

## **The Economic Naturalist Walk: A Proposal for Poster Presentation**

Scott R. Steele  
Associate Professor of Economics  
Berea College  
Berea, KY 40404  
[scott\\_steele@berea.edu](mailto:scott_steele@berea.edu)  
859-985-3652

Six years ago an ecologist relayed to me a classroom activity where students would attempt to determine where their water comes from. This activity turned into an effective ecological walk. I found this to be an interesting active learning exercise and have since developed something similar: *The Economic Naturalist Walk*, for use in Principles of Microeconomics.

On the day of the *Economic Naturalist Walk* I distribute an “Economic Naturalist Journal” and ask students to take a walk with me and use their “powers of observation” to see things that could potentially be explained using the economists primary tool—benefit-cost analysis. I have relayed this activity to a few colleagues who find it unique and potentially illuminating.

### **The Exercise:**

To describe this exercise I will highlight a few stages in the walk.

#### Stage 1: Physical Layout

In this stage I ask students to wander the halls of our classroom building and discuss items of interest with a partner. At this stage I attempt to get students to see the “obvious,” “trivial” or “silly.” For example, students may note the number of trash cans in the hall—could there have been more or less? Or, furthermore, they could have been placed in different locations. Throughout the semester we have discussed the question of finding the “optimal amount” of something and trash cans are simply a trivial example. Instead of trash cans students may note: windows, water fountains, restrooms, lights, fire alarms, and/or extinguishers. Each year students find different things and see the hall as a much more interesting place than one might first imagine.

#### Stage 2: The Workplace

In this stage I ask students to walk through and examine our campus’ Learning Center.” Students notice, among other things, free coffee, a basket of candy, and comfortable chairs. After allowing students to find such things we take a break outside to discuss what they have seen. I then allow the students to explain why the learning center has free coffee, free candy, and comfortable chairs. Many of the students are then able to explain that these items are used by the learning center staff to alter the incentives that individual students face. For example, the costs of entering the Learning Center are reduced when free coffee and candy and comfortable chairs are provided. On the margin, the existence of these items can change behavior.

### Stage 3: Public Safety

At this stage, I like to show students an electrical box posted with “Danger” signs. Asking students what they notice about the box, they usually notice the signs and the lock on the box. We then discuss whether all electric boxes have always had such protections and if the current protections are sufficient. Further discussion leads to a discussion of the marginal costs and marginal benefits of adding additional signs or another layer of protection such as a fence or guard dogs.

At this stage students are having a good time and starting to understand what I am trying to show them—“economics is everywhere.”

More stages continue and students are sent out on “a quest” to find whatever else they can and to record their thoughts. I pick up the journal the following day and provide time for in-class discussion.

#### **The Poster:**

In the poster I will highlight that students often find economics to be dry, boring and theoretical. This exercise is designed to address this problem by showing how economics can be fun and that economic is everywhere and, in particular, right in front of their eyes. Further, I will discuss the primary goal of this exercise—to help students see “economics as a way of thinking and observing.”

To allow easy adoption of this exercise, the poster will include: (1) a description of the exercise (enhanced with photos), (2) a description and layout of the “Economic Naturalist Journal,” and (3) examples of student responses to the exercise. A one-page handout will also include all essential information allowing for easy adoption of the exercise.