

On what nature can teach us about creativity



Writer and forester Peter Wohlleben (*The Hidden Life of Trees*) discusses keeping science accessible, why nature can't be ranked, and what we can learn from trees.

November 18, 2021 -

As told to Miriam Garcia, 2042 words.

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The universe of nature is infinite. When and how did you know that you had enough information to write your books about trees, forests, and animals?

I will never have enough information. There's so much to discover. But I've been giving guided tours in the forest for around about 30 years, and people were always asking where they could read more about this and that there was no book like that so my wife begged, "Please, Peter, write this book." I resisted for some years, but then I wrote the books.

You've mentioned before that the scientific work that was written about nature had a language and style that was not accessible or interesting for most readers. When you started writing your series of books, were you thinking about the tone you wanted to give to them or for the reader? What was the main intention that you wanted to give in your writing?

I think the main intention was to have a written guided tour for the people. That's reflected in the chapters' length: it's like a little rest in the forest, I narrate what's going on at this spot, and then we move a little bit forward and we have the next stop. That's why the book has many short chapters. But it was not my intention to say, "Oh, I'm going to construct this book like this." I wrote the book and said to my wife, "Okay, I sent it to several publishers and if no one wants to have it, I'm not able to write" and that's it.

I wonder how your experience of being a guide helped you transition to being a writer. You have to keep people entertained by being a good storyteller, right?

Yes, and you can train this. My first guided tour was 30 years ago and was a disaster. I don't remember them very well but I think so, and when you feel a little bit of empathy, then you say "Okay, this is what wasn't good there." For example, I don't use technical terms because they are boring and technical terms are good for what, to have a typical language which can be just understood in certain circles of scientists and then you have a better feeling, but of course, you don't need them in many cases to have a better understanding from the topic. So, I tried not to use any technical terms.

Your book *The Hidden Life of Trees* was published a few years ago. Is there anything that you would like to add or change?

Yeah, of course. Perhaps not change but add, and that's the reason why the latest book is called *The Long Breath*

of Trees. It means that trees are tough and they are learning to deal with climate change. Even 1000-year-old oaks are able to learn and they give this knowledge to their siblings. The ecosystem is learning. Trees are learning and they are able to create their own climate as long as we don't disturb them with a chainsaw.

I have the impression that *The Hidden Life of Trees* is one of the first books that positions nature, trees, and wildlife as beings that are connected with us and a part of a whole ecosystem. It also names and places them as subjects rather than objects. There's the idea that renaming and relabeling completely changes our relationship to them and how we treat them. It has political implications as well. What were your thoughts when you were discovering and writing about this?

My thoughts are, in general, that all living beings are more than just raw material or bio-robots. Nowadays we say, "Ah, they are driven by a genetical code, like a computer," but the reality is that they are intelligent. They feel, they suffer, they share, they support, they are living beings like we are. Of course, trees are not able to write books or make documentaries, but they make different things. For example, they're able to create the local climate, which we are not able to do.

What would you say that are some of the main implications of naming trees as subjects rather than objects?

I think it's very important because if we don't do it we are not able to protect nature, and we are not able to discover all its wonders. Our knowledge from nature is not so scientifically influenced as we think. For example, we think of nature in a ranking. We think humans rank highest, and then we have higher animals, lower animals, higher plants, lower plants. That's exactly how we deal with them, but there's no scientific reason to have this ranking.

It's okay to sort nature into categories, but to make a ranking has nothing to do with science. Such ranking makes it harder to understand nature because most people think that plants are not very much more than green stones, and when it comes, for example, to the protection of whales, the oceans, why are most people against whale hunting? It's because whales are so sympathetic and we're so emotionally close to us, we understand them, and we love whales. Whales are giants, friendly giants, and that's exactly what trees are. Trees also have families and share information, but they are too slow to detect this in everyday life. It changes very, very slowly. I think the biggest problem is that we are living at different speeds.

Where does this idea or conception of ranking nature come from?

I think it comes from religion and the worst case came with The Age of Enlightenment where animals and everything was seen as machines that served us. That was how scientists in The Age of Enlightenment looked at nature, and that's exactly how we look at nature today. We say, for example, that every animal and plant has a function. No, there is no function. For example, if we say a tree produces oxygen for several people each day, a tree would say "I'm doing what? For who? No, I'm breathing out. That's it, and not for producing gas for anyone."

Many people say "Ah, this animal is good because it controls that, and this one is good because it produces that." We look at nature as if every species and every single living creature is a servant to us, which is not true. That comes from The Age of Enlightenment. I think we have to have a new look at nature and we can do that with books. I think we lose so many things if we look at nature like being just bio-robots, just servants.

Nature is wonderful. It's full of feeling creatures, living in families, having a happy or sad life. And it's fun and it's interesting and exciting to be part of nature. We are not alone on this planet. If nature would be like this, like machines, we would be very, very alone on this planet. That's not a very good feeling.

I think that is because of books like yours are we are starting to reshape these narratives.

I'm starting to think that we are changing this narrative of how we're all connected and that moving one thing really impacts the whole. That's exactly what hits the heart of the people—not the brain, but the heart. In the past, many people who made documentaries, for example, wanted to hit the brain. They wanted to educate. But we

want to have entertainment because nature is exciting and funny. So why couldn't nature entertain us?

We don't keep in mind how photosynthesis works. It's boring. But when you know, for example, that some plants are able to discover family members optically then you say "Wow, what are plants able to do?" Or as I said those 1000-year-old Oaks are now more resilient against a drier hotter climate. So trees are learning, trees are changing, and that is the wow effect. And this form of education is most suitable, it's more accessible, and that makes a connection because when you then walk out in the forest, then you become aware that there are living creatures there.

The writer Terry Tempest Williams, who is from Utah, writes about nature and our relationship to it. In a podcast interview, she mentioned that, if we don't know who we live among, then when they vanish, there's no one to mourn that loss. That statement really hit me because all these species that are vanishing will not be remembered. And I started thinking that if we don't know that certain species even exist or if we do not know their names how are we going to protect them? As readers, and maybe as citizens, what can we do? One thing is to read for pleasure, that other I think it comes from reading as a responsibility. Is that something that you would agree with?

Yeah. But if you see it as a duty, I think no one will do it. For example, if you regard trees as something like plant elephants, then you would love them and you would say "I don't want them to be cut down to make paper out of them, or furniture." And that means that we should first know more about the trees and forests in general, that we should go out as much as possible because when you experience a forest, when you understand what trees are able to do and what they feel, what their needs are, then you're also aware that they need more protection. Then you can take some action in your everyday life.

Do you think that we are more reluctant to take action when we see them as duties?

Most people don't like to be told what to do, but when it is your idea to protect someone or something, then it feels very good. And that's exactly why I love that when you understand that protecting trees is a benefit for yourself, then you're more likely to take action. For example, if you have a garden, you sit on a hot summer day under an umbrella. Then compare it with sitting under an old tree, and you'll realize that the old tree is cooler. So you see that a single tree in your garden changes the local climate a little bit, and then two trees change it a little bit more, and so a forest will change it a lot more, and so on. Every step counts and it's worth starting with every single little step.

Learning more about nature comes with the risk of knowing about all the damage and loss, and it's a mixed situation of finding all this love for nature and living beings, but also getting hurt, angry, and sad, and also maybe feeling useless and powerless. How can we phrase that invitation to just go over these risks and be open to what we might encounter?

I think it's a mixture. That's what I hate about some stories for the younger generations, because the future seems to be hopeless. Many young people say, "Ah, we have those tipping points and then it's all over." That is nonsense. When we go over those tipping points, it's harder to reduce, reuse, have a change; but it's always possible, so it's not true that the future is hopeless. When I was young and finished school in 1983, I thought that I was not going to live to be older than 40 because at that time it was said that if we continued using coal and oil, the planet would be dead by the year 2000. There is a future, but the future will become harder. That's it. It's bad enough and we will lose some species on the way, and that's also very sad-but there is hope. So I think it should be a good mix: you have to show the problems, but you have also to show the solutions.

Peter Wohlleben recommends:

book: *Lord of the Rings*

hobby: being in the forest

movie: *Avatar*

food: noodles with tomato sauce (homemade)

Name

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Vocation

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