

Tales of the Forest

Contemplating the lace-like fabric of streams outspread over the mountains, we are reminded that everything is flowing—going somewhere, animals and so-called lifeless rocks as well as water. Thus the snow flows fast or slow in grand beauty-making glaciers and avalanches; the air in majestic floods carrying minerals, plant leaves, seeds, spores, with streams of music and fragrance; water streams carrying rocks both in solution and in the form of mud particles, sand, pebbles and boulders. Rocks flow from volcanoes like water from springs, and animals flock together and flow in currents modified by stepping, leaping, gliding, flying, swimming, etc. While the stars go streaming through space pulsed on and on forever like blood globules in Nature's warm heart.

—John Muir

My First Summer in the Sierra, 1911



To put it in a sentence, there were three separate Government organizations which dealt with mineral resources, four or five concerned with streams, half a dozen with authority over forests, and a dozen or so with supervision over wild life, soils, soil erosion, and other questions of the land.... Suddenly it flashed through my head that there was a unity in this complication—that the relation of one resource to another was not the end of the story.... When the use of all the natural resources for the general good is seen to be a common policy with a common purpose, the chance for the wise use of each of them becomes infinitely greater than it ever had before ... conservation of natural resources is the key to the future ... the key to the safety and prosperity of the American people, and all the people of the world, for all time to come.

—Gifford Pinchot

Breaking New Ground, 1947



Bur oak is the only tree that can stand up to a prairie fire and live. Have you ever wondered why a thick crust of corky bark covers the whole tree, even to the smallest twigs? This cork is armor. Bur oaks were the shock troops sent by the invading forest to storm the prairie; fire is what they had to fight. Each April, before the new grasses had covered the prairie with unburnable greenery, fires ran at will over the land, sparing only such old oaks as had grown bark too thick to scorch.... Engineers did not discover insulation; they copied it from these old soldiers of the prairie war.

—Aldo Leopold

A Sand County Almanac, 1949



And then there is the world of little things, seen all too seldom. Many children, perhaps because they themselves are small and closer to the ground than we, notice and delight in the small and inconspicuous. With this beginning, it is easy to share with them the beauties we usually miss because we look too hastily, seeing the whole and not its parts. Some of nature's most exquisite handiwork is on a miniature scale, as anyone knows who has applied a magnifying glass to a snowflake.... A lens-aided view into a patch of moss reveals a dense tropical jungle, in which insects large as tigers prowl amid strangely formed, luxuriant trees. A bit of pond weed or seaweed put in a glass container and studied under a lens is found to be populated by hordes of strange beings, whose activities can entertain you for hours. Flowers (especially the composites), the early buds of leaf or flower from any tree, or any small creature reveal unexpected beauty and complexity when, aided by a lens, we can escape the limitations of the human size scale.

—Rachel Carson

The Sense of Wonder, 1956

Tales of the Forest (cont.)

For a long time God didn't worry about the forests. Some trees got cut, which was bad enough, of course, and he would be sick about the cutting awhile, but his children needed houses and warmth, so he stepped in right after they had gone and got some seeds in the ground. The clear-cutting had come so fast he'd been unprepared. One minute the loggers were axmen, with their crosscut saws and oxen and rafts, and when he looked again, they were in helicopters. When people started to replant, it was a good thing, but there was no way to re-create a forest. Not quickly. And the trees would just be cut again. Before God knew it, his trees were being planted in rows, like corn, and harvested like corn. That was 1940, when the tree farming started, but it seems like yesterday to God. Not longleaf. It was quirky in habit, its taproot cumbersome to deal with and slow-growing, so most of the tree farmers abandoned it. They could plant slash or loblolly and in 25 years be able to cut again.

—Janisse Ray

Ecology of a Cracker Childhood, 1999



After the women had planted seedlings on their own farms, I suggested that they go to surrounding areas and convince others to plant trees. This was a breakthrough, because it was now communities empowering one another for their own needs and benefit. In this way, step by step, the process replicated itself several thousand times. As women and communities increased their efforts, we encouraged them to plant seedlings in rows of at least a thousand trees to form green "belts" that would restore to the earth its cloth of green. This is how the name Green Belt Movement began to be used... Education, if it means anything, should not take people away from the land but instill in them even more respect for it, because educated people are in a position to understand what is being lost. The future of the planet concerns all of us, and all of us should do what we can to protect it. As I told the foresters, and the women, you don't need a diploma to plant a tree.

—Wangari Maathai

Unbowed, 2006



They had been sleepwalking their way towards extinction, not knowing what internal colonialism had done and was doing to them. It had fallen to me to wake them up from the sleep of the century and I had accepted in full the responsibility for doing so.... To die fighting to right the wrong would be the greatest gift of life! Yes, the gift of life.

—Ken Saro-Wiwa

A Month and a Day, 1995



What these explorers, and their predecessors, had learned from experience was invaluable: human strength lies not in resistance but in giving in. If we are to survive in Antarctica, we must give in to nature, not fight it. It is obvious that the forces of nature are much stronger than a solitary man (or even six men). Man is not intended to live, or survive, in these conditions. But over the years we have survived, due to our sole advantage over the wilderness, our ability to learn from and adapt to whatever it has in store. The strength this team has is its willingness to take whatever nature hands out. There is a spiritual factor to our success too. Though we have seen bleak times, we must keep our spirits strong and our hope alive.

—Will Steger (and Jon Bowermaster)

Crossing Antarctica, 1992



Nature's economy is the first economy, the primary economy on which all other economies rest. Nature's economy consists of the production of goods and services by nature—the water recycled and distributed through the hydrologic cycle, the soil fertility produced by microorganisms, the plants fertilized by pollinators. Human production, human creativity shrinks to insignificance in comparison with nature.

—Vandana Shiva

Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace, 2005