it in the bin. The moderator asks everyone to sit back down along the wall for the activity, without YET discussing the baby bird warmup.
4. Once everyone is sitting down ready for the next activity, the moderator says, 'before we start the next activity, how did people feel about the bird activity?' People may realise how they placed meaning in the plain piece of paper (to different extents: to some it was just paper; to others, it was a baby bird). This warmup is intended to prime the participants to think about how meaning (what something is and why it matters) can be a



powerful force and important consideration in environmental research and decision making.

*Object of Significance* (running time: 25 minutes):

1. Divide the participants into three groups. Give each group an identical object (e.g. pinecone). The groups are told that the object is important. At this point, it is better if the groups are isolated from one another so that they do not overhear the instructions of the other groups, although the activity can also be run where everyone is aware of all instructions.
2. Each group gets different instructions. One group is designated as the local community, another group as a conservation organisation, and the last group as scientists.
  - a. Local Community: must design a ritual that demonstrates how they/their family have imbued the object with symbolic significance
  - b. Conservation Organisation: must design a method in which the object will be protected/preserved
  - c. Scientists: must design a method for how the object will be studied/how facts will be derived about the object.
3. All groups must also identify anything that *must not happen* to the object.
4. Give the groups ten minutes to discuss amongst themselves. They may play act their own rituals and/or methods to demonstrate what they do with the object/how they interact with it. They may also discuss/decide their rationale behind their rituals/methods.
5. Regroup as a whole and have each group share their objects and their rituals/methods with everyone. After each group has shared, you may allow one or two clarification questions from participants from other groups or you as the moderator, if desired.
6. Then, the groups must discuss and attempt to come to a decision around how best to use, protect, and study the object, instructed to hold on to the values which they decided in the group. They will find that compromise is difficult, and sometimes impossible, when meanings and values of the object are different.

### **Discussion Questions:**

After this *Object of Significance* activity, the moderator should lead a discussion, asking participants to step outside their roles and the activity. Here are some suggestions for discussion questions:

1. How did the scenario feel from the perspective of the different groups?
2. What did you find difficult about agreeing on a collective approach to the object?
3. How might this relate to environmental research?
4. Do you have experiences from your work where you experienced similar dynamics to those in the activity? What happened?
5. If you were to apply the insights from this activity to your own work, what would you do differently as a result?



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