



Montclair State University

New Jersey School of Conservation
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Nature Writing

Subject Area: Humanities

Session Description: This creative writing session allows students to express their thoughts and feelings about nature through language. Students will have the opportunity to try several different creative writing styles, including field journaling, reflective journaling, poetry, story-writing, campaign writing, and writing from a specific perspective. Draft writing will be done outdoors; at the conclusion of the class, students will have the opportunity to create a final copy of their favorite piece of writing from the session and present it to the class.

Objectives:

- To develop observation skills.
- To reflect on the natural world and develop thoughts and feelings about the natural world through writing.
- To learn about and experiment with different writing styles.
- To create a final draft of a piece of writing from the field.

Materials:

- Students will either bring their own notebooks or be provided with a field journal (TBD).
- Clip-boards and pencils
- For the final draft, students will be provided with paper, pencils, and art supplies such as colored pencils, crayons, and markers.
- “The Earth on Turtle’s Back” short story
- Several examples of field journal pages
- An example of a reflective journal entry
- Examples of poems and haiku with nature themes
- Examples of perspective writing
- Examples of green advertising for campaigns

Procedures:

At the very beginning of the class, the students will be taken outside on a hike. There will be several stops along the hike to sit and write. The instructor can take the class anywhere on campus, but some spots may include Piney Point, the Pavilion (when it is open), Vesper Glen, the beach on Lake Wapalanne, a clearing along the Big Flat Brook, the Corral, and other spaces where it is easy to find a place to sit and write.

The following activities can be done in any order, depending on teacher preference. Each activity should take between 15 and 25 minutes, but the teacher can judge this based on student interest and participation. ***The class can work on as many or as few of these activities as necessary.***

Each activity will begin with a brief lesson. Teachers will share an example piece of writing and instruct about form and style before giving the writing assignment. The teacher can also provide ideas for the students.

○ **Story-telling**

For this activity, begin by reading “The Earth on Turtle’s Back” from *Keepers of the Earth* by Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac. Talk to students about **creation myths**, or symbolic stories that show how the earth was created and how people came to live on it. In many Native American creation myths (such as this one by the Onondaga people of the Northeast Woodlands), animals, plants, seasons, elements, and the four directions played crucial roles.

Discuss the story. Ask students: What animals are in this story? What plants are in this story? What elements are in this story? How do the humans get along with the animals? How do the humans treat the earth and other living things?

Give students the assignment: write a short creation story. They can use their imaginations to write about how the earth was created, or they can get more specific and write about why a pinecone was created or why a salamander was created. Other ideas include how clouds got in the sky, how the turtle came to live in the pond, why the squirrel eats nuts, or why owls or bats come out only at night.

○ **Field Journaling**

Field journaling is a tool that has been used by ecologists for centuries. In order to better understand the natural world and the plants and animals in it, scientists draw and take notes about the things they see. Field journaling allows people to keep notes on what they saw, when they saw it, where they saw it, and what behavior it was exhibiting. It also allows people to later look up and research something that they saw in the field.

Show some examples of field journaling pages that include both sketches and writing. Then, give students the assignment: to write a field journaling page. Have them each write down the date, time, and what the weather is like. Then have them choose one object in nature: a tree, a rock, a flower, a newt, a leaf, etc. Have them draw that object, paying close attention to detail. Then have them take down notes about that object. What color is it? How big is it? If it is an animal, what is it doing? Where was it found? Does it appear to be common or rare? Is it dead or alive?

○ **Reflective Journaling**

For this activity, read the students an example reflective journal entry. Discuss some of the elements that can be used in reflective journaling, particularly thoughts and emotions. Such journaling is a useful tool to reflect on an experience. Have the students write a reflective journal entry on their experience so far at the New Jersey School of Conservation.

Ask students: What do you like about NJSOC? What don't you like about? What has been your favorite part? What would you have liked to do differently? What are you looking forward to? How are you getting along with your classmates? How do you like your teachers? What are you learning? Are you having fun? How are you feeling? (Happy, excited, calm, interested, nervous, sad, content, etc.) What does it feel like to be in nature?

○ **Poetry**

Students will be introduced to different forms of poems, such as haiku, cinquain, and diamante poems. They will be given examples of these poems. This activity will have a seasonal component, with different sets of examples of poems for each season. The students can then choose one form to write a poem about something found in nature. To assist students, discuss terms such as *syllable*, *noun*, *adjective*, *verb*, and *synonym*.

- Haiku: This type of poem is a traditional Japanese style of writing. It follows this form:

Five syllables
Seven syllables
Five syllables

- Cinquain: This type of poem, with five lines, can be used to describe an object. It follows this form:

Name of object
Two adjectives to describe the object
Three verbs to describe what the object does
Four words to describe how the poet feels about the object
Repeat the first line, or use a synonym.

- **Diamante:** This type of poem forms the shape of a diamond and indicates a change. It follows this form:

Noun
 Two adjectives describing it
 Three verbs ending in “ing” or “ed”
 Four related nouns
 Three verbs indicating change
 Two adjectives continuing the change
 Noun (opposite)

○ **Sensory Awareness and Perspective**

Students will be read examples of poems or short pieces of prose where the author is using a specific sense or perspective. Ask students to name the five senses and talk about how senses can be used to describe an object, place, animal, or plant. Then, each student will be given a laminated card with their assignment. The cards will include the following prompts:

- Become an ant. Lie on your stomach with your eyes close to the ground and imagine an ant walking along the soil. What does it look like? What does it feel like?
- Observe your surroundings using only your ears. What do you hear? What does that tell you about your surrounding environment?
- Choose a color and look for that color in nature. Is the color hard to find or can it be found easily? What objects, plants, or animals are that color? What other words can you use to describe that object, plant, or animal?
- Imagine you are a bird, looking down on the forest. What do you see? What does nature look like from up in the air? How is it different from a human perspective, on the ground?
- Observe your surroundings using only your eyes. What do you see? What does that tell you about your surrounding environment?
- Find an object, such as a rock, leaf, branch, tree, moss, or mud. Feel the object with your fingers. Describe it using only your sense of touch. What does it feel like? What is the texture? Is it hot or cold, hard or soft, rough or smooth?
- If you were a salamander burrowing under a wet log, how would you see the world? What does it look like, feel like, and smell like? What are you afraid of? How do you like to spend your time?
- Rocks have been here longer than anything else—longer than the trees, moss, animals, plants, buildings, and people. Imagine you are a rock. What have you witnessed over time? What changes have you watched take place? What is the most amazing thing you saw in your thousands of years?

- Observe your surroundings using only your sense of smell. What does the forest smell like? How does it smell different from where you live? Does something smell stronger than everything else? What is it?
- If you were a black bear roaming through the forest, how would you spend your time? What do you smell? What do you look for? What is your favorite part of the forest?
- Imagine you are the stream. What do you feel like? Where do you go? What plants and animals depend on you? How does that feel?
- You are a white-tail deer browsing through the forest. What do you look for? How do you spend the day? What do you do when you see a human?
- If you were a fish in Lake Wapalanne, how would you see the world? How do you feel? What do you do during the day? What other plants or animals do you encounter?
- You are a pine tree in the forest. What is your life like? Do you feel, think, or see? You are very old; what have you learned during your life?
- You are a snake slithering through the forest. How do you see the world? How do you spend your day? What do others think of you? How does that make you feel?

Have students write a short story or poem based on their prompts.

○ Campaign Writing

For this activity, students will be shown examples of “green” advertisements or campaign materials, with brief statements that include information about the environment or an environmental issue. The teacher will talk to students about **persuasion**, or using words to influence the reader’s decision. Ask students: What important information was used in each campaign piece? What was the call to action? What tactics were used? Is the advertisement effective?

Have the students then make a campaign flier, using words and drawings. Give them a scenario: A development company is planning to cut down part of Stokes State Forest to build a mall and several condos near the New Jersey School of Conservation. How do you feel about this issue? Write a campaign flier to persuade others to protect the forest. If students are having trouble, they can write a campaign flier to protect their favorite place in nature, or a place near their home.

Wrap-up:

Following the hike and writing activities, return to the classroom and provide students with paper, pencils, and art supplies. Have the students choose one of their pieces of writing from the hike to make a final draft. Then have them present their projects to the class if they would like to.

To wrap up, give a brief lecture on Rachel Carson and Henry David Thoreau, two very influential nature writers. Carson’s book *Silent Spring* was extremely influential in

alerting people to the dangers of the insecticide DDT. Thoreau's famous *Walden* is a book that has lasted for generations, showing people the value and beauty of nature.

Rachel Carson and *Silent Spring*:

- Published in 1962, *Silent Spring* helped launch the American environmental movement. The book facilitated the ban of DDT in the US in 1972.
- DDT is an insecticide that was used in the US to kill mosquitoes.
- The book argued that pesticides such as DDT were having harmful impacts on animals, especially birds. The chemical was impacting the thickness of bird eggshells, so that no baby birds were hatching. The title comes from the idea that the spring would be silent because no birds would be heard.
- Carson argued that chemicals such as DDT were having harmful affects on humans, as well.

Henry David Thoreau and *Walden*:

- *Walden* was published in 1854. It was written over the course of 2 years at Walden Pond near Concord, Massachusetts, where Thoreau lived in a cabin he had built.
- Thoreau went to Walden Pond to live a simple, self-reliant life. His reflections and observations from these experiences are described in *Walden*.
- This book is one of America's earliest examples of nature writing. For generations, the book has inspired people to spend time in nature.

After describing these two authors and their works, have a short discussion with the class about the importance of writing in sharing messages about the natural world. Such writing can both inform readers about the natural world and promote appreciation for it.

Indoor Activities:

(To be held in the Nature Center)

Have students go through the same activities as above. Instead of finding scenes or wildlife outdoors to write about, have them choose a display animal, nest, pinecone, or something similar from the Nature Center to describe. They can also practice story writing and poetry by using their imaginations instead of direct observations. They can also use the time to journal about their experience at the New Jersey School of Conservation thus far.

Story-Telling Sample

“The Earth on Turtle’s Back” from the Onondaga people of the Northeast Woodlands

Before the Earth existed, there was only water. It stretched as far as one could see, and in that water there were birds and animals swimming around. Far above, in the clouds, there was a Skyland. In that Skyland there was a great and beautiful tree. It had four white roots which stretched to each of the sacred directions, and from its branches all kinds of fruits and flowers grew.

There was an ancient chief in the Skyland. His young wife was expecting a child, and one night she dreamed that she saw the Great Tree uprooted. The next morning she told her husband the story.

He nodded as she finished telling her dream. “My wife,” he said, “I am sad that you had this dream. It is clearly a dream of great power and, as is our way, when one has such a powerful dream we must do all that we can to make it true. The Great Tree must be uprooted.”

Then the Ancient Chief called the young men together and told them that they must pull up the tree. But the roots of the tree were so deep, so strong, that they could not budge it. At last the Ancient Chief himself came to the tree. He wrapped his arms around it, bent his knees and strained. At last, with one great effort, he uprooted the tree and placed it on its side. Where the tree’s roots had one deep into the Skyland there was now a big hole. The wife of the chief came close and leaned over to look down, grasping the tip of one of the Great Tree’s branches to steady her. It seemed as if she saw something down there, far below, glittering like water. She leaned out further to look and, as she leaned, she lost her balance and fell into the hole. Her grasp slipped off the tip of the branch, leaving her with only a handful of seeds as she fell, down, down, down, down.

Far below, in the waters, some of the birds and animals looked up.

“Someone is falling toward us from the sky,” said one of the birds.

“We must do something to help her,” said another. Then two Swans flew up. They caught the Woman From The Sky between their wide wings. Slowly, they began to bring her down toward the water, where the birds and animals were watching.

“She is not like us,” said one of the animals. “Look, she doesn’t have webbed feet. I don’t think she can live in the water.”

“What shall we do, then?” said another of the water animals.

“I know,” said one of the water birds. “I have heard that there is Earth far below the waters. If we dive down and bring up Earth, then she will have a place to stand.”

So the birds and animals decided that someone would have to bring up Earth. One by one they tried.

The Duck dove down first, some say. He swam down and down, far beneath the surface, but could not reach the bottom and floated back up. Then the Beaver tried. He went even deeper, so deep that it was all dark, but he could not reach the bottom, either. The Loon tried, swimming with his strong wings. He was gone a long long time, but he, too, failed to bring up Earth. Soon it seemed that all had tried and all had failed. Then a small voice spoke.

“I will bring up Earth or die trying.”

They looked to see who it was. It was the tiny Muskrat. She dove down and swam and swam. She was not as strong or as swift as the others, but she was determined. She went so deep that it was all dark, and still she swam deeper. She went so deep that her lungs felt ready to burst, but she swam deeper still. At last, just as she was becoming unconscious, she reached out one small paw and grasped at the bottom, barely touching it before she floated up, almost dead.

When the other animals saw her break the surface they thought she had failed. Then they saw her right paw was held tightly shut.

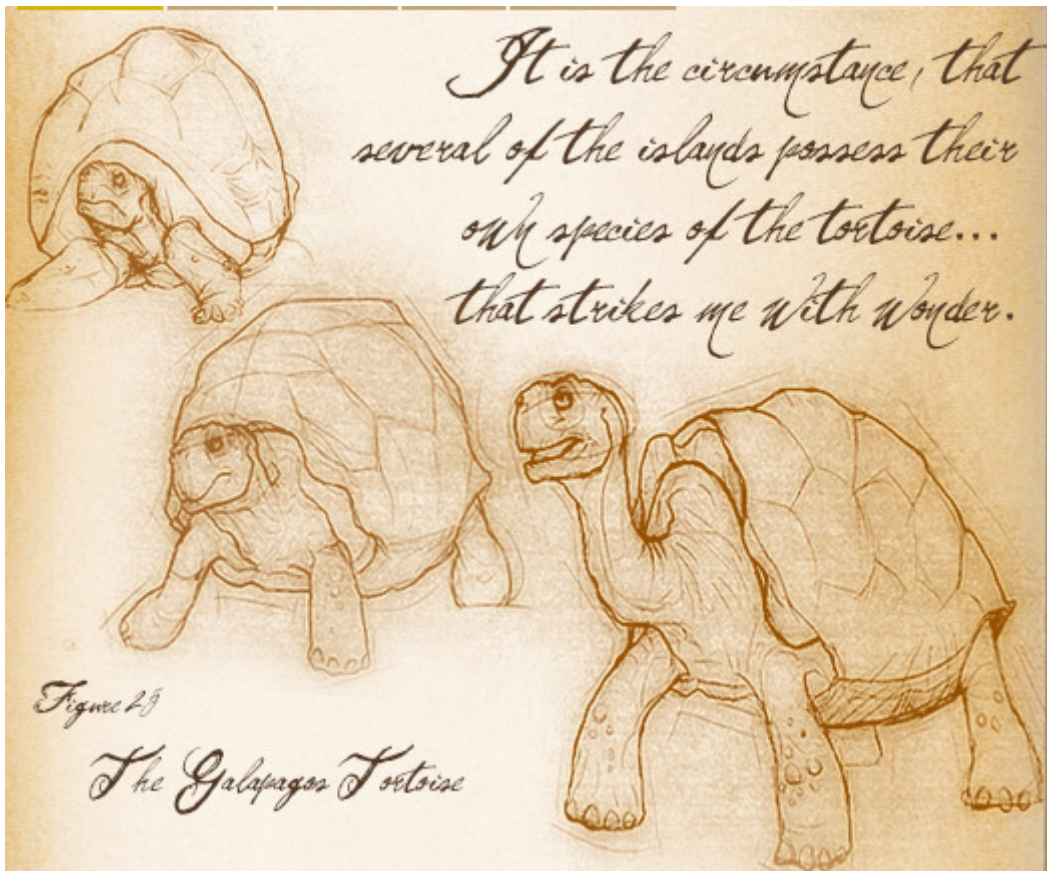
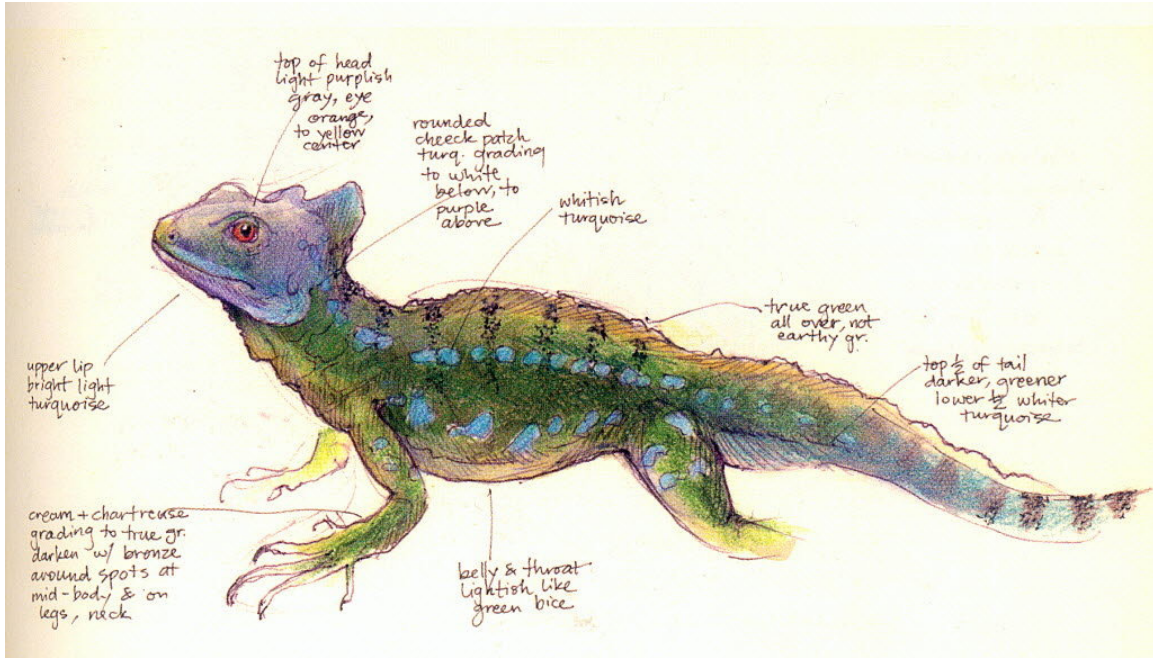
“She has the Earth,” they said. “Now where can we put it?”

“Place it on my back,” said a deep voice. It was the Great Turtle, who had come up from the depths.

They brought the Muskrat over to the Great Turtle and placed her paw against his back. To this day there are marks at the back of the Turtle’s shell which were made by Muskrat’s paw. The tiny bit of Earth fell on the back of the Turtle. Almost immediately, it began to grow larger and larger and larger until it became the whole world.

Then the two Swans brought the Sky Woman down. She stepped onto the new Earth and opened her hand, letting the seeds fall onto the bare soil. From those seeds the trees and the grass sprang up. Life on Earth had begun.

Field Journaling Samples



Northern
Red oak

Leaf
was about
4 inches long
with an inch of stem



Herring gull Probably 1st winter
Very
Brown



33

Field Park, Brookton, MA

Sept 17, 2011

I wander this Park over all the time usually,
just not so much this past few weeks.

Started walk along the Reservoir embankment
one tree lost a very large limb to the Hurricane
another lost a large branch, noticed other trees
down on my drive through the Park.

Water level is still up from our Storms last
week - water is flowing over the spillways.
Saw only a couple of Butterflies - yellow, brown,
white.

Noticed that the Bird-foot clovers and some of
the vetches seem to be starting another Bloom
cycle after none or hardly any in Aug.

Saw and Photographed more mushroom Clumps
these growing at the base of Oak or Pine trees

The thistles are all dead in the Park, don't
take them long to Bloom, set seed and die.

At the feeding area lots of Mallards in Canada Geese
they will probably stay all winter. If not this lot
others.

Saw a young gull - Eastern still have a
lot of Brown instead of white looking for a
band. Flat topped golden red almost in Bloom
here the Talleys spiked Golden Rod are in bloom.

Saw some wild grapes that actually had
grapes - almost ripe - along the middle pond.

Just below where they feed the Ducks/Geese/
sea gulls

Lots of people in the Park - walking, planning
feeding the birds - A very busy Park.

09-04-11 55°F sunny, a slight breeze making it
chilly in the shade but I want to finish Spring
is here.

A reward for another week of orientation
meetings: we were loaded into the station's
large Van and taken to the research labs
at Old Combs Zep. They have the last
remaining black-footed perquins
and are trying to get the small
population to breed so that they
can do more experiments. The outlook
is grim. This penguin seems to have
some sort of auto immune response
and is experiencing a super molt
and loss of pigmentation. The
director hinted that the
remaining birds might
have to be destroyed
before they can be
useful.

There is also destruc-
tion of the beak.
As a result of catching
which leads to



painful/difficult eating,
wounds causes lusterless,
lack of interest in eating or
death, so far of 4 birds...

This one still has his pink-
eye skin and head color
but feathers, when they
are coming in are a
liver-colored brown outside
of any ve corded normal
variant.

Reflective Journal Entry Sample

When we arrived at the New Jersey School of Conservation, it was raining lightly. The rain began to pour down harder when we went to ASEs. It was cold and wet. At first, I wanted to go back into the cabin, but as we began working on the group challenges, I forgot about the rain. I think my team worked well together even though we didn't solve all of the challenges. For some of the activities, we were disorganized, but then Emily stepped up to be a leader, and I think she did a really good job.

Stokes State Forest is really different from where I live in New Jersey. It feels like we are in a different state because I'm not used to seeing so many trees. There are also more hills here than at home. I like hiking here but I am afraid to sit on the ground because there are so many earth worms. I hope that we see more wildlife while we are here. I want to see deer, and if we're lucky, a bear!

Sensory Awareness and Perspective Sample

From the perspective of a salamander:

Damp, slimy, slick, dark. Under here it smells cold, barely a smell at all. The dirt is fresh, it's healthy and moist and for now there is no reason to move anywhere else. Not until the ground starts to shake and the log starts to move; the heavy vibrations indicating something has come looking for me. Once that happens I will have to move quickly, scurry under the wet leaves to find safety from the massive creature that somehow finds something as small as myself to be a substantial meal. But until that happens, I'll stay here, where I am safe.

Poetry Samples

Haiku:

Snowflakes are our friends
They descend when winter comes
Making white blankets

Frost this morning and
a cold wind, scatters leaves like
broken promises

Moonlight casts a pale
blue light on the snow, winter
perfect, cold and brisk

Cinquain:

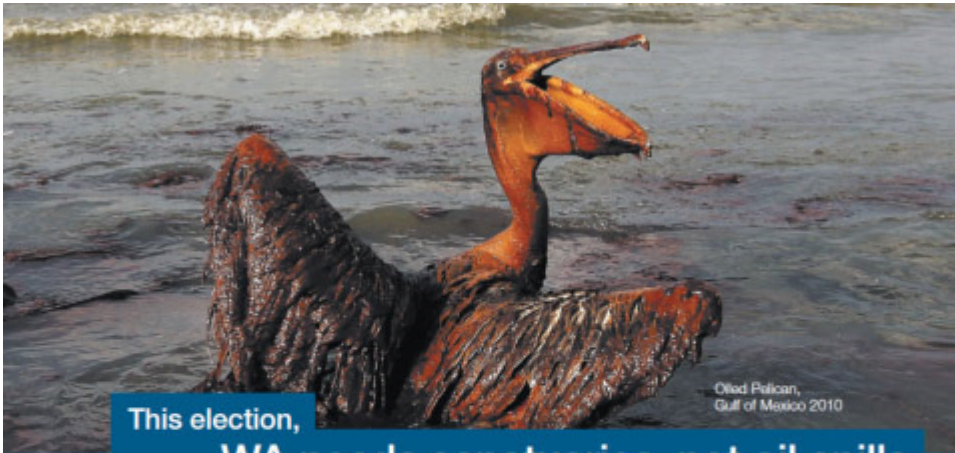
pine
soft, green
standing, growing, producing
tall, regal, silent, majestic
tree

Diamante:

autumn
crisp, colorful
cooling, drying, dropping
leaves, acorns, branches, wind
falling, freezing, sleeping
white, cold
winter

Advertisement Samples





Oiled Pelican,
Gulf of Mexico 2010

This election,
WA needs sanctuaries, not oil spills

Less than **1%** of WA's oceans are protected.
There is a greater level of unique marine life in our south west than on the Great Barrier Reef.
Marine sanctuaries are urgently needed.

Tell your local candidate there's no time to lose:
www.saveourmarinelife.org.au



Authorized by P. Westgate on behalf of The Conservation Council of WA, 2 DeH Street, West Perth, WA, 6005

A photograph of a smiling woman with blonde hair, wearing a blue jacket and a yellow life vest, paddling a green kayak on a body of water. The background shows a shoreline with trees.

Thanks for the
Exercise!

TYDB
THANK YOU DELAWARE BAY

Thank You Delaware Bay!
Delaware Bay takes care of us. Let's return the favor.
Find out what you can do. Visit thankyoudelawarebay.org