

Where trees talk: A writer's journey to Sydney Inlet

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“Let’s just say I wouldn’t be cooking any bacon,” Laura says, in answer to my plea for advice. Laura Loucks is the Research Coordinator of the Clayoquot Biosphere Trust and when the idea of me serving as a writer in residence in the Sydney Inlet research cabin in the Clayoquot Sound UNESCO Biosphere Reserve first came up “Yes!” was the only thing on my mind. I had been yearning for wilderness; hungry for a sense of timelessness in the midst of nature. But as the date drew nearer, it was the details I needed help with. “How much water should I bring?” “Who could pick up my kids from camp if the water taxi scheduled to collect me failed to show up?” “Did I need to bring bear spray?” It was that final question that triggered the bacon comment. Funny how it seems to be animals, and more specifically *big* animals, that come to mind when the dream of spending time “away” in the forest transforms into the place you are going a week from Thursday.

And then Thursday arrives and I am splayed on a slippery tumble of algae covered beach rocks trying to haul in the aluminum skiff that has ferried my husband Andy and me two hours from Tofino. Annie, the skipper of the water taxi, leans over the bow and effortlessly passes me two 40 lb water jugs. They land with a *thunk* by my feet. A giant cooler, sleeping bags, library books, more water and a double kayak fly one-by-one from her strong arms. “One of our staff will pick you up in a week,” she calls as she reverses the motor and pulls away. “I have to take my daughter to a birthday party.”

Andy and I glance at the pile of belongings and up toward a pathway of log cut steps. Even here at the landing site, it is difficult to see the cabin. It sits high above the winter storm tide line behind a screen of tall cedars; its plywood frame disappearing into the thick forest that surrounds it. We bend down to pick up the heaviest loads first but I can not contain my excitement. I twirl around to take in the view. Thick, impenetrable forest blankets the steep slopes of this coastal fjord, draping everything from the tops of the

hills to the waters edge in myriad colours of green. We are alone in a pristine temperate rainforest.

It is only after we enter the cabin, and begin making ourselves at home that I realize the word “bedding” on the packing list meant more than a sleeping bag. Yet it is not the bruises on my hips from sleeping on a sheet of plywood for which I am unprepared. It is the stillness. If stillness was a cocoa bean, Sydney Inlet would be a Death-by-Chocolate feast.

Two sleeps pass before my ears stop ringing. Two sleeps before the car alarms and text alerts and other noisy reminders of everyday life I brought along with me in my head subside. I discover by surprise one afternoon that I am no longer straining to hear the snap of a bear’s footfall as I make my way to the outdoor privy. The swoosh of the incoming tide reminds me to move the kayak to higher ground. The call of an eagle, a tiny speck far off in the estuary, funnels flute-like down this long, narrow fjord.

Sydney Inlet is a listening-lovers paradise. Without clocks to determine our days, Andy and I fall into a blissful existence of reading, writing and exploring by kayak. We paddle to the mouth of the Sydney river and watch our own footprints merge with the bear, otter and bird tracks that crisscross the estuary. We crane our necks to wish on falling stars during the height of the Perseid meteor shower. We thrill to the barely audible “pfff” of a harbor porpoise rising to exhale as she nurses her calf on a late summer evening.

As the days pass, the stillness of Sydney Inlet gives way to a form of listening that extends beyond my ears. It feels all encompassing, like a sense of contentment. When I nestle into a sunlit patch of moss at the knee of a cedar I do not feel like a woman sitting beneath a tree. For who could even fathom where a single tree starts and ends in this tangled, flourishing explosion of huckleberry and ferns and searching roots and fallen trunks? I am enveloped, entwined, made somehow more whole by the complexity and beauty of these green lives.

Aristotle, I find myself thinking, must surely have got it wrong. If only he could have experienced a coastal rainforest he might never have portrayed plants as passive, inactive beings with no purpose of their own. What would he make of the sensation of being dwarfed by the quiet force of towering, thousand year old, living beings?

My friend Enid Elliot is one of the founders of the Nature Kindergarten movement in Canada. Not so long ago she told me about a girl who as a young child was able to talk to trees. As the girl grew older she realized that this was something she couldn't tell most people. "I wonder if we have lost ways of knowing we might once have had when we were children," Enid said.

I wish I could introduce that girl to Suzanne Simard. "Trees talk," she told me when we met by skype a few years ago. Suzanne is a tenured professor in the Department of Forest and Conservation Sciences at the University of British Columbia. She described how trees converse in the language of nitrogen, carbon, phosphorous and water, and through defense signals and hormones. "A forest is much more than what you see," she explained. "Underground there is a world of infinite biological pathways that connect trees and allow them to communicate. Through back and forth conversations they increase the resilience of the whole community."

Trees, according to Suzanne, are active agents of their lives, purposefully sharing resources between not only their own species but with other species of trees and plants. It's easy to embrace this characterization in Sydney Inlet, in the midst of this vibrant, intact, forest. I find myself starring whole paragraphs in the books I brought with me to read, *Brilliant Green: The Surprising History and Science of Plant Intelligence*; and, *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*. Plants, according to the scientific evidence that spills across their pages, are not passive beings – mute, insensitive, inactive. They communicate. They act with purpose. They are intelligent. As Stefano Mancuso, director of the International Laboratory of Plant Neurobiology in Florence, and the co-author of *Brilliant Green* puts it: "Intelligence is the ability to solve problems and plants are amazingly good at solving their problems."

I close my eyes and will myself to hear this “tree talk.” I wonder if it might be perceived not as some form of audible sound, but in the feeling of stillness that pervades the forest. Is it possible to listen for things that can’t be heard? I am reminded of a conversation I had with Christopher Clark, director of the Bioacoustics Research Program at Cornell University, about the capacity of blue whales to listen. Blue whales travel the world in search of super dense assemblages of krill. But they don’t just wander. They work a patch and then take off at fast speeds straight toward another that might be 20 miles away. But Chris doesn’t think they are listening for the sounds the krill make. He thinks they may be listening for *the ocean processes*, such as ocean storms and upwelling events, that result in insanely thick congregations of krill.

Listening has long been a method used by scientists to better understand the hidden underwater world. In July 2015, the Clayoquot Biosphere Trust launched the *Sydney Inlet Soundscape project* as a means to inventory the sounds of not only the marine animals of Sydney Inlet, but the terrestrial species as well. They developed a baseline reference of species diversity by recording monthly sound samples, each spanning a 24 hour time period.

In the first two months of recording, they identified the timing of the daily summer nesting patterns of marbled murrelet and the dawn and dusk choruses of shore and song birds. Changes in climate are predicted to impact the seasonal timing of bird migrations and salmon spawning and thus, influence multiple predator-prey relationships. The Soundscape Project will allow researchers to identify and track changes in the diversity of species through alterations in their sound patterns over time, alerting them particularly to potential impacts on species of concern such as the great blue heron, the Western screech-owl and the marbled murrelet.

The day Andy and I return from Sydney Inlet, we stop by the Clayoquot Biosphere Trust offices to thank Laura. She has just finished teaching an intensive field course based in Ucluelet for graduate students in the Master of Arts in Environmental Education and

Communication Program at Royal Roads University. She tells us how she invited whale researcher Jim Darling, who is leading the Soundscape project, to share samples of the edited recordings, and how she felt, as an instructor, a little uncomfortable with the long silences that existed between the wild rattling call of belted kingfishers or the deep throaty kraa calls of ravens. Still awe-struck from our experiences among the Sitka spruce, Western red-cedars, Western Hemlock and Douglas fir, I unintentionally correct her. “Those are not silences,” I say. “Those are the voices of the trees.”