

I couldn't quite discern whether it was more appalled outrage or an outrageous sense of being appalled as I read a post from writer, Shankar Raman. All I could see as I quaked for breath was a list of words being removed from a dictionary – and the word “kingfisher” was on the list.

As [Robert Macfarlane](#) drilled on with his sharpened pen, I noted many other childhood friends were being culled from our herd of words.

“The same summer I was on Lewis, a new edition of the [Oxford Junior Dictionary](#) was published. A sharp-eyed reader noticed that there had been a culling of words concerning nature. Under pressure, Oxford University Press revealed a list of the entries it no longer felt to be relevant to a modern-day childhood. The deletions included *acorn, adder, ash, beech, bluebell, buttercup, catkin, conker, cowslip, cygnet, dandelion, fern, hazel, heather, heron, ivy, kingfisher, lark, mistletoe, nectar, newt, otter, pasture and willow*. The words taking their places in the new edition included *attachment, block-graph, blog, broadband, bullet-point, celebrity, chatroom, committee, cut-and-paste, MP3 player and voice-mail*.”

Acorn? Otter? Breathe, I had to breathe. Falling into my office chair, I did what I do – research. Surely this couldn't be. My stomach churned as my brain reminded me there were few more clear-headed and devoted to scientific accuracy than my friend, Shankar. Still, I reached for the balm of finding surely some reasonable explanation. I called Oxford University Press.

“Customerservice this is Linda may I help you?”

“Otter,” I gasped (a little more breathily than I had intended). “It says they've taken otter out of the dictionary.”

Instead of the immediate explanation and defense I had expected, Linda seemed a little confused and slightly concerned. I detected a keyboard rattling in the background.

“Oh, this is in our UK Junior Dictionary.”

I live in the U.S. so had called a U.S. number as I was directed, but felt no relief in Linda's reassuring voice. I didn't give a damn if it was the Tonga Gazette. Kingfisher and Otter should not be removed from a freaking dictionary.

Gentle reader, please forgive my foray into cursing and hyperventilation, but to read that list was the same as saying someone was actually capable of removing Dan and Roxanne and all my other childhood friends from the face of the earth. It was illogical, inconceivable . . . and conferred upon me a level of ill-temperedness that Linda clearly wasn't prepared for on a Monday morning.

“If you give me your e-mail, I'll be happy to find out why from the U.K.”

I mumbled my e-mail and thanks, but while Linda had been efficiently accessing an answer to the mystifying woman on the phone, I had continued my search.

In a January article, [The Guardian](#) had revealed,

“A spokesperson for Oxford University Press said: “All our dictionaries are designed to reflect language as it is used, rather than seeking to prescribe certain words or word usages. We employ extremely rigorous editorial guidelines in determining which words [can] be included in each dictionary, based on several criteria: acknowledging the current frequency of words in daily language of children of that age; corpus analysis; acknowledging commonly misspelled or misused words; and taking curriculum requirements into account.

‘The Oxford Junior Dictionary is very much an introduction to language. It includes around 400 words related to nature including badger, bird, caterpillar, daffodil, feather, hedgehog, invertebrate, ladybird, ocean, python, sunflower, tadpole, vegetation, and zebra. Many words that do not appear in the Oxford Junior Dictionary are included in the Oxford Primary Dictionary; a more comprehensive dictionary designed to see students through to age 11. Words included in this title include mistletoe, gerbil, acorn, goldfish, guinea pig, dandelion, starling, fern, willow, conifer, heather, buttercup, sycamore, holly, ivy, and conker.

‘We have no firm plans to publish a new edition of the Oxford Junior Dictionary at this stage. However, we welcome feedback on all our dictionaries and feed this into the editorial process.’”

I knew their aim was to mollify – or at least explain. It was not working. Oxford Junior Dictionary is one of a progressive set of reference materials aimed at second and third-graders. I thought of myself as Mrs. Canfield led us on second grade marches under a spreading white oak where the autumn ground crunched with . . . what? If my second grade self sought an answer for this question in a certain dictionary today – at least in the United Kingdom - I would find no answer.

How can it be that in a society where [nature deficit disorder](#) is recognized, we can still be stripped of a vocabulary to counteract it? Kingfishers live throughout England, most of Ireland and even north into Scotland. If frequency of use is a criteria for inclusion, who’s not pointing out these fey creatures? They speed along urban waterways as eagerly as rural creeks. And now, grown-up engineers and designers are specifically looking to this bird’s genius design to improve efficient models of [high-speed trains](#). And yet, the seven-year-olds of these engineers and designers, while using an age appropriate dictionary, will not be able to find the name of their mentor.

If our names for the natural subside in favour of today’s more popular technological terms, I grieve for us. I do not begrudge “blog” and “broadband” their place. But a lack of awareness of nature comes a certain lack of knowledge along with its attendants comprehension, analysis and synthesis. If young people cannot name the blue bird whizzing along the river bottom, how can they form an informed attachment? How can they pencil in their tattered tablet, *I peeked through the bluebells and saw the kingfisher tilt his head and swallow his dinner whole!*

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