



Reading the Forested Landscape: A Natural History of New England

Tom Wessels, Brian D. Cohen (Illustrator), Ann H. Zwinger (Foreword by)

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An intrepid sleuth and articulate tutor, Wessels teaches us to read a landscape the way we might solve a mystery. What exactly is the meaning of all those stone walls in the middle of the forest? Why do beech and birch trees have smooth bark when the bark of all other northern species is rough? How do you tell the age of a beaver pond and determine if beavers still live there? Why are pine trees dominant in one patch of forest and maples in another? What happened to the American chestnut? Turn to this book for the answers, and no walk in the woods will ever be the same.

Reading the Forested Landscape: A Natural History of New England Details

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From Reader Review Reading the Forested Landscape: A Natural History of New England for online ebook

Kayla says

This is a must-read for anyone who spends time in the forest. The book teaches you how to be a forest sleuth and ascertain the history....logging, glacial, blight, etc of a particular stand of trees. The author writes in a style that is engaging and informative. In the end, you realize that you want to morally sign up to be a warden of New England's greatest resources:

"I am not just a tourist passing through, but a part of the landscape--a partner in its dialogue. Through this relationship I continue to gain respect and reverence for the land, its history, its changes, and its well-being."

Amazing book!

billyskye says

I've read some great books over the years. Books that have entertained me. Books that have informed me. Books that have moved me. Some to high orders of magnitude. Yet, elusive has been the experience of which I can claim – entirely absent of effusive smarm – to have witnessed, almost in real-time, a distinct reorganization of the foundational manner in which I approach a subject. That rare piece of writing which adds some semblance of grounding to all those exhausted phrases: “mind bending,” “life changing,” etc. James Ferguson’s work always comes to mind in this regard. Maybe Richard Wright’s *Native Son* too.

For anyone who has spent any amount of time in or around woodlands, *Reading the Forested Landscape* is sure to induce a similar sense of awe. Through incredibly accessible and economized text, Tom Wessels manages to transform the natural biome of New England from a piecemeal collection of largely overlooked organisms and structures into a breathtaking tapestry full of motion and history. Each chapter begins with the etching of a particular “scene” and then does marvelous work in giving the reader the adequate mindset, tools, and context needed to begin learning how to interact with the land and sleuth through the subtle patterns engraved in the natural world to uncover the mysteries of the forest.

Mr. Wessels’ says the ultimate goal of his project is to leave the reader with “reverence, respect, a sense of inclusion, and accountability” regarding the landscape of the areas they call home. I think you’d be hard pressed to find anyone who came away from this book not feeling just so.

Five stars.

Thomas says

I am so excited about this book.

First of all, it directly applies to where I live- on the Maine coast, at the northern extreme of the map at the front of the book. As I sit at my dinner table, I view 180 degrees of such a forested landscape.

The book is ingenious.

It introduces the idea of forest "disturbance histories", such as fires, logging, diseases, and the climatic changes in this area for the past several thousand years. Each of the 7 chapters focuses on a single type of disturbance history. The first page of each chapter is a black and white hand drawn illustration by artist Brian Cohen that depicts the specific type of disturbance (e.g., beaver activity). The author then selects specific visual features from the picture and then frames them as successive clues that assist the reader in identifying the history of the landscape.

The "Abandonment" chapter lays out the natural history of the beaver against the backdrop of European discover in the early 1600's in masterful form, in just 12 pages. It made me want to walk to a nearby beaver dam to verify the clues that would date the age of that mammal habitat.

I can't wait to go out for a walk today and play "forest Columbo", and deepen my understanding of these forests that are a part of me. I already bought my own copy, and I haven't purchased any books in months.

Shannon says

What a great inspiration to go take a deeper look at our forests!

Carol says

This was a fascinating book, lent to me by my friend Fred (thanks Fred!). As I read it I kept thinking "now where was this book when I was in my ecology classes in college?" We often take the countryside and forest flora for granted when we walk through them. Not in the sense that we don't appreciate them, but we don't stop to ask ourselves "why these *particular* plants *here*?" That's the question I've asked myself since taking Bill Niering's classes all those years ago. Reading Wessels' book has provided me with a refresher course, as well as giving me several new tips and tricks. I knew about such things as "cradles and pillows" (depressions and mounds on the forest floor indicating past tree blowdowns, the depressions being created as the root mass is pulled from the ground, and the mounds formed later as all that organic matter decays), and "wolf trees" (large openly branched trees next to stone walls, which once served as shade trees to browsing livestock in adjacent pastureland). New to me was information about how to read basal tree scars - evidence of fire when on the uphill side of a slope (the side on which leaf litter collects, thus providing fuel for a hotter fire), and evidence of logging when found on facing tree trunks (log skidders scarring the trees as they pass by).

The format of the book is unique, and extremely well-suited to its purpose. Wessels begins each cryptically named chapter with an etching of a forest scene (by Brian Cohen), some of which portray actual sites, some of which are idealized. He then leads the reader through the process of sussing out what factors are most likely responsible for *these* trees and shrubs in *this* location. Finally, he rounds out the chapter with a historical discussion of the particular disturbance factor (fire, wind storms, human interaction, etc.) under discussion.

Wessels has since written an associated field guide (*Forest Forensics*), complete with dichotomous key, even! (Those of a certain age may remember "Choose Your Own Adventure" books - if you want "x" to

happen, turn to page 22; if you want "Z" to happen, turn to page 47. At the end of that page you are presented with another choice - etc., etc. That's how a dichotomous key works). This way, the next time you're walking in the woods, you can whip out your field guide and try to figure out on your own the history of the forest you're walking through. I've already ordered myself a copy!

Note: Even though Wessels has written the book specifically for central New England and the species that typically grow there, much of the information is pertinent for southern and northern New England as well - though of course I *would* love it if there were a similar volume for CT and RI!

Carl Williams says

This is a wonderful book; it contains much of the information that your grandfather would tell you if you were out tromping in the woods with him. Each chapter begins with an illustration of a typical scene in the woods in this part of the world and then dissects it, explaining what happened or might have happened to make it so. Its language is a bit abstract for the ninth graders I look at it with, but it brims with content. Good stuff.

Peter McLoughlin says

This is a nice addition which gives me more grounding on the landscapes I work and inhabit. New England woods are really the only woods I have any experience with. Any book which helps me to understand them better is welcome. This one has some beautiful illustrations to accompany the text and it provides a good supplement to knowledge about the environs I often find myself in. Pretty good book. Wish it was longer.

James says

This is one of several books that I have sometimes assigned in my class on land protection, along with the more management-oriented Thoreau's Country by David Foster.

Elegant drawings and clear prose guide Wessels' reader to understand the sticks, stones, soils, and streams encountered during any hike in New England woods. When I first read the book, in fact, I recognized many of the lessons from walks in the Vermont woods that I had taken with a National Park Service ranger who had studied with Wessels.

Despite the loss of forest to suburban sprawl in some parts of New England, the region overall has several times more forest than it did in the 19th Century. Throughout New England, we find forests that look at first like remnants that somehow avoided being used by humans. Wessels describes how to interpret clues to a much more complex history of human interaction with the land.

Karima says

I don't live in New England and, being an urban dweller and disinclined to take long car rides to get to a forest, spend little time in the woods. However, reading this book has significantly altered how I perceive/interact with the world around me.

So much history is available to us in trees, vegetation and the land itself. This book guides us through/into it. It is generous with very well-executed, simple etchings accompanied by clear explanations of what is depicted.

If one were to give this book a theme, it would be "Connectedness". Connecting pieces and patterns, giving us a broader and deeper understanding of our earth, its history, and perhaps, its future.

Peter Henne says

This is an excellent book for anyone interested in learning more about the world around them. The author presents a wealth of knowledge on New England forests, but in an interesting format. He discusses a variety of ways that forests were disrupted by human or natural occurrences, provides tips on how to identify this disruption (and thus the background of a forest), and presents the relevant history of the region. It will make you appreciate the complex history of the woods you walk through.

Jerrid Kruse says

The author makes the inconspicuous into full-fledged scientific investigations. With connections to all aspects of environmental science and the history of the US (including accurate portrayals of colonialism and native peoples), this book will change the way you look at forests.

Connie says

Ecologist Tom Wessels is a master sleuth who investigates the changes in the forests of New England. Fires, logging, pasturing, beavers, insects, fungus, weather, topography and substrate all leave a stamp on the forest picture. Etchings by Brian D. Cohen illustrate the forest scenes discussed. Most chapters also have "a look back" section where interesting facts about glaciers, Native Americans, colonial history, historic hurricanes, and more are featured. The last chapter tells of Wessels' concerns about the effects of global warming, and atmospheric deposition of acids, heavy metals, ozone, and pesticides. This fascinating book will help me look at the forest with new eyes. Highly recommended!

Geoff says

A very clear well written book that provides the tools to understand the structure of a present day landscape. While specific to central New England, these tools can be used to see the landscape anywhere and learn to

understand what causes things to happen. Really remarkable and thoughtful.

Alan Mills says

This Spring, we spent a week in the Great Smoky Mountain National Park. As we hiked the ought he woods, I had repeated questions about the ecology: how long does it take for a fallen tree to decompose? We're trees with elevated roots avoiding wet soil, or did their up used to be something under them? Why were so many trees down is a particular area?

This book seeks to answer these sorts of questions. It uses a series of etchings of forests to lead the reader though the various disruptions that shape forests: man is responsible for two: logging, and clearance for pastures; beavers ALS dramatically impact their environment, both by creating lakes, and by cutting down good tasting trees to build their dams. In addition, fire, insects/fungus, and wind storms have all had huge impacts.

The book focuses on the central New England forests...but many of the concepts apply to US forests more generally. What I found particularly fascinating is how limited our perspective is. We think of "virgin forests," but there really is nothing of the sort. Of the last 100,000 years, much of the time much of the northern US was covered by huge glaciers. Until 12,000 years ago, virtually all of New England (and all of Illinois) were covered in thousands of feet of ice. It wasn't until about 5,000 years ago that trees began to repopulate the area....and there is evidence that starting then, indigenous people began to actively manage the forests, largely through controlled burns. It wasn't until 3,000 years ago that the mix of trees we see today had populated the region. Then in the 1700's, the British started cutting large straight pines, for ship masts, and by the early 1800's, huge numbers of sheep had been introduced (which is why most of the stone walls you see remnants of today were built). The sheep were give by the late 1800's, and trees began to recolonize the pastures. Then in the early 1900's, hemlock and then, a little later, elm became decimated by disease.

In sum, the idea that there is some static state in which the nation's forests could be termed "virgin" is mythical.

Fascinating read for anyone who wants to look more deeply into the forests they are walking through.

Curt says

Curious about the minutiae of local patch of woods? This book is for you. Part Sherlock Holmes, part Bill McKibben, part Center for Land Use Interpretation. Learn how much of New England's rural landscape was shaped by thirty years of "sheep fever" from 1810-1840.
