

A VOICE FOR THE SPIRIT BEARS — TEACHING GUIDE

About the Book

The true story of a boy who fought to protect a rare subspecies of bear.

As a child, Simon Jackson found navigating the world of the school playground difficult. He felt most at home in the woodlands, learning about and photographing wildlife. At thirteen, Simon became fascinated with spirit bears, a rare subspecies of black bear that were losing their habitat to deforestation. Simon wanted to do something to protect them. He decided he had to become their voice. But first, he would have to find his own.

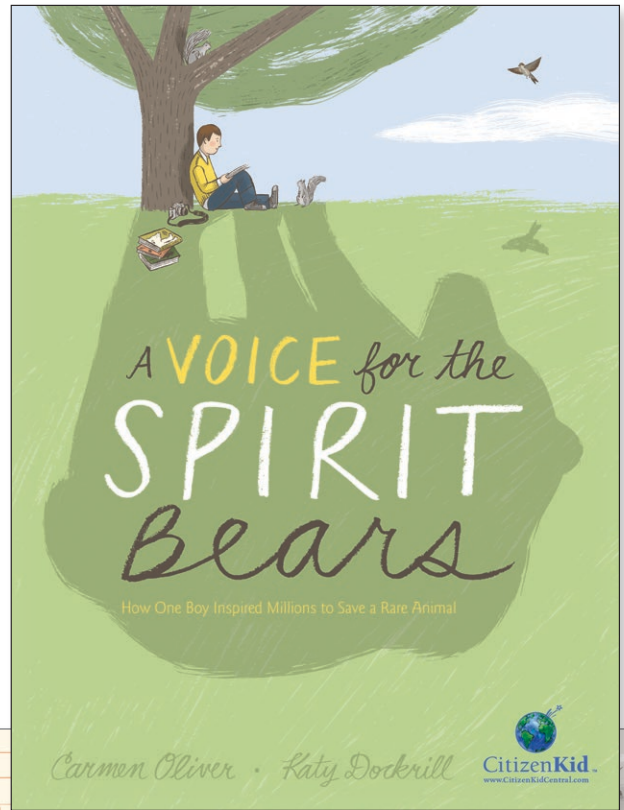
The inspiring message is clear: one child's voice truly can change the world.

About the Author

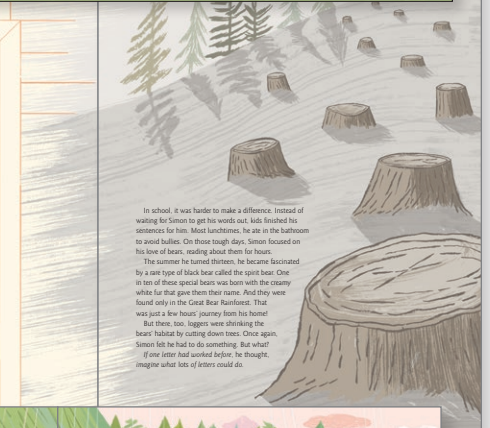
CARMEN OLIVER is a children's author whose books include *Bears Make the Best Reading Buddies*. Born in Canada, she now lives outside Austin, Texas.

About the Illustrator

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ISBN 978-1-77138-979-2



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Goals

- Define and understand scientific concepts, such as *conservation* and *habitat*
- Understand how any person — no matter their age — can become an activist

Overview

After reading *A Voice for the Spirit Bears* by Carmen Oliver and Katy Dockrill, students will discuss the major themes in the book, including conservation of animal habitats and environmental activism. Students will learn how to act in their own communities on behalf of issues that matter to them.

Essential Questions

- Why is conservation of animal habitats important to the environment?
- How can children become environmental activists?

Activities

- Whole Group: read and understand *A Voice for the Spirit Bears*
- Small Group: brainstorm about activism in your community
- Individual: complete a step-by-step guide to becoming an activist

ACTIVITY 1: WHOLE GROUP — READING *A VOICE FOR THE SPIRIT BEARS*

After reading *A Voice for the Spirit Bears* as a group, or reading it aloud to the class, engage students in a discussion about the story. Review each of the main points and discuss each of the central ideas, as outlined below.

- Start by explaining the difference between fiction and nonfiction for students who may not know. Read the biography of Simon Jackson on pages 30–32 aloud and make sure students understand that this story is based on his real life.
 - Note that even nonfiction stories have a plot, characters, a setting, and rising and falling action.
 - › If your students are particularly interested in the structural aspects of stories, go through these elements of the story. It's not required, however, and many of these features will come up in the discussion that follows.
- Point out that the story begins by explaining Simon's passion for bears. He first saw one when he was seven years old and fell in love. That experience led him onto the path he followed for the rest of his life.
 - It's important to highlight for students that Simon felt a personal connection to the grizzly bear he saw in Yellowstone National Park. "Seven-year-old Simon wished *he* was as powerful as a bear," it says on page 6.
 - › Readers learn later in the book that Simon struggles to speak without stuttering and to make friends. He sees something in the bear that he wishes he had in himself. He thought of it as power, but maybe what he connected to was the idea that the bear was brave.
 - › Highlight that people connect with ideas and feelings that relate to their own experiences, even when they may seem unrelated (such as bullying and bears). This concept will help students as they complete the small-group and individual activities and start making their own activist plans.



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- Focus on the lemonade stand on page 10. Reread this page, or ask for a student volunteer.
 - Ask students why Simon is selling lemonade. (He is raising money to help save the bears in a region where their habitat might be cut down.)
 - Ask students to compare what they read on this page with the information they just heard when you read aloud from Simon Jackson's biography at the end of the book.
 - › Point out that in the story Simon thinks his money saves the forest, but once you read the biography, it becomes clear that other people were working towards the same goal. It's important to note that young Simon *believed* his letter and money made the difference. If he hadn't believed that, he might not have worked to get other students involved later on. "If one letter had worked before, he thought, imagine what *lots* of letters could do," it says on page 13.
- As you review the rest of the book, point out how Simon's passion from when he was seven years old carries him all the way through high school and beyond. He is now a man, and he devotes his life to this passion: helping animals who don't have a voice.
- Finish your whole-group discussion by writing the following terms on the board.
 - **Habitat:** the natural conditions and environment in which a plant or animal lives, e.g., forest, desert or wetlands
 - **Conservation:** the preservation, management and care of land and natural resources
 - **Activism:** action taken in pursuit of a political or social goal

Ask students to define each term, and as they provide correct answers, write those on the board, as well. Leave this up for the class to see as they complete the small-group and individual activities that follow.

ACTIVITY 2 : SMALL GROUP — BRAINSTORMING

Divide the class into small groups of four or five students each. Provide students with sticky notes and pencils. Tell them that this brainstorming activity is intended to help focus their ideas about issues in their community that matter to them, and which they want to work to improve. **Note to Educator:** Because the focus of the book is environmental conservation, that can be the focus of this activity as well. But if students are more interested in finding ways to make an impact on other aspects within their communities, that's fine. Tell them to follow the instructions for whatever issues matter to them the most.

Explain that "brainstorming" is a term used by professionals and creative people all over the world. It simply means that they should plan to get all of their ideas out, and not to worry if some of them aren't any good. The whole point of brainstorming is that some ideas stick, some land flat and some land in the garbage.

- Instruct each group to start talking to one another about their environmental concerns, or other issues that matter to them. Have them ask one another, "What do you want to fix?"
- As they're talking, and ideas are flying, each member of the group should write down key words or phrases. Explain that they don't have to write down only their own ideas — if they hear someone say something that appeals to them, they should write it down!
 - For example, if one group is talking about their community, and someone mentions that a house in their neighborhood leaves the lights on all night, and someone else says that there's a big empty lot near their apartment that is full of broken glass and litter, then two ideas have already sprung up. Students should write on sticky notes:
 - › Reduce electricity use
 - › Clean up neighborhood
 - If a group seems stuck and isn't talking or producing many sticky notes, pass by and write some down for them. For example:
 - › Recycle batteries
 - › Recycle water filters
 - › Plant a tree
 - › Volunteer at a community garden
 - › Clean up a nearby lake or waterway
 - If a group is thinking as big as, for instance, *save a species of animal*, don't discourage them. Instead say, "That is exactly what Simon does in the book!" This whole process is about letting them dream big.

The next year, Simon asked some friends to help him start a group they would call the Spirit Bear Youth Coalition. His idea was that students from around the world — kids who cared about the bears the way he did — could share information in school and online.



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- Once each group has a pile of sticky notes on their table, return to a whole-group discussion format and have students come up to the board with the sticky notes.
- At the end, along with the keyword list (habitat, conservation, activism), there will be ideas scattered all around the board from which students can choose to complete the next activity.
 - Explain that no one owns any single idea. If there is something on the board they want to do, they can use it.
 - Remind students, “Every idea is a good idea, and every small step toward activism is better than no step at all. Through small steps progress can be made.”

ACTIVITY 3: INDIVIDUAL — PIE-IN-THE-SKY DREAMING

Students should now take out their notebooks to begin the individual work of making a commitment to becoming an activist. Explain that there are a lot of ideas on the board, and that they shouldn't feel restricted to choosing only one.

- Say, “Many activists become leaders in the fields that matter most to them. In Simon's case, that was conserving land for bears. But they don't stop there.”
 - Activists also choose one issue to support in smaller ways. Maybe Simon volunteers at an animal shelter in his hometown. We don't know from reading the book, but it would make sense, given how much he loves animals.
 - Many activists also choose a new habit that will benefit a cause, such as conserving electricity. Perhaps Simon uses less electricity than his neighbors. That habit will have a positive impact on the environment he cares so much about!

Students should write down three issues they are interested in supporting as activists. The first one should be the one that matters the most to them — it's an issue on which, if they could, they would become leaders. This is Pie-in-the-Sky Dreaming.

- Say, “If you had all the resources in the world, what would you do for this cause?”
 - For instance, if the cause is protecting the earth's oceans, perhaps they would invent a machine to sweep oceans and clean out pollution. Without Pie-in-the-Sky Dreaming, Simon couldn't have saved the spirit bears. Simon knew he wanted to help the spirit bears so he thought big and came up with the idea of having his classmates write letters to save the bears' habitat.
- Now ask students to think about an organization related to their cause.
 - What does this organization do?
 - What does this organization need to keep doing that work?
 - › For instance, if they're thinking of an environmental protection organization such as Greenpeace, maybe they need money. Ask students what they can do to raise money for Greenpeace, such as:
 - » Open a lemonade stand, as Simon did, and donate the proceeds.
 - » Encourage kids in other neighborhoods to do the same.
 - » Host a fundraiser at the school and ask everyone to make a donation at the door.
- Now ask students to think of one way they can change their daily lives that will impact the environment — one thing to make into a habit. For example:
 - › Turn off the lights when they leave a room.
 - › Stop running water when they brush their teeth.
 - › Walk, take the bus or ride their bike to school instead of getting a ride in the family car.
 - › Encourage their parents and siblings to do the same.

Have students share their three-part plans with the class, and encourage them to ask one another questions. Sharing good ideas is the best way to spread the activist spirit!

