The Trees Talking

Feel a sense of wonder and awe for the humble tree

Trees have been a source of inspiration for centuries, evoking a primal sense of wonder. They are the storytellers of the seasons, woven into the backdrops of our lives but it's easy to overlook their significance. Artist, Emily Quilton, has been working on a project called, *The Trees Talking* based in the New Forest, with grant support from Campaign for National Parks and the National Lottery Heritage Fund. Did you know? Forests cover just 13.3% of the UK's total land area - in England that figure drops to 10%. It's no secret that we have one of the lowest tree coverage percentages in Europe. Since the Middle Ages, England has lost over 90% of its ancient woodland. The complex biodiversity in ancient woodland is irreplaceable, which is why protecting areas like the New Forest is vital.

Located in Hampshire, the New Forest was established over 1,000 years ago when William the Conqueror named it Nova Foresta in 1079. This patchwork of forests covers an astonishing 219 square miles and became a National Park in 2005. Home to the oldest tree in England, the Knightwood Oak, thought to have been planted in 1600, the New Forest is believed to have the highest concentration of ancient trees in Western Europe- making it a truly special place. With famous texts like Alice in Wonderland being inspired by its charm, there are countless stories of witches, ghosts and fairies lurking within the undergrowth. Whilst it sounds like folklore, the trees are talking, and we are only beginning to understand their language. Science is uncovering the complex lives of trees and how they communicate with one another.

Whilst the scientific understanding of tree communication is still evolving, the evidence points to a dynamic system of underground fungal networks, dubbed the 'wood wide web' by forest ecologist Dr. Suzanne Simard. There are infinite biological networks under the ground that connect trees to one another, making the roots and soils the foundations of the forest. Mycorrhizal fungi latch onto the end of roots and take sugars from the tree.

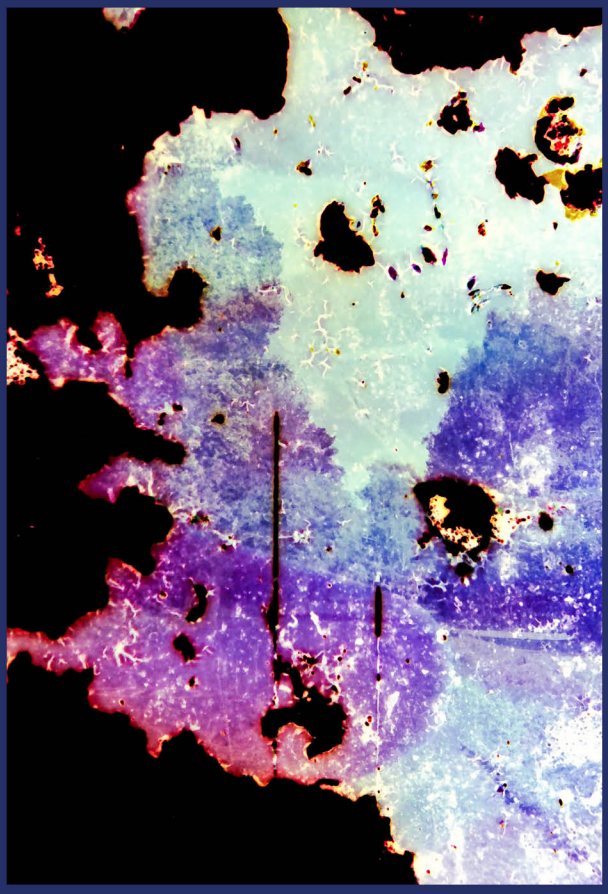
It's this fungi that facilitates the sharing of nutrients, wisdom and water between trees. Through these connections trees can send warning signals to one another about things like pests, drought or disease. Research from Dr Simard found that there is a 'mother tree' within the network; the oldest tree that has the most communication with the trees around. She found that trees are species specific to who they communicate with, prioritizing their own offspring - yes, they can tell which saplings are one of their own. This symbiotic relationship between fungi and tree really puts into perspective how interconnected all these species are. It almost reflects humanity, thriving in the care and company of others — supporting, nourishing, and growing alongside one another.

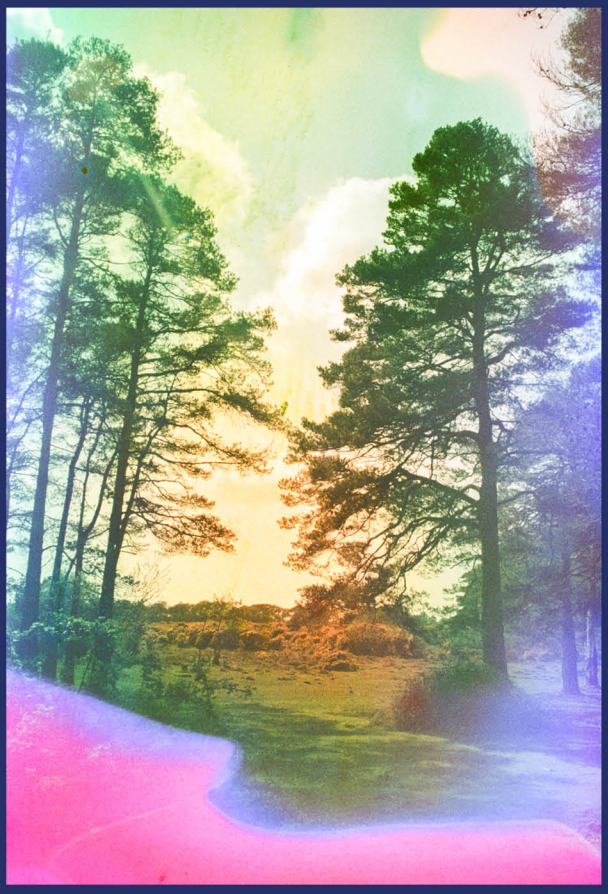
'The clearest way into the universe is through a forest wilderness' -John Muir

In today's fast-paced, modern world, many people experience eco-anxiety; a sense of helplessness about the future of the planet. Yet there is a sense of irony, as immersing ourselves in a

forest reduces stress, lowers blood pressure and improves our mood. By connecting to something larger than ourselves, we become small, offering a sense of perspective and grounding. This highlights how important these areas are and why we need to protect them because it might just be the answer in reducing eco-anxiety.

Quilton's photography project focuses on this line of exploration, collaborating with nature to create a unique way to see the New Forest, where photography and subject meet. The creation of the images was a grounding experience, working with natural elements in a tactile process to produce a visual outcome. Her process was far from ordinary, taking analogue photos of the woodland and then boiling the unprocessed rolls of film in water taken from streams in the imagery. Together with a combination of things found in the forest including leaves, soil and flowers, the rolls were boiled for 5 minutes then soaked in the solution for 24 hours. This process is known as film soup and the results have a vibrant, colourful and liquid quality. The film was then processed by The Minilab in Northampton. Collecting soil from the New Forest, Quilton then buried the processed film negatives in soil. Scanning them every 3 days, the images decayed away due to the soil activity and natural rain water. By 10 days the images were unrecognizable.





This process handed over creative control to nature, allowing it to have a word in this silent conversation.

The results are unpredictable and Quilton says *"you can't be precious about the destruction of the images"*. The final project showcases each stage of the process. Rich in texture and colour, the images have evolved into an abstract representation of what a woodland looks like. The work creates wonder for the world around and inspires a greater appreciation, recognizing that trees are not just a resource to be managed but part of a community to be respected. However, it can leave the viewer uneasy as they face a juxtaposition of seeing the familiar in a surreal way, nature in the unnatural. Nature is powerful and it's refreshing to see work that shows the New Forest in an abstract way, maybe one that can be associated with developing scientific understanding of the forest we can't physically see.

Every tree tells a story of time, community and care. When you're next in a forest, standing in the middle of a vast connected living system, try to begin hearing the silent words being spoken beneath your feet.

To find out more information head over to Campaign for National Parks webpage about Quilton's project.

Made possible with Heritage Fund

CAMPAIGN for NATIONAL PARKS

Meet the Artist

Hey, I'm Emily! I am a visual communicator based in Suffolk. As a multidisciplinary artist, I specialise in photography, graduating from Marine and Natural History Photography at Falmouth University in 2024. As a nature enthusiast, appreciating the unassuming is my gift and I aim to create art that celebrates the wonders found around us.

‘To really feel a forest canopy
we must use different senses,
and often the most useful one
is the sense of imagination.’
-Joan Maloof