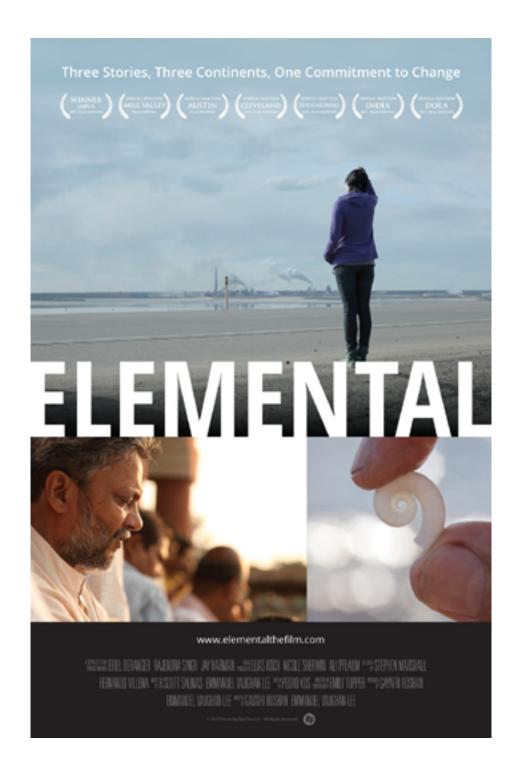
ELEMENTAL

Discussion Guide

Three Stories, Three Continents, One Commitment to Change



Poster from the theatrical release of *Elemental*.



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The Elemental Discussion Guide and Conversation Cards are available for free download at

elementalthefilm.com/education

The three protagonists in Elemental. From top: Rajendra Singh, Eriel Deranger, and Jay Harman.







About the Film

Elemental tells the story of three individuals who are deeply connected with nature and driven to confront some of the most pressing ecological challenges of our time.

The film follows Rajendra Singh, an Indian government official, on a 40-day pilgrimage down India's once pristine Ganges River, now polluted and dying. Facing community opposition and personal doubts, Singh works to rouse his fellow Indians to treat their sacred "Mother Ganga" with respect.

Across the globe in northern Canada, Eriel Deranger mounts her own "David and Goliath" struggle against the world's largest industrial development, in the tar sands of Alberta, an oil deposit larger than the state of Florida. A young mother and native Dené, Deranger campaigns against development of the tar sands and the proposed 2,000-mile Keystone XL Pipeline, which are destroying indigenous communities and threatening ecosystems.

In Australia, inventor and entrepreneur Jay Harman searches for investors willing to risk millions on his conviction that nature's own systems hold the key to Earth's ecological problems. Harman finds his inspiration in the natural world's profound architecture and creates a revolutionary device that he believes can slow down global warming.

Separated by continents, yet sharing an unwavering commitment to protecting nature, the characters in this story are complex, flawed heroes whose life's work is stemming the tide of environmental destruction.

The 57-minute educational cut is a condensed version of the feature-length film and is geared specifically for classroom use. This version is available exclusively through The Cinema Guild.

Emmanuel Vaughan-Lee

Director, Producer, and Co-composer

About the Filmmakers

Emmanuel Vaughan-Lee is a director, producer, musician, and composer. He has directed and produced numerous award-winning films (*Thousand Suns*, 2009; *What Would It Look Like?* 2009; *A Game For Life*, 2008; *Barrio de Paz*, 2007) that have played at festivals worldwide and aired on PBS, Link TV, and ABC Australia, among others. He is also the founder and executive editor of the Global Oneness Project, a Webby Award–winning online magazine. Prior to his work in film, Emmanuel performed and recorded as a sideman with some of the biggest names in jazz, as well as releasing two critically acclaimed records under his own name, *Previous Misconceptions* (2002) and *Borrowed Time* (2005).

Gayatri Roshan

Director and Producer

Gayatri started her career in London, where she produced over 50 television and radio commercial campaigns for Sony BMG, Universal Music, Virgin Music, and numerous top bands, including Outkast and Pink. In 2005, she cofounded the *Species Alliance*, with whom she wrote and produced a documentary, *Call of Life*. In 2009, she wrote and produced *A Thousand Suns* (PBS) and *Peace Wanted Alive* (Link TV). In 2010, she completed work as producer and executive producer of *Harmony*, a feature-length documentary inspired by and in collaboration with the Prince of Wales that aired for NBC's 2010 Green Week.

Visit the Elemental website to find out more.

elementalthefilm.com

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About the Center for Ecoliteracy

The Center for Ecoliteracy supports and advances education for sustainable living, engaging since 1995 with K–12 educators from across the U.S. and six continents through seminars, academic program audits, coaching for teaching and learning, curriculum development, and technical assistance.

The Center's publications include *Ecoliterate: How Educators Are Cultivating Emotional, Social, and Ecological Intelligence; Ecological Literacy: Educating Our Children for a Sustainable World; Smart by Nature: Schooling for Sustainability;* and *Cooking with California Food in K–12 Schools.* Its website offers hundreds of resources, including lessons and activities, discussion guides for films such as *Food, Inc., Nourish: Food + Community,* and *The Last Mountain,* and essays by leading writers and experts.







Scenes from the Center A student helps restore a watershed as part of a school-community project; A Rethinking School Lunch seminar engages teacher, student, and parent; Educators explore art, science, and design at a Center for Ecoliteracy seminar.

Visit the Ecoliteracy website for more information.

ecoliteracy.org

A Letter from Zenobia Barlow

Cofounder and Executive Director, Center for Ecoliteracy

Dear Educator,

The Center for Ecoliteracy is pleased to offer this resource to help students explore themes and issues presented in Go Project Films' *Elemental*. The film tells the stories of individuals responding to some of today's most pressing environmental concerns. It is hopeful, portraying people who feel called to action and who discover inner strengths and resources in their communities and the natural world to act in creative, courageous ways.

As a way to understand these stories, we chose the metaphor of the hero's journey, a theme that has recurred throughout human history and literature. The hero is often a very ordinary person who rises to the occasion when confronted by challenges within his or her world, perseveres in the face of obstacles, gains self-knowledge, and becomes a model and inspiration for others.

Educators play a vital role as communities address the issues facing them today. You inspire students to become engaged citizens and help them gain the knowledge, self-understanding, and skills they will need. I believe that you will find the film and this guide to be valuable tools; the guide provides discussion questions, reflection exercises, and action ideas to assist students to look more deeply at the film's themes and to examine their own "journeys" and their responses to environmental issues.

The Center for Ecoliteracy is dedicated to schooling for sustainable living. Through our initiatives Ecoliterate and Smart by Nature, we offer guidance and support for school communities, from designing curricula to examining the ways in which schools provision themselves and use energy and resources. I invite you to consult our website, ecoliteracy.org, to learn more about our publications and programs.

Thank you for all that you do to educate students about creating sustainable communities.

Warmly,

Zenobia Barlow

Using this Guide

What's Inside

This discussion guide offers suggestions for exploring some of the themes and issues presented in the 57-minute educational cut of the film *Elemental*. It is designed for educators working with high school or college-level students. The film and guide may be used in a wide variety of courses, including environmental studies, English, literature, political science, career exploration, leadership, or service learning.

The guide uses the metaphor of the hero's journey for analyzing the stories of three environmental activists portrayed in the film. It is organized around three film acts that follow the hero's journey motif: Act I focuses on the *Call to Action*; Act II addresses *The Road of Trials*; and Act III portrays *Finding Hope and Coming Home*.

In addition, the guide explores three important themes raised by the film: *Connection to Place, Perseverance,* and *Nature as Teacher.* These themes represent qualities that the three protagonists share, and provide insight into strengths everyone can draw on in their own lives. See page 11 for more about the themes.

For each act, the guide provides discussion questions and reflection exercises for helping students think more deeply about the act, and action ideas for motivating students to consider ways to become more involved in their community.

An opener activity sets the stage for viewing *Elemental*. It suggests ways to introduce students to the hero's journey and to the three themes before seeing the film. It also includes a recording sheet for students to take notes while watching *Elemental*.

Both the guide and a <u>downloadable deck of conversation cards</u> are designed to accompany the educational cut of the film. The conversation cards may also be used with the full-length version of the film.

Using this Guide

Viewing the Film

You may opt to show the film one act at a time, and lead a discussion and do the activities suggested for each act. Or you may show the whole film at once or over two days, and then select questions, activities, and reflections from throughout the guide that best fit your instructional goals. We recommend that you preview the film before showing it to your class. This will help you determine how best to connect it to the purposes for your course.

The Hero's Journey

As students view the film, they will analyze the three protagonists (leading figures) through the lens of the hero's journey, an archetypal story that appears in cultures all over the world. Familiar examples of the hero's journey from literature and film include the stories of *Moses, Odysseus, The Hunger Games, The Lion King, Star Wars,* and *The Hobbit*.

While the details of the hero's journey may vary, the basic form is generally the same...

- 1) The hero gets a call to travel from the everyday world to the unknown.
- ② Along the way, the hero meets challenges and obstacles, eventually facing an ordeal or abyss.
- ③ With the help of a mentor, guide, or guiding principles, the hero has a revelation that enables him or her to accomplish his or her goal.
- The hero returns home with the power to bestow knowledge or treasure on others.

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Using this Guide

The hero's journey is an insightful metaphor for describing the struggles we all face. It also sheds light on the protagonists depicted in the film. All three protagonists are called to their challenging work, face trials and obstacles along the way, and rely on mentors or guiding belief systems to help them reach their goals. By examining the protagonists' work though this story pattern, students can begin to see how their own efforts are part of a larger story.

Themes

In addition to the hero's journey, this guide explores three different themes that run through the stories in the film. These are:

Connection to Place. As the protagonists demonstrate, when people have a personal connection to a place—either through direct experiences or by the meaning they ascribe to a particular location—they are much more invested in making change.

Perseverance. There is often a fine line between failure and success—as the film's protagonists might attest—and perseverance can make the difference. Perseverance requires steadily adhering to a course of action, purpose, or cause, despite obstacles or discouragement.

Nature as Teacher. The protagonists in the film look to nature as their source of inspiration or guidance. By observing how natural ecosystems survive and thrive, they become increasingly determined to preserve the integrity of nature and demonstrate ways humans can live in harmony with the natural world.

These three themes are explored in the questions, reflections, and actions included for each film act. In addition, the conversation cards include nine cards relevant to each theme.

Using this Guide

Facilitating the Discussion

After viewing each act or the entire film, ask participants to share their general reactions. Then use the discussion questions to explore the particular act or theme more deeply.

To promote thoughtful discussion, we invite you to think of discussion, reflections, and other suggested activities as components of the students' own "hero's journeys." As such, the teacher's role is to support and guide students' quest for knowledge and truth rather than impose a particular viewpoint. To this end, you might consider:

Making it clear that the questions are meant to be open-ended, with no right or wrong answers. Their purpose is to help students expand their understanding of the topic.

Using different discussion formats to engage students in different ways and to deepen their thinking. For example, you might have students discuss questions as a whole class, or in pairs or small groups, and then report out to the class. You might also have them reflect on a question individually before discussing it in a group.

Providing reflective silence. After asking a question, give students five to ten seconds to think before responding. This quiet time allows students to reflect and often stimulates deeper insights.

Inviting a variety of viewpoints by encouraging different students to participate. Rather than relying on the same volunteers to answer every question, encourage quieter students to speak up.

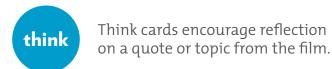
Modeling "thinking out loud" to create an atmosphere in which students feel comfortable taking intellectual risks, asking questions, and admitting when they do not know something.

After the discussion, encourage participants to think more deeply about the film with the reflection and action suggestions. Depending on your objectives, you may also use the suggestions as small group discussion topics, individual essay prompts, or test items.

Using this Guide

Conversation Cards

The conversation cards are organized around the three themes and also provide three different ways for students to engage with the film content.



Ask cards invite questioning and dialogue.

Act cards direct students toward taking specific actions in their community.



Conversation Cards
The twenty-eight
conversation cards
help students engage
with the film.













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Exploring the Film:

The Hero's Journey

Opener: What is a "Hero's Journey?"

Before showing the film, introduce or review the concept of the hero's journey, <u>using information from page 10</u>. Describe some of the common elements of the hero's journey storyline in myth and literature.

Discussion

Lead a discussion about the hero's journey motif:

What myths, novels, or movies can you think of that follow a hero's journey storyline?

- (A) Why might the hero's journey be such a common pattern for narratives throughout the world?
- (B) Writer Willa Cather said, "There are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before." What do you think she means? What might be the two or three stories she refers to?
- © If you knew you were on a hero's journey, how might that affect how you reacted to any people or obstacles you met along the way?
- (D) When people describe someone else as a hero, they often use words like courageous, strong, or honorable. When people who have done something heroic describe themselves, they often use words like scared or ordinary. What words would you use to describe a hero?

Themes

Reflection

Introduce the three themes—connection to place, perseverance, and nature as teacher—using information from page11. Explain that as they watch the film, students should look for examples of how each of the three protagonists portrayed in the film is connected to particular place, perseveres in the face of obstacles, and looks to nature as a guide.

Give students a copy of the Elemental Themes recording sheet on page 32 and invite them to jot down their observations as they watch the entire film or individual acts. Have students use the notes to write a brief summary of how one (or more) of the themes is presented in the film.

Suggest that students also use their notes to recall details from the film for later discussion and activities.

Action

Ask students to spend a few minutes writing a draft paragraph about an issue or cause they feel passionate about—one important enough to them that it might stimulate their own "hero's journey." Invite them to share their ideas with each other in pairs or small groups.

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Themes

Themes Recording Sheet: Sample Responses

Connection to Place

Rajendra Singh...says the Ganges represents many things: livelihood, pride, faith, devotion, honor, and respect. Eriel Deranger...has early memories in the bush, fishing and hunting with parents. Jay Harman...spent lots of time swimming and diving in the sea when growing up.

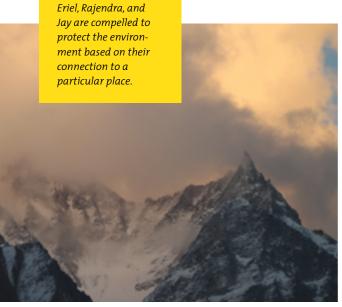
Perseverance

Rajendra Singh...is trying to clean up one of the world's most polluted rivers in spite of the apathy and outright resistance he encounters. Eriel Deranger...is fighting to stop powerful international corporations from constructing massive pipelines. Jay Harman...is tirelessly working to stop the destruction of the natural world even though many consider his ideas to be outlandish and doomed for failure.

Nature as Teacher

Rajendra Singh...recognizes that without water there is no life, and that we're a part of nature. Eriel Deranger...sees how tar sands development is affecting rivers and other ecological systems. Jay Harman...was inspired by the geometry of swirling water for his idea for the planet-cooling device.



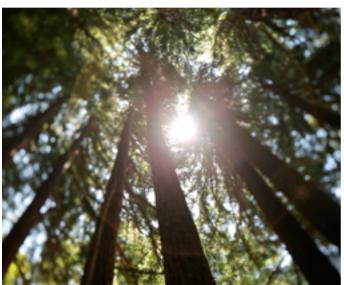


A Call to Action











Act I: Call to Action

Act I Details

Running Time for Act: 15:54 minutes

Time Code Start: 00:00 Time Code End: 15:54

Act I of the film introduces each of the three protagonists and illustrates the Call to Action stage of the hero's journey, giving us insight into what drew each of them to their work. In typical hero's journey stories, the call is the point when the future heroes first realize that their life is going to change.

The theme for Act I is connection to place. All three protagonists were deeply inspired by their relationship to a particular locale, and were called to action to help protect it:

Rajendra Singh was born in a small village in northern India. He has fought to clean up the highly polluted Ganges River, which he considers to be "the lifeblood" of his country.

Eriel Deranger was raised as a member of the First Nation community of Athabasca Chipewyans in Alberta, Canada—now the location of controversial tar sands mining by oil companies. Eriel has devoted her work to preventing mining on her native land.

Jay Harman was born and raised in Australia and spent most of his childhood exploring the ocean near his home. His inventions incorporate efficient designs found in nature and aim to benefit the Earth.

We suggest that you show Act I, stopping the film at 15:54 (just after Jay Harman says, "And this drives me to do everything I can to stop this destruction of the natural world.").

Act I: Call to Action

Discussion

Lead a discussion about Act I that explores the Call to Action stage of the hero's journey and the theme of connection to place. You may choose to pose the discussion questions to small groups or the whole class.

- (1) What called each of the three protagonists to action?
- 2 What challenges do you anticipate them facing?
- (3) What particular place is important to each protagonist? (You may wish to point out on a map the three places described above.)
- 4 For these three protagonists, how does their connection to a place empower or motivate each of them to act?
- (5) Why might connection to a place be such a powerful influence in a person's life? Can you think of other examples of its importance?
- (6) In what ways is your life as a student like a hero's journey? In what ways does it differ?

Reflection

Ask students to think and write about one of the following:

- ① When describing how she got involved in the tar sands issue, Eriel Deranger says, "For me, it was do or die." What does this expression mean in general and what might she mean by it? Is there anything in your life you feel that strongly about?
- (2) In the film, one of Rajendra Singh's colleagues uses the word "war" to describe his effort to clean up the Ganges. Is "war" an accurate metaphor for the environmental work Singh, Eriel Deranger, or Jay Harman is doing? What are differences between a warrior and a hero? Which term do you think describes you better?

Act I: Call to Action

3 Describe a place you feel connected to. What emotions does it evoke when you think of that place? What meanings does it hold for you?

Action

In preparation for getting involved at the local level, have students research one of the following:

- ① Direct students to conduct an Internet search on their community to learn about the history and issues that have helped form the place where they grew up or live now. Suggest that they start their research with the term "history of [name of town]." Ask them to write a one-page description of something they found interesting from their research.
- ② Invite students to research the three protagonists—Rajendra Singh, Eriel Deranger, and Jay Harman—to find out more about them, their journeys, and their current work. Ask each student to write a summary or create a timeline of one of the protagonist's lives to date.

Facing major challenges and setbacks, the protagonists decide to keep going. Suncor Oil Sand

The Road of Trials.











Act II: The Road of Trials

Act II Details

Running Time for Act: 17:54 minutes

Time Code Start: 15:54
Time Code End: 33:48

In Act II of the film, we witness some of the challenges the three protagonists face in their work. This act illustrates the Road of Trials stage of the hero's journey, as these stories typically include one or more ordeals that the hero must face as part of the quest.

The theme for Act II is perseverance. All three protagonists demonstrate this theme as they encounter a number of difficulties along their way:

Rajendra Singh is physically sickened by the pollution he finds on his pilgrimage, and faces angry opposition to his proposals for cleaning up the Ganges.

Eriel Deranger loses her job as well as the backing of the organization that had supported her in her fight against tar sands development.

Jay Harman was forced to lay off his staff when the economy slowed, and is having trouble convincing new investors to fund his innovation.

To show just Act II, go to the Chapters menu and start the chapter labeled "Act II." Stop the film at 33:48 minutes (just after Eriel Deranger says, "And he said... he said that... um... working in the tar sands assured him a place in hell.").

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Act II: The Road of Trials

Discussion

Lead a discussion about Act II that explores the Road of Trials stage of the hero's journey and the theme of perseverance. You may choose to have students discuss the following questions in small groups or as a class.

- (1) What trials or obstacles does each of the three protagonists encounter?
- ② Many of the challenges people face in life are economic, cultural, physical, or personal in nature. What examples can you find from the film for of each of these kinds of challenges? How do the protagonists handle each?
- Resistance to change and the temptation to give up are often driven by fear. In what ways does fear play a part in the three protagonists' stories? How does each protagonist respond to his or her own fear or others' fears?
- (4) How would you define perseverance?
- (5) What personality traits seem to enable or compel each of the protagonists to persevere?
- 7 People are often moved by stories of others' perseverance. Why is perseverance so inspiring? In what situations might perseverance be a detriment?
- (8) We often think of heroes as being strong, larger-than-life figures who respond valiantly to the challenges they face; but true heroes can be clumsy, weak, or otherwise imperfect. What flaws do the three protagonists exhibit? What can we learn from their flaws as well as their strengths?

Act II: The Road of Trials

Reflection

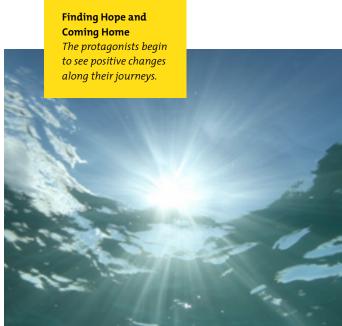
Ask students to think and write about one of the following:

- ② Psychology professor Angela Duckworth focuses on a trait she calls "grit" sticking with something until you master it. Her research indicates that when it comes to school success, for example, grit or perseverance may be more important than intelligence (see Resources on page 30 for information on her report). Why might perseverance be so critical for success? In what ways do the protagonists in the film demonstrate grit?
- ② Describe a challenge you are facing now or that you recently confronted. What are you doing or did you do to face the challenge? Is there anyone whose words or actions helped you?

Action

To further their ability to act at the local level, direct students to do one of the following:

- ① Suggest that they research strategies for increasing the capacity to persevere. Invite each student to choose two or three strategies and write about how they might practice those strategies to increase their own perseverance.
- ② Encourage students to research a person in their community or area of interest who persisted in the face of difficulties. (They might begin by searching "story of perseverance" on the Internet.) What helped this person through his or her "road of trials"? You may have students present their findings in one of a variety of ways—through an essay, multimedia presentation, blog, glog, or other format.













Act III: Finding Hope and Coming Home

Act III Details

Running Time for Act: 23:03 minutes Time Code Start: 33:48

Time Code End: 56:51

In Act III of the film, the three protagonists begin to see signs of hope: while there is still work to be done, they each surmount one or more of the obstacles they had faced. This act illustrates the Finding Hope and Coming Home stage of the hero's journey, and helps us learn from their experiences. As with most hero's journey stories, the film's protagonists find inspiration in other people and in themselves.

The theme for Act III is nature as teacher. The three protagonists demonstrate this theme as they continue their journeys:

Rajendra Singh finds that faith in the river itself and wise words from a local elder encourage him to complete his pilgrimage and to carry on his work: he learns that no dams will be constructed on the upper region of the Ganges.

Eriel Deranger organizes a "healing walk" to mend some of the spiritual and cultural wounds caused by tar sands extraction, and sees that the issue is now being discussed on an international level.

Jay Harman, holding to his optimistic view that nature can help people solve the environmental problems we face, finds a financial partner for developing his Earth-cooling invention.

To show just Act III, go to the Chapters menu and play the chapter labeled "Act III" through to the end of the film.

Act III: Finding Hope and Coming Home

Discussion

Lead a discussion about Act III that explores the hero's journey stage of Finding Hope and Coming Home, and the theme of nature as teacher. As with the other acts, you may choose to pose the following discussion questions to students in small groups or to the whole class:

- ① What is something that each of the protagonists learns from nature that helps his or her cause?
- ② What people or beliefs provide them the strength and hope to continue their work? (For example, Singh's faith, Deranger's family, and Harman's optimism inspire them to keep going.)
- ③ Jay Harman says that all of our knowledge comes from nature because we are a part of nature. How does his view influence the way he approaches problems? What other perspectives might people have about the source of knowledge?
- 4 What successes did each protagonist experience?
- (5) The typical hero's journey ends with the hero returning home to tell others of his or her feats. What evidence does the film provide that our protagonists' journeys are not complete?

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Act III: Finding Hope and Coming Home

Reflection

Ask students to think and write about one of the following:

- ① In the film, Jay Harman says, "Nature is always optimistic" and gives the example of crabs and lobsters putting out millions of eggs as optimism. Do you agree or disagree with his view? Why? What qualities would you ascribe to nature? What examples can you give?
- ② Actor and writer Christopher Reeve wrote, "Once you choose hope, anything's possible." Do you believe hope is a choice? Who or what gives you hope about the future?

Action

Invite students either to go back to their potential hero's journey (from the action ideas in the Opener on page 16) or think now about something they feel passionate enough about to go on such a journey. First ask them to imagine their journey's completion, and then have them write their responses to the following:

- ① What will you have accomplished at your journey's end?
- 2 In what ways could nature inform your journey?
- 3 How will you, your community, or the world be different?
- 4 What first steps could you take now?

Ask students to share their thinking with a partner or a small group of other students. Encourage them to actually start their journeys and, if there is interest, allow class time for groups to support each other.

Selected Resources

For additional information on the film's protagonists, and on the issues and themes raised by the film, explore these resources.

Websites and Twitter

Eriel Deranger on Twitter.

Jay Harman's website.

Books and Articles

Archer, John. (2010). The Wisdom of Water. London: Allen & Unwin.

Benyus, Janine M. (2002). Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature. New York: Morrow.

Duckworth, Angela L., et al. (2007). "Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long-Term Goals." Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. 92(6). 1087–1101.

Hollick, Julian Crandall. (2007). Ganga: A Journey Down the Ganges River. Washington, DC: Island Press.

Nikiforuk, Andrew. (2010). Tar Sands: Dirty Oil and the Future of a Continent. Vancouver, BC: Greystone Books.

Schwenk, Theodor. (1996). Sensitive Chaos: The Creation of Flowing Forms in Water and Air. London: Rudolph Steiner.

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Selected Resources

Organizations

Biomimicry Institute

Buckminster Fuller Challenge

Indigenous Environmental Network

International Rivers

Nature Conservancy

Acknowledgements

Center for Ecoliteracy

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Selected Resources *Elemental* Themes Recording Sheet

	Connection to Place Connections to a particular place	Perseverance Steady efforts in the face of obstacles	Nature as Teacher Ways nature serves as a guide
Rajendra Singh			
Eriel Deranger			
Jay Harman			

ELEMENTAL

Share your experiences with us on how you used the discussion guide, as well as your thoughts and impressions.

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