

Green Teacher

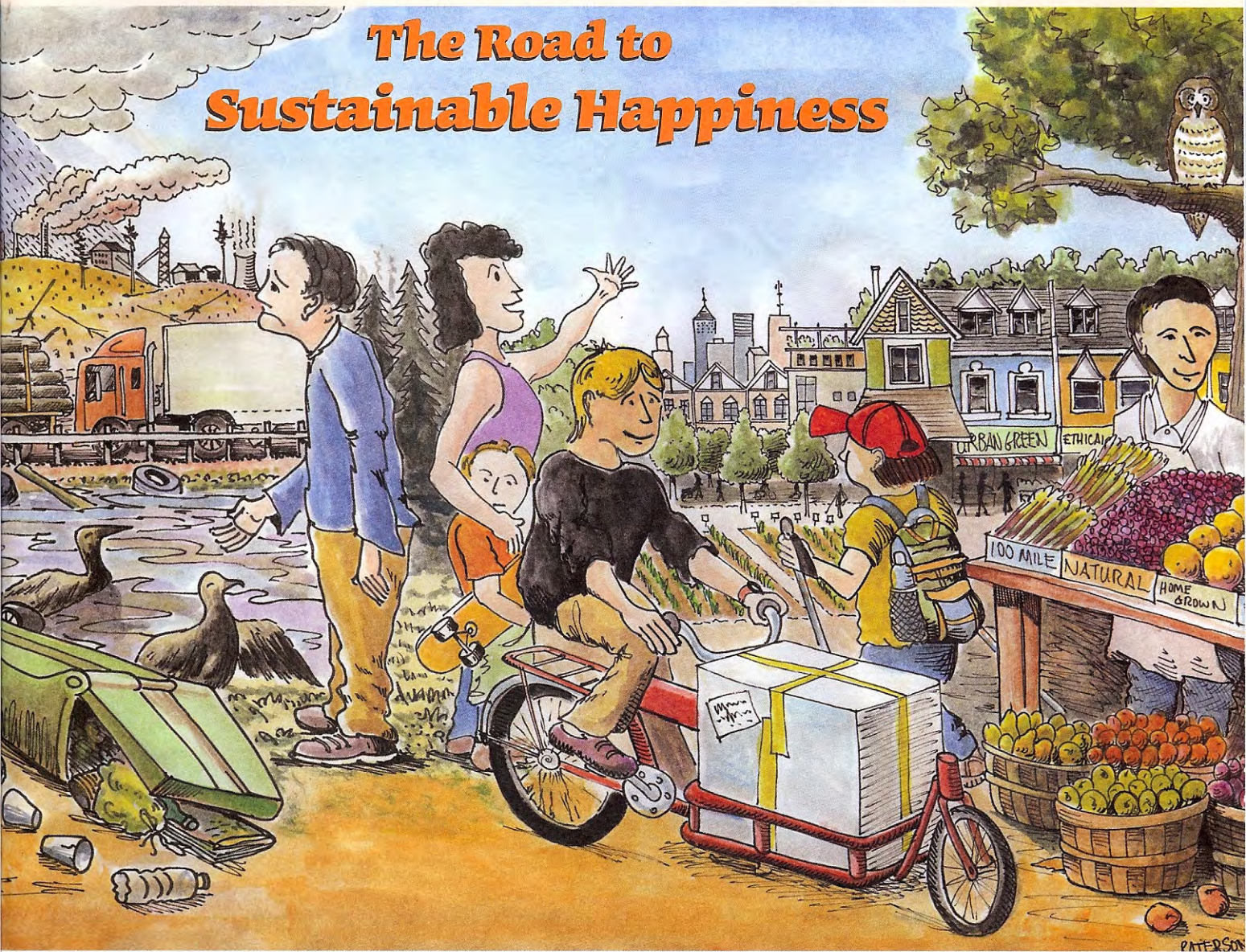
EDUCATION FOR PLANET EARTH

\$7.95

Summer 2011

Issue 93

The Road to Sustainable Happiness



PM40069238

Climate Change Summits for Teens

How to Lead a Night Hike

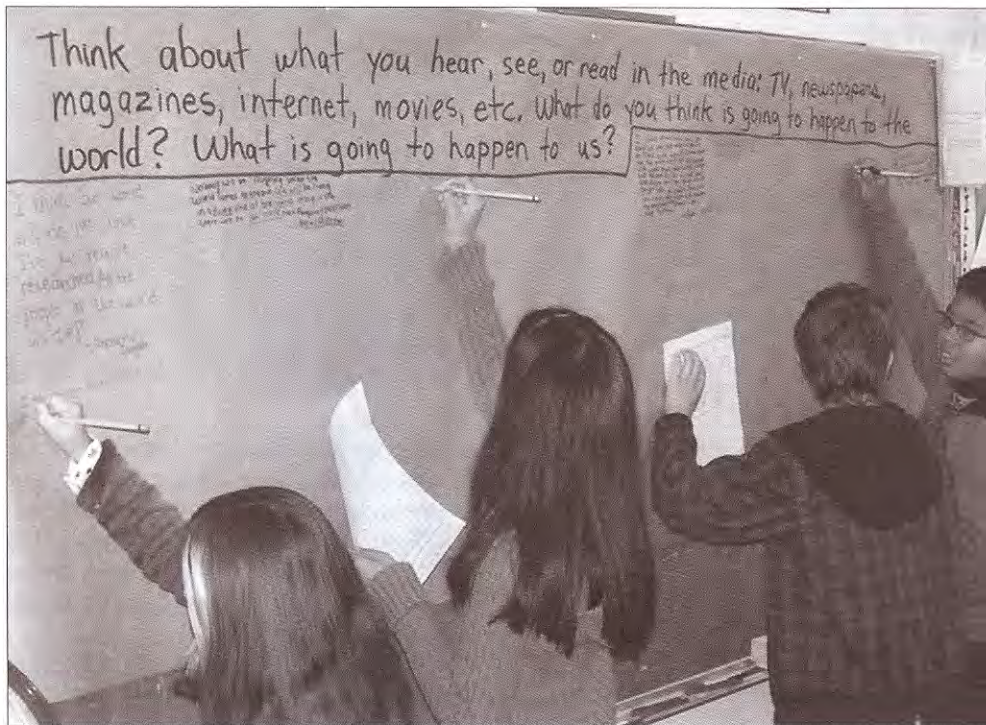
Outdoor Murals by Young Children

Discovering Native Bees

Learning about Frogs through Outdoor Games

Rewriting Our World

Moving from doom and salvation to hope and sustainability in the Western cultural narrative



By John Gust

THERE WE WERE, doing exactly as our language arts content standard dictated, “analyz[ing] media as sources for information, entertainment, persuasion, interpretation of events, and transmission of culture,” when the question dawned on me—What sort of tale is our media spinning? “Hey,” I asked, interrupting my fifth-graders’ morning perusal of the *Los Angeles Times*. “I was wondering: Given what you hear, see, and read in the media—you know... TV, newspapers, books, magazines, the Internet, radio, video games, movies, all that—what do you think is going to happen to the world? What is going to become of us?”

Everybody grabbed their pencils and started writing. I knew that a recent study released by the Kaiser Family Foundation had claimed today’s 8 to 18 year-olds devote a whopping 10 hours and 45 minutes to entertainment media across a typical day, so I really was dying to find out exactly what sort of culture the media was transmitting to these kids. With everything that had been going on in the world, I had my own ideas about what students would say, but I wanted to find out for sure. I desired to delve into my students’ lived experience to uncover what Paulo Freire called their “generative themes” or “thematic universe” (p. 77).

My students’ answers exposed a universal theme all right, but I’d hardly call it generative. Every one of them said our story was going to turn out badly. Their answers were incredibly disturbing and full of despair. Brian wrote:

“I think the world is going to be trashed by pollution and all the things that are being wasted since us humans don’t even care.” Christian declared: “I think the world will end up like the one in *Wall • E*.” April’s account was the worst: “I think everybody living on earth will soon die and the air will be filled with lots of carbon dioxide. The whole earth will be trashed with plastic bags, water bottles, garbage, etc.” Prior generations had weaved stories about a possible nuclear holocaust, but it was never anything like this. This is the first generation I can remember feeling so desperate about their future. And all of this, from just a brief review of the media.

Here’s how it all got started: First, I brought the *Los Angeles Times* into the classroom. We identified the sections of the paper, looked at all of the articles and advertisements, cut out those that were noteworthy and saved them in a folder. Then we listed and talked at length about all the movies, TV shows, books and videos that we had watched or read recently. Lots of them had seen the movies *Wall • E*, *I Am Legend*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, *Deep Impact*, *Armageddon*, or *2012*. Most had read articles about wars, polar bears and their diminishing environment, rising carbon emission levels, global warming, climate change, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, and our planet’s new, sixth mass extinction. And many had read at least one of the growing number of lauded dystopian young adult novels out there, like Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* or even M.T. Anderson’s picture book, *Me, All Alone, at the End of the World*.

Since my students’ answers were indicative of our cur-

rent collective state of mind, I decided that we should explore how all this gloom and doom got started. How did we fall into this narrative that says our world is going to end in catastrophe, death and destruction? What sort of principles and ideals had generated this theme for our tale?

The Fatal Founding Principles

My next task was to take my students backward in history for a critical review of our story to discern the origin of their “thematic universe.” To accomplish this, I figured we’d have to identify the principles and ideals that formed the foundation and direction of our worldview, because I believed these to be the origin of my students’ generative theme. So, we set off to uncover the origin of the theme hidden in the narrative my students were living.

Fortunately, I didn’t have far to look. I found the source in our fifth-grade Social Studies curriculum. In California’s fifth-grade classrooms, educators were supposed to teach how the United States of America was “founded on Judeo-Christian principles,” and “the ideals of the Enlightenment.” There they were, our good old principles and ideals.

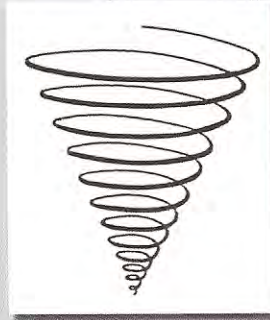
Now, to determine what those principles and ideals are, we would need to listen closely for evidence of that kind of discourse ‘humming’ through our story. We would need to hear “the voice of Mother Culture” as Daniel Quinn describes it in his book, *Ishmael*, because: “Once you learn to discern the voice of Mother Culture humming in the background, telling her story over and over again to the people of your culture, you’ll...be tempted to say to the people around you, ‘How can you listen to this stuff and not recognize it for what it is?’” (1992, p. 37).

Wanting my students to be able to recognize our dominant narrative for what it is, we started searching first for evidence of the Judeo-Christian principles that helped to form our culture. Once again, we didn’t have far to look: the chalkboard. On it, I had written the day’s date. “And where does this come from?” I asked. “None other than our Gregorian Calendar! It’s our world’s civic calendar that Pope Gregory XIII introduced to correct the inaccuracies of the Julian calendar. It’s based on the *Anno Domini system*, or the birth of Jesus. Therefore, our civic calendar is about as Judeo-Christian, or more specifically, as Christian as anyone can get.” And right there, I thought, with our entire world dated to the birth of Jesus, essentially, to one degree or another we were all living in accordance with certain Judeo-Christian principles.

In the United States, we citizens hear all kinds of Judeo-Christian principles humming away in the background. We even chime into the story’s mantra everyday in our public schools when reciting the words “under God” in our Pledge of Allegiance. Heck, our country’s official motto, written on our dollar bill, is “In God We Trust.” Likewise, I’ll bet that if you listen closely enough you can hear Judeo-Christian principles humming along in the dominant narrative of nearly every country in the Western world.

At this point, I presented a gallery walk of quotations

Redemptive Narrative



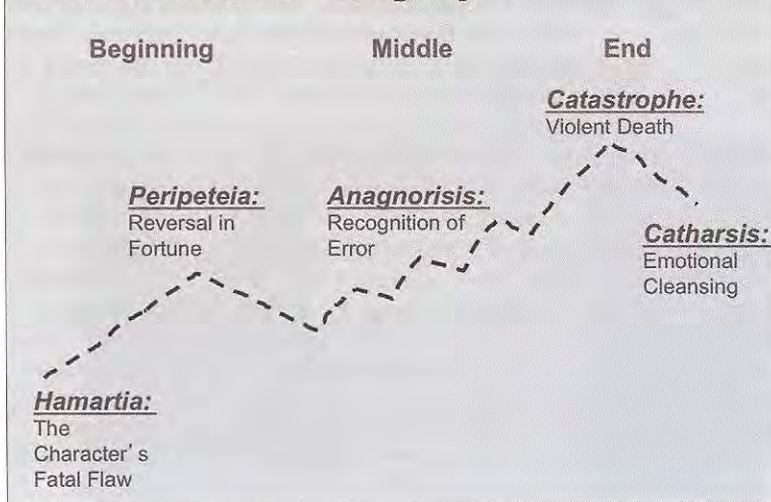
- The Fall
- Under God
- In God We Trust
- Made in the Image of God
- Be Fruitful and Multiply
- Soul of Man Only
- This Land is Your Land
- Hold Dominion
- For the Glory of God
- City on a Hill
- Revelations of the Apocalypse
- Savior
- Redemption (post apocalyptic earthly beatitude)

and illustrations from a few prominent “voices” heard in our Judeo-Christian discourse. For this, I glued specific quotes and illustrations on posters, and hung them on the wall for display. Students took turns reading, reflecting on and writing a response to each piece, and commenting on each other’s responses, thus turning the entire exercise into a discussion of sorts.

The last poster on our gallery walk included two images that I believe identified the true origin of my students’ “generative theme.” The first was a painting of the author of the *Book of Revelation*, John of Patmos, receiving from this God we trust, his two apocalyptic visions. The second was Michelangelo’s *The Last Judgment* from the Sistine Chapel. Surrounding these two images, I also included a variety of dreadful quotes from the *Book of Revelation*. Since those horrific revelations, it seems, we as a culture have been talking, writing, filming and dreaming about, and perhaps looking, waiting and even hoping for the end of the world, non-stop.

So, this is the narrative we had uncovered. It’s what Thomas Berry, the former Catholic priest and eco-theologian, called in his book *The Dream of the Earth* the “redemptive story.” As Berry states, “[t]his religion-based story originated in a revelatory experience some three thousand years ago.” First was the ‘fall’ of humanity described in Genesis: “[a]ccording to this story, the original harmony of the universe was broken by a primordial human fault.” Because we’re fatally flawed, Eve picked the fruit that got us expelled from the garden. Now we’re under God, in whom we trust, even it seems, to the exclusion of our own self-reliance. However, because we’ve been made in His image, we should be fruitful and multiply. And because human beings are the only creatures who possess a soul and the ability of self-reflection, this land is our land and we hold dominion over all the other creatures on our planet. Thus, for the glory of God, we’re supposed to create a great city on a hill, so that it can all end in a horrible apocalypse. But those who believe in the savior will be redeemed and “mov[e] infallibly toward [their] fulfillment in the peace of a reconstituted paradise” (p. 124).

The Aristotelian Tragedy



With the Judeo-Christian principles and resulting narrative clearly identified, our next task was to search our discourse for evidence of the ideals of the Enlightenment. “But what exactly is the Enlightenment?” I asked. None of them knew, of course, so I first defined the term. “Immanuel Kant, one of the most influential thinkers of the time, described it as, ‘The freedom to use one’s own intelligence.’ So... instead of looking to the crown or the church for answers...”

“People started reading and thinking for themselves,” interrupted a student.

“Exactly,” I said. “And one of those people was Sir Isaac Newton, whose voice, more than any other, found a place of prominence in our story.” Thus began another gallery walk. I posted quotes from Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*, but we focused mostly on Newton’s *Optics* and Descartes’ *Meditations*, because each quote from these works illustrated just how much these men were influenced by the Judeo-Christian principle of a transcendent, patriarchal Creator and His creation.

In this world, dead matter, particles, and solids—without purpose and devoid of spirit—were set in motion according to certain mechanical laws “the end for which...” Newton said, “God himself made one in the first creation.” And, according to Descartes, we represent nothing more than the mere “machine of the human body as having been formed by God for the sake of the motions which it usually manifests.”

Now, the story was complete. I felt confident that we had located the origin of our generative theme. For me, it was clear: Our Judeo-Christian principles provided us with a clear apocalyptic vision, and the ideals of the Enlightenment paved the path to help get us there. As characters in the story, we believe that with the proper use of the scientific method we have the means to manipulate the material world for almost anything we want. And because we’ve been made in God’s image, and are therefore superior to all other species in the Animal Kingdom, we have the complete arrogance to think that we have the right, even the responsibility, to do so. But from the looks of things, we seem to be failing in our efforts. The principles and ideals that had once propelled us to greatness are not working anymore. Because of our fatal

flaw, or *hamartia*, we are not living sustainably on our planet. Not by a long shot.

More and more, I realized, our media is transmitting a culture that seems destined to end up like an Aristotelian tragedy Augusto Boal warned us about in his book *Theatre of the Oppressed*. “[Aristotle’s] system appears in disguised form on television, in the movies, in the circus, in the theatres. It appears in many and varied shapes and media. But its essence does not change: it is designed to bridle the individual, to adjust him to what pre-exists. If this is what we want, the Aristotelian system serves the purpose better than any other...” (p. 47). Realizing this, I decided it was time to transform my students from passive spectators in this unfolding apocalyptic narrative into bold “spec-actors” ready to rewrite the script. In short, we needed a whole new story.

The Rewrite

“So what are we going to do?” I asked, once our critical review of our dominant narrative was complete. “Can we change things? Should our story be rewritten?”

“Yeah,” my students said. “We’ve got to try.”

First, we decided to make some personal changes by completing a carbon footprint survey. Right away students discovered that *all* of our footprints were *way* above our earth’s share! And because now everything seemed so incredibly urgent, at home students were immediately compelled to start making changes. Kids told their parents to take shorter showers, not to serve any more beef, to change their light bulbs, or to pedal to the store.

In spite of all our personal efforts, the question always loomed: “Will our small changes be enough to save the world?” “Personally,” I said, “I think we need to change *everything*.” We needed big changes. And to do that we still needed to transform our thinking about the world, our generative theme. “That means we’ll have to start over again. All over. Right from the beginning. Well, maybe not the beginning, but rather, sometime back in our country’s history.” My young fifth-graders were really great at suspending disbelief, so I next asked, “What do you say we travel back in time and go see the people we learn about in U.S. History to persuade them to change things? If you could, would you do that? Would you go back in time to make a few changes and then return to the present with the hope of finding a whole new world waiting for you? All because of you and your efforts?”

“Yeah!” they all shouted.

“Really?” I asked.

They all nodded. Some shouted “Yeah!” again.

“Okay,” I said. “Then let’s figure out a way to make a time machine, and go!”

Off we went, rewriting our world, each of us creating our own alternative history. We were going to change the world through our stories, one narrative at a time. In order to write our stories, we first had to look for places to break into our culture’s storyline. We had to determine where and when we would go, and who we would talk to when we arrived. First, we wrote research reports on various historical figures—

"We have to know who we're going to go see, right?" And after our research reports were complete, I explained, "We better know what we're going to try to convince them to do when we get there, right?" Thus the persuasive essays were born. It was our responsibility to have something pertinent to say. And we had to say it well, if we were to truly convince these people.

After that, students synthesized their thoughts to create three worlds. The first world in their collective story was the dystopian world they were leaving behind just in the nick of time. Exactly how would it end? What would it sound, feel, look, smell and even taste like? The second world was composed of the historical world settings to which students time traveled. If students were going to interrupt the Constitutional Convention, they had better know who was going to be there, what they looked like, and what the Philadelphia State House looked like, as well. And finally, in their new ending—which was really a new *beginning*—after convincing our historical figures to make a few *major* changes to our Constitution or Bill of Rights, or whatever, they had to return to a strange new ecotopian world their actions helped to create. Therefore, we had to create and articulate a vision for how to rebuild our world. What exactly would a sustainable community look, sound, feel, smell and taste like?

In order to envision this new world, we learned a variety of ecological literacy concepts—basically, a whole new set of principles and ideals. Aside from the usual study of non-renewable versus renewable forms of energy, for example, my students also learned the difference between democracy and biocracy, agriculture and permaculture, anthropocentric and

biocentric, mehamimicry and biomimicry, states and bioregions, and on-the-grid and off-the-grid, to name just a few.

When all was said and done, my students had completed more writing than they had ever done in all their lives. And they loved every minute and word of it. There was never an issue of motivation, because they felt as if they were doing something hopeful to actually save and transform their world. They were engaged from beginning to end. My reward came when all their stories and books were done, and when my student, Livier, proudly proclaimed: "I love writing because if you want to change something or the whole world, just write a story and the story might persuade people that read it to change their whole way of thinking."

John Gust is a sixth-grade teacher at Environmental Charter Middle School in Inglewood, California and the author of books including *Adventures in Fantasy: Lessons and Activities in Narrative and Descriptive Writing* (Jossey-Bass). To learn more about John's books or ECMS visit www.johngust.org or www.ecmsonline.org.

References

- Berry, T., *The Dream of the Earth*, Sierra Club Books, 1988.
- Boal, A., *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Theatre Communications Group, 1979.
- Descartes, R., *Meditations*, Pacific Publishing Studio, 2010.
- Freire, P., *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Continuum, 1997.
- Kaiser Family Foundation, "Daily Media Use Among Children and Teens Up Dramatically from Five Years Ago", <<http://www.kff.org/entmedia/entmedia012010nr.cfm>>, Accessed January 20, 2010.
- Newton, I., *Optics*, Prometheus Books, 2003.
- Quinn, D., *Ishmael: An Adventure of Mind and Spirit*, Bantam, 1992.

22 FUN ACTIVITIES FOR KIDS AGES 8-13

CATCH THE WIND HARNESS THE SUN

22 SUPER-CHARGED SCIENCE PROJECTS FOR KIDS

MICHAEL J. CADUTO

Includes how to capture wind and harvest the sun!

New from Author Michael J. Caduto

Available from **Storey Publishing**
www.storey.com

"FRIENDLY, FUN, SCIENTIFICALLY GROUNDED AND ACCESSIBLE ACTIVITIES address one of the most urgent of contemporary needs — moving to renewable resources for the health of people and the planet, now and in the future."

— **CHERYL CHARLES, Ph.D.**, president and cofounder, Children and Nature Network, www.childrenandnature.org

Green Teacher

Attention educators!

Now everyone in your school district, school, or organization can access Green Teacher for a low price!

Over 1500 schools now access *Green Teacher* digitally through district-wide or school subscriptions – an affordable way for institutions to subscribe.

Subscriptions start at just \$3 per school for school districts, and cost \$42 for individual schools and institutions (other than universities).

All new subscribers receive access to six back issues as a bonus to their subscription.

Green Teacher's newly improved interactive digital format features quick search, zooming, scrolling, and page-flipping.

To view a sample issue online and learn more about Green Teacher's bulk digital subscriptions, visit www.greenteacher.com or call us toll-free at 888-804-1486.