



Lisa Phinney Langley performing  
in the Sable Ocean Dance Project.  
PHOTO: Kevin MacCormack/  
Mocean Dance

# Connecting the Dots:

## USING DANCE TO COMMUNICATE ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

by SARAH MOORE /// EAC Staff

It was an early summer morning, the blue-purple light before sunrise illuminating the mist drifting above a lake in Kejimikujik National Park. Lisa Phinney Langley was there working for Environment Canada, studying how mercury moved through the land, water and air.

As she rose to check her equipment, she heard loons calling to each other – and not just one pair, which is usually all you will see nesting on a small lake, but rather nine individuals. Their short, soft hoots and echoing wails resonated through the mist. “It was breathtakingly beautiful. I’d never seen so many loons together before,” says Phinney Langley, currently the artistic director of Phin Performing Arts. What she saw and heard was akin to a social scene for single loons. She says this remarkable experience not only piqued her interest in the social behaviours of loons, but then caused her to reflect on how mercury, which she had been studying, might affect them.

That reality is a far cry from the beautiful chorus she had heard across the lake. Among other effects, mercury causes blindness and makes the birds over-preen their feathers, reducing the survival rate of their offspring.

Inspired and concerned, Phinney Langley took what she learned and created two dance pieces: *Gavia* (2007), a solo performance, and *Analogy for Solid Bones* (2009), a piece with seven dancers that illustrated the plight of the loons through lyrical movement. ***A review for Analogy for Solid Bones*** by Sue Carter Finn in *The Coast* contains Phinney Langley’s all-time favourite quote: “Conservationists take note: If you want people to pay attention, partner with an artist.” This, Phinney Langley considered her highest praise. She says her audience “may never have read about mercury in the environment from a scientific paper but we brought it to the stage. It reaches a different audience ... on a level that engages their action, not just their brain.”

## Fundamental similarities

On the surface, “art” and “science” are distinct. One might even consider them incompatible disciplines that have little to offer each other. One is creative, emotional, expressive; the other analytical, precise, methodical. Phinney Langley, however, hasn’t seen it that way in a long time – not since she attended the Dance Arts Institute, then called the School of Toronto Dance Theatre. “I was so inspired and excited by ... what we were developing as improv artists; this sort of way of exploring and changing and following through with an idea and then changing the impulse and seeing where that leads,” she recalls.

At the same time, she was conducting environmental research, drawing on her undergraduate degree in physics. She was struck by the scientific process of exploring different trends and relationships often leading to interesting tangents. “The way [my supervisor] led me to explore the data was so similar to the way that we were exploring movement,” Phinney Langley says. That connection inspired her to later turn her master’s degree thesis in atmospheric physics, which was about phytoplankton and climate feedback cycles in the ocean, into a dance.

More recently, Phinney Langley is developing a workshop titled **Improvisation for Scientists and Researchers**, drawing on the similarities at the core of artistic and environmental pursuits. She says, “Artists are sensitive; we pay attention to those around us, the connections we see, the beauty around us. For those who care about the environment it’s the same thing – we care, we respect our environment, the people around us. I think in cultivating mindfulness and a culture of care, we cultivate both artistic expression and a respect for the environment.”

## Plastic pollution and education

That mindfulness and curiosity was exactly what the Sable Island Institute and Mocean Dance aimed to cultivate with the Sable Ocean Dance Project.

Ocean plastic pollution is ubiquitous and deadly. **Between 1 and 2 million tonnes** of plastic enter our oceans annually – a huge number that is, nonetheless, still only a small fraction, 0.5 per cent, of all plastic waste produced in a year. This debris escapes in our waterways, swirling through currents to make its way to the ocean, where it kills marine mammals, fish, turtles and seabirds.

On Sable Island, a crescent-shaped sliver 175 kilometres off the coast of Nova Scotia, **plastics have been found in the stomachs of seabirds**. Waves and wind carry debris ashore, scattering it among white sand dunes and tufts of green beach grass – and making movement a natural way to communicate the issue of ocean plastics to the public.

With the Sable Ocean Dance Project, performers utilized debris washed up on the shores of Sable Island and collected by Zoe Lucas, president of the Sable Island Institute. In May 2023, they held **engagement sessions in schools**, transforming a gym into

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a meandering pathway framed by all manner of fraying ropes, colourful bags and tattered nets. One performer, holding a buoy like a lantern, guided students through the scene as another started weaving a narrative: “Once upon a time in M’ikma’ki...” The layout of the debris and the animation of pieces conveyed the motion of winds and ocean currents distributing its deadly effects.

“It was very powerful,” says Phinney Langley, one of the creative collaborators for the project. “Just the sheer volume of plastics that were laid out, I think that made a big impression.”

## Understanding expands

Peer-reviewed scientific papers, dances or paintings are all forms of storytelling. How the ideas are received, and who is there to listen, might differ. “Not everyone reads scientific papers, and those who do are generally already well-informed about the issue they are reading,” says Phinney Langley. “Bringing the issues to the stage or studio or gallery reaches a new, perhaps broader audience ... not through facts and graphs but through an experience they can connect with, something that resonates, brings up memories, connections and ideas for them.”

Rather than engaging the analytical part of the brain, “art can get at the heart, make broad connections, and illustrate an issue from an emotional perspective,” she says. “Suddenly your understanding of the work expands that much more.” Indeed, events that elicit an emotional response **are remembered more clearly, accurately and for longer periods of time than those lacking an emotional reaction**.

“We can appreciate facts, but I think they resonate better when paired with emotion or spirituality or memory,” says Phinney Langley. “Perhaps that leads us toward care, and towards action.”

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